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**“I DON’T REALLY COMPARE TO THE IDEAL”: OBJECTIFICATION
THEORY AND THE EFFECTS ON SEXUAL BEHAVIOR AND
COMMUNICATION**

By

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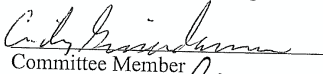
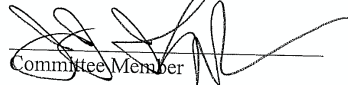
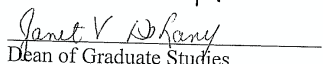
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Abstract

The present study considered the ways in which women described their sexual experiences and communication with men from the framework of objectification theory. Objectification theory refers to viewing women as sexual objects. The data was collected from 148 heterosexual women, between the ages of 18-24. Participants completed an anonymous online survey that took about 23-30 minutes. This survey included both open-ended and closed ended questions, along with two different questionnaires. The data showed both negative and positive perceptions from sexual objectification and self-objectification. Low body image was apparent in almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the participants. Compartmentalization was common in most responses. That is, there were both negative and positive attitudes towards specific body parts; these parts commonly being socially sexualized anatomy like breasts, buttocks, and stomach. Although some respondents found communicating sexually difficult, most did not allow their lack of self-confidence to hinder communication.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	vii
1. Introduction	1
2. Literature Review	2
2.1 Physical Attractiveness and the Impossible Standard	3
2.1a Reaching the Impossible Standard: What Lengths are Women Really Taking?	5
2.2 Male Gaze	8
2.3 Women as Objects: Compartmentalization	10
2.4 Objectification v. Self- Objectification	11
2.5 Objectification and Women’s Experience of Sexuality	12
2.6 Societal Double Standards of Sexuality	13
2.7 Effects of Sexualization on Women’s Experiences of Sexual Behavior/Relationships	14
3. Statement of the Problem	16
4. Research Design and Methods	17
4.1 Research Design Overview and Defense of Methods	17
4.2 Content Analysis	17
4.3 Thematic Analysis	18
4.4 Ethics	19
4.5 Participant Recruitment and Sample Design	19
4.6 Measures	20
4.7 Coding	21
4.7a Content Analysis Coding	21

4.7b Thematic Analysis Coding	21
5. Results and Discussion	23
5.1 Big Breasts & Toned Butts: Describing the Fragmented Body	24
5.2 Comparing the Body to the Ideal: Sexualized Body and Objectification Theory	26
5.3 Should I Talk? Bodily Perceptions and Sexual Communication	28
6. Conclusion	30
6.1 Limitations of Current Study and Directions for Future Research	31
7. Appendices	34
Tables	34
Appendix A: Survey Questions	37
Appendix B: References	38
Appendix C: Curriculum Vita	45

List of Tables

Table 1: Participant demographic information	34
Tables 2: Negative and positive perceptions of the body	35
Table 3: Body and sexual communication	36

“I Don’t Really Compare to the Ideal Body”: Objectification Theory and the Effects on Sexual Behavior and Communication

1. Introduction

“Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.”

-Calogero 2011

Both women and men have the tendency to observe and judge others on the basis of their physical appearance (Strelan and Hargreaves, 2005). Women, in particular are observed and judged as sexualized objects (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). This perception becomes internalized by women, thus leading them to not only judge other women, but also themselves. Women, then, understand themselves as sexualized, which ultimately influences the relationships they establish with men (Sanchez & Keifer, 2007).

The present study takes a qualitative approach to studying women’s behaviors and ability to communicate during sexual activities with men through the framework of objectification theory. Based on data analysis of online surveys completed by heterosexual women within the United States, the present study investigated the ways that women described their sexual experiences with men. This research concentrates on how objectification theory explains both negative and positive perceptions of women’s bodies and how those perceptions affect sexual communication and sexual experiences.

2. Literature Review

Objectification theory provides a framework for understanding sexually driven objectification of both men and women; however many studies have found that women are the main targets (Miner-Rubino, Twenge & Frederickson, 2002).

According to Calogero, Tanteff-Dunn, and Thompson (2011) objectification theory is:

A synthesis and formalization of the many disparate lines of theorizing and research on the sexual objectification of women, offering a focused and formal framework for investigating the consequences of living in such a sexually objectifying culture milieu that socializes girls and women to view and treat themselves as objects to be evaluated on the basis of their appearance (p.9).

The American Psychological Association (APA) outlines four main components of sexualization that comes from society. The four components include: 1) a person being valued by their sexual appeal only; 2) physical attractiveness being the only determinant for sexual appeal; 3) a person being sexually objectified; or 4) a person having sexuality forced upon them (Calogero, Tanteff-Dunn & Thompson, 2011). These four points demonstrate possible consequences and indicators that a woman is a victim of sexualization and objectification. Although sexualization may occur for both women and men, Calogero, Tanteff-Dunn and Thompson (2011), note that there are unique consequences of sexualization for women.

Research on objectification theory has had implications for understanding women's experiences in a number of ways including self-esteem and eating disorders. Mercurio and Landry (2008) found that negative perceptions of the body were associated with low levels of self-esteem. Failing to portray the societal ideal of

beauty can create the negative perceptions warranted to lower a person's self-esteem. Some women feel the need to take drastic measures to obtain society's beauty standard. An example of such would be eating disorders. According to Tiggerman and Slater (2001), there is a positive correlation between objectification and disordered eating (Mercurio and Landry, 2008). The lower an individual's body image the higher the likelihood of disordered eating. In considering heterosexual women's experiences of sexuality, four areas of research are particularly relevant: 1) physical attractiveness and the impossible standard, 2) male gaze, 3) compartmentalization, and 4) objectification v. self-objectification.

2.1 Physical Attractiveness and the Impossible Standard

One area of research that supports objectification theory is the literature on the impossible standard of physical attractiveness. Though women struggle to obtain the thin ideal, most will fail and be seen as defective. As a result, they will be seen as a 'work in progress', always in need of enhancing (Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 2011). There will always be something that can be improved in the physical sense for women, thus feeding into this impossible standard of physical attractiveness. Women come in constant contact with images of extremely thin models that serve as a definition of the ideal, thus creating shame and a sense of failure (Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007). Through media outlets, there are not so subtle examples of enhancing the female form in the guise of 'television entertainment'. TV shows display women going through intense makeovers in order to improve their appearance (Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007).

As children, girls are bombarded with images of this thin ideal, starting with Barbie. In 2012, sales for Mattel's popular doll reached \$2.07 billion (Dickler, 2012). Golgowski (2013) took the measurements of the doll and attempted to create a real woman. The results show a woman who is not able to stand up on two legs, she would need to be on all-fours, her stomach would only be able to hold half of a liver and a small portion of her intestines, and she would not be able to really lift anything (Golgowski, 2013). Even with the reality of such a distorted view of women, so many are attempting to work towards this image. Two thirds of the American female population between the ages of 15 and 19 are trying to lose weight and using eating disorders to do so (YWCA). Advertisements on television now use skinny women to promote diuretics because more and more women are using such outlets to lose weight (Kilbourne, 1994). Women see images of impossibly thin women everywhere and fall victim to the messages the pictures send.

American bodily ideals for women vary racially (Overstreet, Quinn, and Agocha, 2010). The ideals for white and black women seem to differ based on their susceptibility to societal pressures (Greenwood and Dal Cin, 2012). Black women are more likely to ignore the pressures the media places on women to conform to the physical ideal (Greenwood and Dal Cin, 2012). White women feel more pressure to conform to societal standards because they are more likely to buy into the socially constructed ideal (Overstreet, Quinn & Agocha, 2010). White women are more likely than black women to have disordered eating because of the pressure to conform and be thin (Lips, 2008). There is a different ideal for black and white women (Kemper, Sargent, Drane, Valois, and Hussey, 1994). In general, the ideal body for black

women is larger than for white women (Kemper, Sargent, Drane, Valoise, and Hussey, 1994). According to Overstreet, Quinn, and Agocha (2010) there is a curvaceous shape ideal that black women are prone to display, and some white women are seeking to attain. Black women are less likely to work towards the thin ideal that most white women desire (Overstreet, Quinn and Agocha, 2010). Lopez, Blix, and Blix (1995) found that Latina women were more likely to feel overweight due to comparing themselves to the ideal for non Latina white women. Although women of color differ in their own body ideals, according to Poran (2002) the beauty ideal for white women has become the normative standard from which we judge women.

2.1a Reaching the Impossible Standard: What Lengths are Women Really Taking?

It is clear that women are bombarded with images in the media regarding the ideal body. It is also clear that women will go to great lengths to attain the societal ideal. This is evidenced in the amount of money women spend to surgically alter their bodies. Women spend money on cosmetic surgery, including liposuction, breast enlargements, and receive BOTOX injections (Kilbourne, 1994). According to the American Society of plastic surgeons website, in 2012 there were 236,000 total cosmetic procedures performed on individuals between the ages of 13 and 19, and 2.5 million procedures performed on individuals between the ages of 20 to 29 years old and 91% of all cosmetic procedures were performed on women (“American Society of Plastic Surgeons”). Women who get these procedures done spend a lot of money to aid in looking like the ideal that society has created.

Two areas of focus for cosmetic surgery that target sexualized body parts of women are the breasts and the vagina. In 2012, there were about 286,000 breast augmentations performed, including 89,067 breast lifts, in the United States (“American Society of Plastic Surgeons”, 2012). Women are having these procedures done to their breasts because one of two reasons. The first being that there is an immense amount of disgust for an individual’s breasts, because of this, they feel the need to receive the procedure to correct the flaw (Taylor, 2012). The other reason is that cosmetic surgery, and more specifically breast augmentation, is seen as a normal thing for women to do, ergo it is an easy decision for some to make (Taylor, 2012). Women have even gone to the extreme to receive plastic surgery on their vaginas. In 2012 alone, there were approximately 3,500 vaginal rejuvenations performed in the United States (“Consulting Room”, 2003). There are no health or physical benefits aside from fitting a stereotyped idea of what the vagina should look like (Davis, 2002). Women tend to get this surgery done because they perceive their vaginal folds to be abnormal or defective (Davis, 2002).

Beyond surgery, women attempt to achieve impossible standards in other less drastic ways. Body hair on women, within the Western culture, comes with a negative connotation. This negative perception of body hair is a new concept, starting to surface in the 1920’s (Fahs, 2011). Statistically speaking, 91.5% of American women shave their legs, and 93% of women remove hair from their underarms (Fahs, 2011). Women also see waxing near the genital area as a norm in the name of vanity. According to Women’s Health Magazine (2012), Brazilian and bikini waxes can create serious health risks, including cellulites because pubic hair is

meant to be a protection from bacteria. The idea of being hairless as conforming to femininity came about in the 1930's through the use of photography and advertisements that brought about the beauty ideal of women being hairless (Fahs, 2011). Body hair enacts a sense of power, this power is associated with the male gender. It is acceptable and expected for men to have body hair because of the power and dominance it brings about; however, women are supposed to be more submissive and powerless, ergo the removal of body hair (Fahs, 2011).

Makeup is another less drastic outlet for women to enhance their physical appearance. According to Kilbourne (1999), girls, in their teenage years, spend around \$4 million annually on cosmetics. Women, as a whole, spend somewhere around \$7 million a year on cosmetics (YWCA). Dellinger and Williams (1997) found that women within a professional setting received negative attitudes from coworkers, both male and female alike, when makeup was not worn within the work setting (Jeffreys, 2005). The women explained that they did not look *healthy*, or *credible* when they did not wear makeup (Jeffreys, 2005). Some women believe that makeup empowers them, but Jeffreys brings about a great point, "what disempowers them about being without a mask?" (Jefferys, 2005, p. 115). Tseelon (1995) explained two different uses for make-up. Younger women use make-up for the purpose of advancing them into adulthood (Tseelon, 1995). Older women, on the other hand, use make-up in order to sustain their youth for as long as possible (Tseelon, 1995). Either way, it appears that women are never happy with their appearance.

Aside from media influences encouraging the physical ideal, men act as yet another reinforcement. Men place a large amount of importance on the physical

attractiveness of potential female partners, specifically but not limited to thinness, thus encouraging societal pressure to conform to the socially constructed beauty norm (Wiederman & Hurst, 1998). Between different media outlets enforcing the picture of perfect female beauty, and the realization that men judge women on these standards, women go to great lengths to achieve the impossible.

2.2 The Male Gaze

Women have a higher likelihood of feeling objectified because of the male gaze (Zurbriggen, Ramsey & Jaworski, 2011). This can also be referred to as ‘girl watching’, a term describing men “sexually evaluating women, often in the company of other men”(Quinn, 2002, p. 387). This evaluation can take the form of verbal comments, mostly containing sexually driven messages of proposed sexual activities (Quinn, 2002). According to Calogero (2004), women only have to think about being seen by men and proceed to feeling intense body shame. This finding is particularly shocking because women do not even have to converse with a man to feel poorly about themselves, there just has to be a possibility of a male gaze (Calogero, 2004). Women seem to place negative attention on and have anxiety towards their bodies when they believe there is a possibility that men will have the ability to place judgment on their physical appearance. Women face both implicit and explicit pressures to physically take up less space by being small, thin, and appearing fragile (Kilbourne, 1994). This pressure becomes a factor that plays into the negative perceptions women feel about themselves regardless if they are in the presence of men or not.

The physical appearance of women is relentlessly appraised, scrutinized, and or desired by our culture. Women feel a constant pressure to conform to this view of the ideal body, that they “view themselves from the vantage point of an external observer and engage in chronic self-policing”(Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 2011, p.7). Women stop seeing themselves as individuals, and instead see themselves as the object of sexual desire the men see them as.

It has become evident that women face societal and self-pressures to conform to the ideal image of the female body. Past research has established that lesbian and bisexual women experience sexual objectification differently than do heterosexual women. This may be due to feeling more distance from the pressure created by the “male gaze”. According to Swami and Tovee (2006), Herzog, Newman, Yeh, and Warshaw (1990) and Legenbauer et. al. (2009) lesbian and bisexual women have more positive body images than heterosexual women.

Swami and Tovee (2006) used the body mass index (BMI) to look at physical attractiveness beliefs among lesbian and feminist women. The study found that BMI was an important factor in the attractiveness of an individual among all participants. However, there was considerably less pressure for lesbian women to be thin when compared to heterosexual women (Swami and Tovee, 2006). According to the analysis, lesbian and bisexual women prefer heavier women (Swami and Tovee, 2006). This data is congruent with the data Herzog, Newman, Yeh, and Warshaw (1990) found in their study where heterosexual women reported more anxiety to fit into the socially constructed ideal than there was among lesbian and bisexual women.

These researchers suggest that lesbian and bisexual women have a varying standard of the acceptable body.

Legenbauer et al. (2009) focus on the factors that regulate the preferences for a partner and how that differs across genders and sexual orientation, including the desire for physical thinness. There were two main findings discussed in the article. First, men, regardless of sexual preference, preferred physical thinness in their partner. Second, weight and body shape dissatisfaction explains the discrepancy between men and women their preference on thin, attractive individuals based on their body dissatisfaction (Legenbauer et al, 2009). Based on past research, it could be hypothesized that lesbian women tend to have better body images than heterosexual women, and the male gaze, or lack of male sexual partner, could have something to do with this finding.

Overall, heterosexual women's standard of the ideal body aligns with men's preference in physical thinness. Due to the norm of acceptable female appearance western culture has created, heterosexual women feel obligated to look a certain way. This norm does not seem to be as prominent for lesbian and bisexual women. Referring back to Legenbauer (2009) supports the fact lesbian and bisexual women face less pressure to conform to heterosexual women's beauty ideal, meaning there is less body dissatisfaction, and therefore there is less of a preference for a stereotypically defined thin partner.

2.3 Women as Objects: Compartmentalization

The male gaze concentrates on the female body, and more specifically sexualized parts of the female body. Women are seen as sexual objects that are

coveted for the sole purpose of their physicality. There is an emphasis on women performing a role of decoration, acting as something to be seen and enjoyed (Stankiewicz and Rosselli, 2008). There appear to be specific focal areas of the body—breasts, buttocks, and stomachs, each with their own standard for ideal shape/appearance (Overstreet, Quinn & Agocha, 2010). Breasts need to be larger, but not overly so, the buttocks need to be accentuated, and the waist line needs to be impeccably small (Overstreet, Quinn, & Agocha, 2010). These areas of interest are broken up and devoured by the American culture. The idea of female physical compartmentalization runs rampant through social media outlets, like television, product ads, and daily interactions (Quinn, Kallen & Cathey, 2006).

There are images of particular body parts everywhere. Ads for products emphasize women's legs, arms, or stomach, and break up the female body into either the upper body, or the lower body (Kilbourne, 1999). Very few ads add in a woman's face. The more in-depth personal traits like personality or intellect are of no consequence (Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 2011). This compartmentalization contributes to both societal objectification and self-objectification.

2.4 Objectification vs. Self-Objectification

The impact of objectification does not end with society's view of women, or even men's view of women's bodies. Objectification comes full circle when it impacts how women view themselves. Self-objectification is when a woman views and values herself solely as a physical or sexual being, much like that of an outside observer (Miner-Rubino, Twenge & Frederickson, 2002). Goodin, Van Denburg,

Murnen and Smolak (2011) found that young girls, around the age of thirteen, displayed heightened levels of self-objectification if over exposed to television and music videos with their hypersexualized view of women. After being treated a certain way for an extended amount of time, it is not surprising that some begin acting out what is expected. Objectification comes from societal pressures to conform to the socially constructed norm of female beauty. This pressure comes from men, other women, and the media (Sanchez and Broccoli 2008, Strelan and Hargreaves, 2005).

Many women start to self-police, self-survey, and attempt to conform to the physical norms, sometimes through healthier avenues like eating healthy or exercising; other times with more radical ways like eating disorders (Mercurio and Landry, 2008). Mercurio and Landry (2008) discuss both the healthier way of conforming to the standard, healthy eating and exercise, as well as the unhealthy way of conforming, through eating disorders and too much exercise.

2.5 Objectification and Women's Experience of Sexuality

Feeling physically objectified by oneself as well as other people can affect women sexually (Sanchez and Kiefer, 2007). In Sanchez and Kiefer's (2007) study, participants were made up of both male and female Michigan University students. The survey concentrated on those individuals that participate in heterosexual relationships. The participants completed a survey pertaining to body shame, sexual self-consciousness, sexual arousability, ability to reach orgasm, and sexual pleasure. The data showed that self-consciousness was influenced by body shame. This shame was felt when individuals believed that they did not meet societal standards of appearance. Both men and women who have high amounts of bodily shame are less

likely to participate in sexual activities, however women were more likely to feel sexual self-consciousness (Sanchez and Kiefer, 2007). Though this particular study looks at men and women, women tend to be the population that receives the most pressure on a physical level.

During sexual activities, if the concentration is not on the activity, there is a strong chance that orgasm will not be reached. Women have a harder time reaching orgasm than men seem to (Lips, 2008). According to Seal, Bradford, and Meston (2009), women tend to focus on the appearance of their bodies, and more specifically which parts are emphasized and which parts are deemphasized during sexual activities. In this study, 85 women who were taking psychology courses at a Southwestern University took three different scales that dealt with the topic of sexual function, body esteem, and sexual arousal (Seal, Bradford & Meston, 2009). Women also worry whether their partner is scrutinizing their bodies because they, themselves are evaluating their own body parts. (Seal, Bradford & Meston, 2009).

2.6 Societal Double Standards of Sexuality

Through objectification, women are constantly receiving contradictory messages of what is expected in the sexual sense. On the one hand they are seen as the object of sexual desire. Their sole purpose is to be observed and treated in a sexual manner (Swami et. al., 2010). Women's bodies hold this high sexual expectation that has been put in place by the American culture (Ward, Merriwether & Caruthers, 2006). Based on the sexualized perceptions placed on the female body, it would make sense to assume that acting on such sexual behaviors would be widely accepted. This is not the case. There are differing attitudes placed on either gender

when acting out sexuality. Kreager and Staff (2009) explained that males are positively encouraged to participate in as many sexual encounters as possible, whereas women are seen negatively for doing so; this is what is referred to as the sexual double standard (Kreager and Staff, 2009). Marks and Fraley (2005) found similar data in their research. Men are seen as successful for conquering large numbers of women sexually, however women who have comparable success are seen as 'loose' or 'slutty'.

Aside from the sexualization of the female body, female sexuality is not to be experienced freely. The double standard "teaches women that their sexuality should be minimized and controlled" (McCarthy & Bodnar, 2005, p. 175). In downplaying female sexual experience and encouraging this sexual double standard, there is trivialization of "women's sexual feelings, refusing to allow for the possibility that female sexual desire is important in its own right" (Lips, 2008, p. 257). Taking away the importance of a woman's sexuality can bring about many different consequences, including sexual partners being hesitant to communicate about their feelings (Lips, 2008). There is a contradiction between the attitude toward the female body and the sexualized view society places on it, and the lack of acceptance for women to act on their sexuality.

2.7 Effects of Sexualization on Women's Experiences of Sexual Behavior/ Relationships

It is not uncommon for women to constantly worry about their appearance throughout their daily lives, during their sexual encounters. If a woman sees herself with low body image, she could act out in one of two ways. Yamamiya, Cash, and Thompson (2006) found that a woman could validate her physical appearance and/or

allure by participating in frequent sexual encounters with various partners. In so doing, she is using sex and the number of men willing to have sexual relations with her as confirmation of her attractiveness and conformity to the societal ideal of the female body. Aside from that, women can lose their assertiveness and ability to say no to a sexual encounter (Yamamiya, Cash and Thompson, 2006). In contrast, women could also completely shy away from participating in sexual relations because they have such low opinions of themselves physically that there is immense fear of exposing their bodies (Yamamiya, Cash, and Thompson 2006).

Sexual dysfunction is another effect objectification can have on sexual activity. If a woman concentrates too much on her appearance while participating in sexual acts, she is not likely to enjoy what is happening and will be unable to concentrate on any possible pleasure that is to be had, including obtaining an orgasm (Wiederman, 2000). Sexual self-consciousness, also “referred to as ‘spectatoring,’” deals with “men’s and women’s sexual responsiveness and satisfaction” (Sanchez and Kiefer 2007). Overall objectification does not allow women the ability to ignore societal ideals and expectations in order to enjoy a private aspect of their lives. This shows how deep and influential sexual objectification and self-objectification can be.

Additional research is needed in regards to objectification framework and the sexual experiences of heterosexual women. Specifically to research focusing on women’s behavior and communication during sexual activities requires more attention. By focusing on the actual lived experiences of women’s sexual behavior and communication, researchers can better understand the wide range of effect of sexual objectification.

3. Statement of the Problem

There has been little research to focus specifically on objectification of women in the context of sexual behavior and communication with male partners. The current research concentrates on objectification theory and body image and how those affect a woman's efficacy in communicating and her behavior during sexual activities. Participants were recruited through various psychological research sites to take an anonymous online survey. Participants were 148 women between the ages of 18-24 years who self-identified as heterosexual and resided in the United States. The current study uses both content analysis and thematic analysis on 148 participants' responses to the online survey. The study considers both negative and positive outcomes of objectification. The content analysis focuses on the number of times related opinions on questions arise, like repeated negative or positive perceptions of the body. Thematic analysis will allow for a more focused analysis on specific patterns within the responses.

4. Research Design and Methods

The present research explores body image and the effects on communication efficacy and confidence while participating in sexual relationships and behaviors through the framework of objectification theory. The research will focus on women's personal feelings towards their bodies in reference to the ideal body type portrayed by socially constructed expectations. The present study investigates how a woman's confidence level in respect to communicating during sexual activities could be influenced by sexual objectification and self-objectification.

4.1 Research Design Overview and Defense of Methods

Using a qualitative/narrative approach to the online survey captures lived experiences of women. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the data was collected through anonymous online surveys. Performing online surveys allows for complete anonymity of the participant and tends to bring about increased honest self-disclosure that face-to-face interviews would not bring about (Kays, Gathercoal, and Buhrow, 2012). The survey contained questions that required personal answers that differ between participants, thus allowing for higher validity (Babbie, 2007). Due to the fact that there are questionnaires within the survey, meaning the answers could potentially be replicated, there is high reliability (Babbie, 2007).

4.2 Content Analysis

A content analysis can be performed on both qualitative and quantitative research and interprets particular patterns within the data (Babbie, 2010). Analysis could be performed on books, letters, newspapers, or surveys (Babbie, 2010). There are different approaches to conducting a content analysis, but there are basic steps to

take: 1) define the important variables to be focused on; 2) decide what type of text to use; 3) collect and record findings, and 4) analyze of the data collected (Babbie, 2010 and Reinharz, 1992). Content analysis looks at the possible meanings behind a piece of text (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000).

For the present study, while analyzing the responses of the participants, some information was not explicitly discussed. The meanings behind the responses had to be thought about in order to decipher whether the respondents were affected by society's normative view of the female body.

While analyzing the data in the present study, certain words and phrases showed up frequently and created patterns within the data. These patterns, and analyzing these patterns, are part of content analysis (Babbie, 2010; Reinharz, 1992). According to Reinharz (1992) content analysis allows for a more in-depth cultural analysis beyond the themes. The second step was to see if these patterns of respondent opinions fell in line with societal beliefs of the female body.

For the present study, data was manually coded without the use of software. The coding scheme developed over time and went through several revisions of coding structures before deciding on the final coding scheme. Consistent with best coding practices (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Once the coding scheme was finalized each participants' responses was re-read to ensure inclusion of all perspectives and validity of the coding scheme.

4.3 Thematic Analysis

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis is used to identify and describe patterns within any given form of data. There is no finite explanation as

to what a thematic analysis is or how one goes about performing it (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis requires a researcher to look for important themes within the data or reoccurring ideas, not frequency of those ideas (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Even if an idea has a high frequency within the data, it may not be of much importance. When considering the themes, we paid particular attention to the meanings behind the themes as they specifically related to objectification theory.

4.4 Ethics

The study was approved by Towson University's IRB and meets the requirements put into place by the University. The current research was conducted in accordance with APA standards for ethical treatment of participants (American Psychological Association, 2002). Participants were informed in the beginning of the survey as to the manner of the research and had to acknowledge that they read the directions and fit the specifications of the study. The participants were not put in any physical harm and had the option of not answering questions or exiting the survey at anytime. The identity of the participants was kept completely anonymous. There was no formal debriefing that occurred but the participants were given researcher's contact information in the event that they had questions or concerns.

4.5 Participant Recruitment and Sample Description

Participants were recruited on online websites for psychological studies: Social Psychology Network and Psychological Research on the Net. Participants were between the ages of eighteen to twenty four identified as heterosexual and resided in the United States. A total of 147 participants completed the survey. Participant demographics can be found in table 1. A majority of the participants self-identified

as white (61%), with Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino making up the next two largest ethnic backgrounds. In terms of regions the participants hailed from, there was participation from individuals representing all of the continental United States. Most participants were from the West, Mid-Western part of the United States, however there were participants from the East Coast and the South. Over 90% indicated they were still completing some kind of degree; most of which being a bachelor's degree.

4.6 Measures

The survey began with a description of the study and certification that the participant met the inclusion criteria: 18 or older and residing in the United States, and having fully read the consent page. The questions that followed asked the participants about their personal body image, how their body image negatively and positively affects their sexual activities and their sexual communication. The survey was comprised of nine open-ended questions consisting of statements like “describe what you consider to be the ideal body”, “describe the ways that you see your body negatively and how that impacts your sexual relationships”, and “describe the ways that you see your body positively and how that impacts your sexual relationships.” Then there were two different questionnaires. After that there were closed ended questions inquiring about demographic information. The questions asked encouraged the participants to disclose their personal experiences during sexual activities with their partner. See Appendix A for examples of the questions.

4.7 Coding

4.7a Content Analysis Coding

There were numerous meetings held in order to discuss and finalize the coding that was used to analyze the data. There were four coding themed categories decided upon. As shown in table 2, themes were: 1) general negative perceptions; 2) negative objectification theory; 3) general positive perceptions; and 4) positive objectification theory.

Within the four themes, there were smaller subcategories coded. When coding for negative perceptions, there were four subcategories that emerged: 1) negative perceptions on specific body parts; 2) overall negative perceptions; 3) no negative perceptions; and 4) comments that were n/a. Coding for negative objectification theory involved three smaller subcategories: 1) negative partner influence; 2) negatively influenced by society's version of the 'ideal body'; and 3) n/a. Positive perceptions involved the same categories: 1) positive perceptions of specific body parts; 2) overall positive perceptions; 3) no positive perceptions; and 4) comments that were n/a. Positive objectification theory: 1) positive partner influence; 2) positively influenced by society's version of the 'ideal body'; and 3) comments that were n/a.

4.7b Thematic Analysis Coding

There were positive and negative themes that were present within the data as seen in table 3. Negative themes consisted of perceptions due to weight, imperfect body parts, emotional insecurities, and feelings of judgment by a partner. The positive themes were specific body parts being mentioned and needing/receiving

encouragement from the partner. All of the themes dealt with body image and the effects of sexual behavior.

5. Results and Discussion

Although objectification theory emphasizes the ways in which society's sexualized view of women's body have negative impacts, as previously discussed by Mercurio and Landry (2008), it is important to note that participants described their bodies in both negative and positive ways. Consistent with objectification theory, which describes how the sexualization of women's bodies serves to view women in compartmentalized ways as stated by, Overstreet and Quinn, and Agocha, 2010), participants' descriptions of their bodies overwhelmingly focused on specific body parts in a sexual context. This was true for both positive and negative descriptions of the body.

Strong themes in participants' experiences were the ways that they viewed their body negatively, as shown in table 2, 22% viewed their bodies overall negatively, 61% focused in on specific body parts. Throughout the data, there were certain body parts that were repeated in many responses, including stomach, buttocks, and breasts. Overstreet, Quinn, and Agocha (2010) also found that the stomach, buttocks, and breasts tend to be the body parts concentrated on by the male gaze (Quinn, 2002) as well as the media industry (Kilbourne, 1999). Frederickson and Roberts (1997) explained objectification theory as a woman being reduced to sexualized parts, not a whole person. The present findings support past research in that women concentrated on specific body parts and felt anxiety in allowing their partners to see their perceived flaws.

When considering positive perceptions of their bodies, 71% of the participants described their body parts in a positive way (table 2). For example, one respondent

wrote that “*I like doing doggy style because it makes my butt [sic] look good*” another woman responded with “*when I am on the bottom i [sic] don’t really mind being topless because i [sic] do see my chest as my best asset*”. This percentage surpassed the negative perceptions of specific body parts. Even those participants who saw their bodies negatively were able to pick out certain parts of their body and have a more positive attitude. Though these women do not see their bodies positively as a whole, they are able to find parts of themselves physically that they do like. In this instance, breaking a woman’s body up into separate parts allows some to find confidence.

Sexually, women tend to place their attention on their stomach, buttocks, and breasts. If a woman finds these areas appealing, she will emphasize them through specific sexual positions. If she does not find any/all of the above body parts appealing, she will do sexual positions that deemphasize them.

5.1 Big Breasts & Toned Buttocks: Fragmented Bodies in the Bedroom

For the most part, participants described their body in ways that negatively emphasized their stomach, buttocks, and breasts. A woman stated that “*[I] gained weight in my stomach*” so she “*preferred to leaver [sic]*” her “*shirt on*”. Others said their “*belly is big*” or “*too pudgy*” which limited their willingness to participate in some positions or keeping the lights on. Other women saw themselves as “*being large in the butt region*” or their “*butt isn’t as toned*” as they would like it to be. Comments on participants’ breasts seemed to fall on both sides of the spectrum. Some said that their “*breasts are too small*” while others reported their “*breasts are big and more [sic] a lot*”.

Some respondents preferred certain positions because it made their “*butt look good.*” Respondents stated that there were parts of their bodies they like and they “*tend to want to do positions more that show*” them “*off.*” There were more respondents that emphasized their breasts in the questions asking about positive perceptions. Some said that their “*chest*” is their “*best asset*” and they want to “*show off*” their breasts. One woman said that her “*boobs gave*” her “*confidence.*”

The attention respondents paid to specific parts of their body affected their sexual experiences. Some get affected negatively and some positively. Either way, there was compartmentalization in a sexual context that monopolized the women’s description. Consistent with past research performed by Weiderman (2000) and Sanchez and Kiefer (2007), women paid more attention to how they looked physically than on the sexual act itself, thus inhibiting them from fully enjoying possible sexual pleasure. Women focused more on the positions that enhanced their positive physical attributes and downplayed their negative physical attributes more than positions that increased sexual pleasure.

Respondents seemed to be distracted during sexual activities. The women did not focus on their sexual pleasure, but more on their physical appearance. This supports Seal, Bradford, and Meston’s (2009) findings that women are distracted during sexual interactions because of their focus on their bodily appearance. Consistent with past research, the participants focused more on the appearance of their bodies, and more specifically which positions emphasized their positive attributes and which deemphasized their perceived negative attributes (Seal, Bradford, and Meston, 2009).

5.2 Comparing the Body to the Ideal: Sexualized Objectification in the Bedroom

When discussing their bodies in the context of sexual activity and communication, 81% of the participants judged their bodies negatively and 35% judged their bodies positively. The societal norm of what female bodies are supposed to look like became more of an influence for women. There were not many examples of participants specifically saying ‘based off society’s definition...’, the responses showed a more implicit influence. Some wrote “*too fat and I am (sic) never feel sexy*”(sic), “*small boobs*”, “*I think my butt is too small*”, or “*I am very overweight and am embarrassed by my body.*” All of these responses indicate there is a comparison being made to a generalized ideal. Though it is not always stated, the responses are in accordance to what these women define as acceptable by societal standards.

Though the societal ideal was more prominent in participants’ responses, some women did judge their bodies negatively based on what they believed their partners preferred. Women frequently worried about their partners’ perceptions of their bodies while participating in sexual activities.

This is exemplified by the following quote “[*I’m*] afraid he won’t be attracted to me”, “[*I*] don’t feel sexy for my husband”, they “*feel like he’s evaluating me*”, or “*fear with [sic] him being displeased with my body*”. All of these examples display the women’s fear of negative opinions from their significant other, not actual male displeasure. While other respondents set themselves up to meet this impossibly high standard for their significant others; some responded with “*I want my body to look perfect for my partner.*” The result of not meeting these expectations is shown when

women “*shy away from his gaze*”. Some participants “*feel like he’s evaluating me*”. The participant actually imagined their partner’s focus was on evaluating her body. Her anxiety stemmed from the fear that her partner was negatively assessing her body and her physical flaws. However, very few women actually indicated that they had heard negative feedback from male partners.

Even in a sexual context, women discussed their bodies as on display for men, as if they are simply objects that are supposed to sexually and aesthetically please their man (Stankiewicz and Rossell, 2008). In support of Zurbriggen, Ramsey, and Jaworski’s (2011) study, the participants felt objectified because of the male gaze as directed from their male partners. Their concentration was on looking good for their partners, not on the sensations sexual acts bring about, or reaching orgasm. The pleasure of the men became the sole focus in the sexual activities. It was not what the women wanted or desired, it was about what would please their partners the most (Daniluk, 1993).

Positive feelings about the body were sometimes experienced when partners verbally assured participants of their physical beauty. These women had men look at them in a sexualized way that concentrated solely on their physical appearance. This falls into objectification, but created increased confidence for the women. Women felt positively about being objectified when their male partners verbally assured them of their physical beauty. Many women had better sexual experiences after these compliments took place. Women felt that “*knowing*” their “*partner finds*” them “*attractive*” their activities and communication are heightened for the better. Other examples include women’s “*partner[s] assuring*” them that they “*are beautiful*”,

“thinks I am perfect the way I am”, *“partner loves my big breasts”*. These comments are concentrated on physical appearance meeting or not meeting a certain societal standard or partner’s personal standard, however they have positively affected the respondents.

5.3 Should I Talk? Bodily Perceptions and Sexual Communication

Negative and Positive feelings about the body impacted sexual behavior and communication in important ways. If women felt negatively towards their bodies there was more of a chance there would not be much communication. Some responded with remarks like *“I get to be uncomfortable about sexual communication”* or *“I don’t want to tell a man what to do if he could find a woman who is more ideal than me [sic]”*. Male pleasure becomes the primary objective during sexual activity. Even the communication is decided on in regards to the man. Women are not placing any importance on their sexual needs. Their sexual desires and urges are being ignored and deemed as unimportant (Daniluk, 1993)

When analyzing positive perceptions, the reverse is true. For participants who felt more positively about their bodies, communication came more easily. Some said that they *“personally don’t have any problems with sexual communication”*. According to Montesi, Fauber, Gordon, and Heimberg (2010), sexual communication is a very healthy aspect of a romantic relationship. There is a positive correlation between the frequency of sexual communication and overall healthiness of the relationship (Montesi, Fauber, Gordon & Heiberg, 2010). Based on past research and the findings in the present study, positive perceptions of the body lead to increased sexual communication, which in turn leads to healthier romantic relationships.

There were several examples of respondents discussing in negative and positive ways when referring to their bodies and their sexual behavior and communication (table 3). While analyzing the data, there were four negative themes present through most responses. One was perceptions due to weight, evidenced through quotes like *“I have less confidence in myself because of weight”*. Another theme is imperfect body parts. One woman responded with *“I like the lights off due to I feel it helps hide myself. Being in the dark helps me hide my legs, hips, and love handles [sic]”*. The third theme was emotional insecurities. One woman wrote *“I am insecure, and insecurity turns men off”*. The fourth theme dealt with feelings of judgment by a partner. One response in particular was *“most of the time I like to have the lights off because I do get self conscious about the way that I look and I don’t want to be looked at because the fear that he is judge [sic] my body”*.

There were two positive themes that were found within the responses. The first pertained to specific body parts. An example is *“certain body parts I like, I tend to want to do those positions more that shows it off more [sic]”*. The second positive theme was encouragement from partners. A respondent wrote *“the good things about my body give me more confidence in my self [sic] and my sexuality, causing me to be more open to other positions. My partner assuring me that I am beautiful has helped over time”*.

6. Conclusion

The present study explores the idea that the way women regard their bodies in a sexual context is highly influenced by the socially constructed norm of the ideal female body. This influence comes in the form of objectification through the male gaze that occurs when a woman is sexually evaluated by a man, or a group of men (Quinn, 2002). The narratives of women in the present study revealed that they felt the pressure of objectification while participating in sexual activities. In some cases the pressure came from the failure to meet the social standard of the female body, while in others the pressure and anxiety was due to their partner's perceived evaluations.

Central to the participants' view of their bodies during sexual activities was the focus on three sexualized parts of the female body- breasts, buttocks, and stomach, which fell in accordance to the research performed by Overstreet, Quinn & Agocha (2010). This is also consistent with the well-documented way in which objectification leads to viewing women's bodies in compartmentalized ways (Stankiewicz and Rosselli, 2008). These three body parts were either seen as a positive aspect of the participant's body, or a negative aspect of their body. Due to these attitudes, the women either performed positions that enhanced those body parts, or took attention away from them. There was more of a willingness to participate in positions that visually presented their bodies for their partners, than to engage in positions that may have heightened their own sexual pleasure.

It is important to note that the themes that emerged in the participant's narratives were consistent with objectification theory. However, in light of the

literature there was a surprising omission in their responses. As discussed in the literature review, body hair has been a growing focus for women's bodies (Basow, 1991). Despite this, of the 148 participants, none mentioned body hair as important in the way she consciously presented her body in a sexual context. This may be due to the overwhelming cultural emphasis on hair removal (Fahs, 2011) such that these young women did not see this as a compromise. It could also be due to the possibility that these young women did not view it as relevant to their sexual presentation. Because older women did not grow up in a time when hairless bodies were the norm (Basow, 1991), this omission may be a generational finding.

6.1 Limitations of Current Study and Directions for Future Research

The present study focuses on sexual behavior and communication and how those aspects are influenced by body image and objectification theory. The research contributed to the data already in existence because not only did it take a new approach to the analysis of body image and objectification through examining sexual behavior and sexual communication, it also took a new approach to studying objectification theory. However, this research is not without its limitations.

The use of an online survey allows for anonymity and the ability for the participants to be honest while answering personal questions (Kays, Gathercoal, and Buhrow, 2012). However, using an online survey runs the risk of ambiguity within the responses. The present study showed that analysis of responses ran the risk of interpreting the participants' answer differently than was intended. Another limitation of the methodology for the present study is the type of relationship demographic used. At times during the coding process the full context was not clear

to the researcher which may have impacted coding. Additionally it was clear in the participants' responses that some women were answering questions based on an established partnership where others discussed casual sexual encounters. The present analysis did not systematically consider relationship type. This may be important to explore in future research particularly as past research has documented that heterosexual women in romantic relationships are less anxious and self-conscious than those who are not in relationships (Steer and Tiggemann, 2008)

It is important not to over generalize the findings beyond the present sample demographics. In particular, women in the current study were in early and emerging adulthood (ages 18-24). Feelings and experiences regarding sexuality are likely different for varying age groups of women. The current sample was also predominately white. It has been well documented that body image ideals differ across race (Greenwood and Dal Cin, 2012 and Kemper, Sargent, Drane, Valoise, and Hussey, 1994). It is likely, then, that findings regarding body image and sexual experience would differ accordingly. Future research is necessary to fully explore racial differences.

The present study specifically focuses on the experiences of heterosexual women. It is important to consider the different attitudes lesbian and bisexual women have towards body image and sexual behavior and communication. Men place much more emphasis on thinness and physical attractiveness (Legenbauer et al. 2009). Research performed by Herzog, Newman, Yeh, and Warshaw (1990) and Swami and Tovee (2006) show that heterosexual women feel more pressure to conform to the societal ideal than lesbian and bisexual women. Over generalizing the data from this

study to women of differing sexual orientations could prove to be incorrect.

Additional research is necessary to systematically consider sexual identity and/or sex of partner.

Another interesting next study would be to consider objectification and men's sexual experiences. Men are becoming more body conscious because society is placing more pressure to be more lean and muscular (Sanchez and Kiefer, 2007). Men face body image problems just as much as women. According to Cash, Maikkula and Yamamiya (2004), both men and women face sexual dysfunction due to low body image. Another area for future research could focus on older heterosexual women. Age does influence sexual behavior and body image. Women could experience things differently based of their age, making this subject very important to study.

Despite limitations, the present research provides an important foundation for exploring objectification in the context of sexual experiences. These additional findings provide important direction for future work in this area.

Tables

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

Number of Participants	147
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Age Range	18-24
<hr/>	
Ethnic Background	
<hr/>	
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1.49%
Asian	2.48%
Black or African American	11.88%
Hispanic or Latino	11.39%
Native Hawaiian	0.0%
White	61.39%
Brazilian/Multiracial	4.59%
No Answer	.99%
Other	5.45%
<hr/>	
Education Level	
<hr/>	
Associates Degree	5.50%
Bachelor's Degree	10.50%
Bachelor's Degree in Progress	65.0%
Master's Degree	1.50%
Graduate Degree	3.0%
J.D	1.0%

Tables 2: Negative and Positive Perceptions of Body

General Negative Perceptions	
Negative (specific body Parts)	61%
Negative Overall Perceptions	22%
No Negative Perceptions	7.0%
N/A	6.0%
Negative Objectification Theory	
Influenced by Partner	17.0%
Influenced by Societal Ideal	81.0%
N/A	17.0%
General Positive Perceptions	
Positive (Specific body parts)	71.0%
Positive Overall Perceptions	11.0%
No Positive Perceptions	5.0%
N/A	12.0%
Positive Objectification Theory	
Influenced by Partner	26.0%
Influenced by Societal Ideal	35.0%
N/A	47.0%

Note: Because participant responses could have represented multiple themes, these numbers should not create a sum of 100%

Table 3: Body and Sexual Behavior and Communication

Negative Themes

Sexuality Themes	Representative Quotes
Perceptions due to weight	I have less confidence in myself because of the weight.
Imperfect Body Parts	I like the lights off due to I feel it helps hide myself. Being in the dark helps me hide my legs, hips, and love handles.
Emotional insecurities	I am insecure, and insecurity turns off men.
Feelings of judgment by partner	Most of the time I like to have the lights off because I do get self conscious about the way that I look and I don't want to be looked at because the fear that he is judge [ing] my body.

Positive Themes

Specific body parts	Certain body parts I like, I tend to want to do those positions more that shows it off more.
Encouragement from partner	The good things about my body give me more confidence in my self and my sexuality, causing me to be more open to other positions. My partner assuring me that I am beautiful has helped over time.

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Appendix A

1. Describe the ways that you see your body negatively and how that impacts your sexual relationships.
2. Describe how personal negative perceptions of your body limit sexual activities (sexual positions, sexual communication).
3. Describe how personal negative perceptions of your body limit or affect physical settings (having the lights on or off, sexual positions or sexual activities).
4. Describe the ways that you see your body positively and how that impacts your sexual relationships.
5. Describe how personal positive perceptions of your body enhance sexual activities (sexual positions, sexual communication).
6. Describe how personal positive perceptions enhance or affect physical settings (having the lights on or off, sexual positions or sexual activities).

Appendix B

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Appendix C: Curriculum Vita

Curriculum Vita
Kaitlin Kernan
kernan.kaitlin@gmail.com
707 Miller Road
Parkton, MD 21120

Educational Background

2011	B.A.	Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia Major: Sociology Concentration: Communication
2013 Expected	M.A.	Towson University, Towson, Maryland Master's Program: Women and Gender Studies

Research Interests: Sexuality, body image, gender differences, gender communication

Research Experiences

Spring 2007	Senior Independent Research Project Hereford High School, Ms. Ponzillo
Spring 2010- Spring 2011	Undergraduate Independent Studies Roanoke College, Dr. Anita Turpin
Spring 2011	Undergraduate Seminar Research Roanoke College, Dr. M. Gilbert Dunn
Fall 2012- Present	Thesis Research "I Don't Really Compare to the Ideal Body": Objectification Theory and the Effects on Sexual Communication Towson University, Dr. M. Paz Gallupo

Experience in Higher Education

Fall 2008-Spring 2011	Office Assistant <i>Student Affairs</i> , Roanoke College, Salem, VA Duties: Perform administrative duties for Roanoke College Office of Student Affairs, provide customer service to parents, faculty, staff and students
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Fall 2008- Spring 2011
Salem, Va

Resident Advisor

Residence Life, Roanoke College,

Duties: Develop community within my floor by planning both mission and social programs, communicate and enforce college policies, and regulation, work to enhance communication within my floor, building and campus, act as a liaison between residents and Roanoke College faculty

Fall 2010- Summer 2011

Summer Conference Manager

Community Programs and Event Planning, Roanoke College, Salem, VA

Duties: Perform administrative duties for the Community Programs and Event Planning coordinator, act as a liaison between summer conferences and Roanoke College personnel, aid in creation of contracts and billing statements for each conference

Spring 2012

Graduate Assistant

Event and Conference Services, Towson University, Towson, MD

Duties: Work with Towson University student organizations to plan events, perform administrative duties for the department, participate in weekly meetings

Teaching/Tutoring

Fall 2006- Present

Tutor

Parkton, MD

Duties: Aid with developing communication skills for an autistic teenager, tutor autistic teen and sister

Spring 2013- Present

Teacher's Assistant

Psychology Department, Towson University, Towson, MD

Duties: Work with professor to plan out class structure, grade weekly journals written by students, aid with questions or concerns of students, help with

classroom discussions, design and create class exams

Leadership Experiences

Fall 2003- Spring 2006

4-H Club President

Parkton 4-H Club

Duties: Leading monthly club meetings using Robert's Rules of Order, aid younger club members with 4-H projects, teach younger members how to complete record books

Fall 2008- Spring 2011
Group

Assistant Director of Accappella

Roanoke College

Duties: Lead weekly practice sessions, aid in arranging music scores, perform administrative duties

Spring 2010- Fall 2011
Education

Vice President of New Member

Alpha Sigma Alpha, Roanoke College

Duties: Teach new sorority sisters about the history of the sorority, act as a liaison between the new members and the sorority, perform administrative tasks for the sorority

Campus Involvement

Fall 2007- Spring 2011

Mainstreet Accappella Group, Roanoke College, Member

Fall 2008- Spring 2011

Alpha Sigma Alpha, Roanoke College, Member, Fulfilled 20 hours community service hours per year

Fall 2007- Spring 2011

Roanoke College Choir, Roanoke College, Member

Computer Skills

General Software: Microsoft Word, Microsoft Power Point, PC and Mac literate

