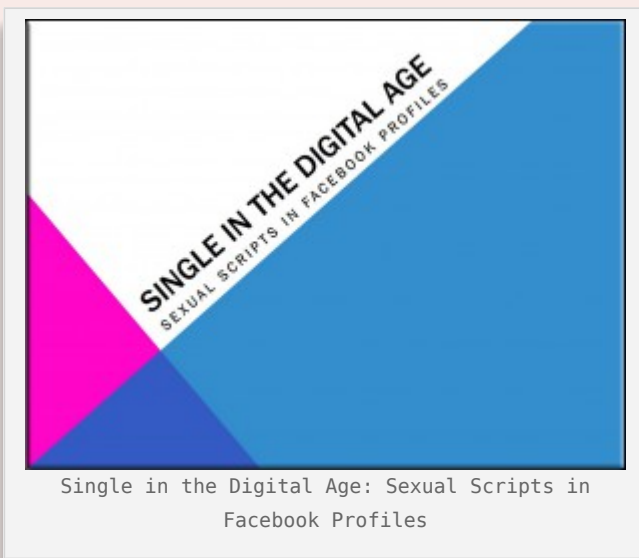


## Single in the Digital Age: Sexual Scripts in Facebook Profiles



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**March 13 2009:** ABC News reports a “disturbing new trend” in which teens and young adults share sexually explicit photographs through cell phone SMS text messaging. According to ABC News, these images often end up on Facebook—intentionally or otherwise (Stone 2009).

**May 25, 2011:** Sexual predator, Peter Chapman, kidnapped, raped, and

murdered Ashleigh Hall after connecting with her on Facebook. Despite efforts to locate and remove the profiles of sexual predators, Facebook and other social media have failed to protect users (Smith 2011).

**December 20, 2011:** John Zimmerman, sex offender, used Facebook and social networking to stalk, lure, and sexually assault, 55 known victims. Even after his arrest Zimmerman created a new Facebook profile and continued to pursue new victims (Liebowitz, 2011).

As the above portrayals plucked from the news, illustrate the use of internet technologies to transmit sexualized content has raised alarm throughout the nation. Parents, police, and educators have all stated strong concerns over the way sexuality is portrayed and transmitted in the digital age, particularly in mass media and advertising. In the effort to protect teens and young adults from sexualized content and sexual predators, authorities have mounted offensives against predators and content that attracts them. They have even been known to use child pornography statutes to charge underage individuals who disseminate sexualized images—even images of themselves.

In last few years social media has become a popular method for young single people to connect with others for dating, sex, and relationships—even long term, as well as popular hunting grounds for sexual predators. On Facebook, the world's number one social media site (Dayton Business Journal 2012), users can create personal profiles complete with photo albums, upload images, videos, and text content, and then connect with other users through the "Find Friends" feature. Given the rampant sexuality and objectification of women in popular media, does the phenomenon of presenting highly sexualized content carry over into the profiles of Facebook users? Do single Facebook users create profiles shaped by sexual scripts seen in movies, music videos, television, and advertising to attract the opposite sex? Culturally dominant sexual scripts informing them, single female Facebook users construct sexualized and hyper-sexualized presentations of self; whereas single male users construct presentations of self which accentuate their potential as companions and providers.

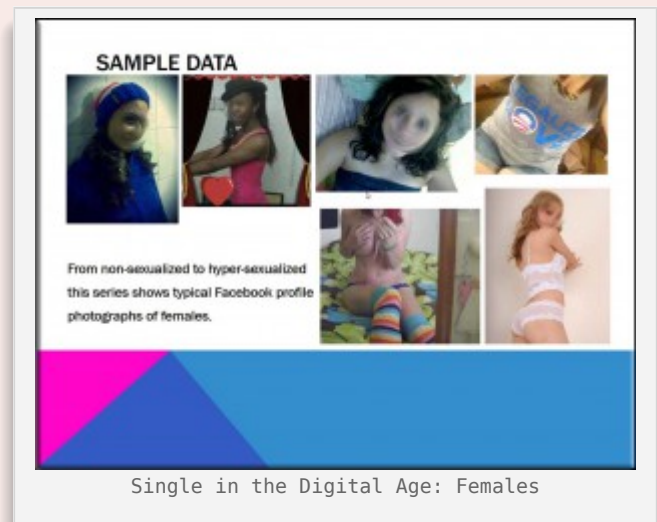
### **Literature**

Since Erving Goffman first explored how mass media constructs gender, much work has been done in the field of content analysis, including study of magazine and billboard advertisements, television, movies, and music videos. Goffman examined differences in the "straight-on gazes, men's strong grasps versus women's light touches, over the top emotional displays with men's reserved semblances," and the portrayal of masculine domination and "female subordination" (Hatton, 258, 2011). In the years since Goffman, 02:54:25 scholars have pointed to an ever increasing use of sexuality and sexualized images in advertising and mass media which may exacerbate the number and severity of problems women face and produce and reproduce gender

inequality (Baker, Hatton, Mary Nell Traunter 2011; Elizabeth Monk-Turner, Kristy Wren, Leanne McGill, Chris Matthiae, Stephen Brown, Derrick Brooks 2008; Tom Reichert, Jacqueline Lambiase, Susan Martin, Meta Carstarphen, Susan Zavoina 1999; Christina Baker 2005).

Some scholars argue the sexualized and objectified images of females have "negative effects" on women's self-image and lead to a host of problems from body dysmorphic disorder to anorexia (Tom Reichert, Jacqueline Lambiase, Susan Martin, Meta Carstarphen, Susan Zavoina 1999). Asher argues the highly sexualized images found in popular culture blur the line "between real and fantasy girls" and engender unreal expectations by both men and women (23, 2002). As Hatton indicates out, sexualized and hyper-sexualized images of women appear far more frequently than those of men on "Rolling Stone" covers (2011). Cooper and others refer to the amount of time people spend online is "exploding" and sexually explicit content "quickly took root and flourished" on the Internet (Cooper et. al. 154, 1999). Brown reveals the Internet has "increased dramatically the availability of sexually explicit content" and argues mass media "reinforce a relatively consistent set of sexual and relationship norms" (42, 44, 2002). Belknap and Leonard argue these influences of "mass media are significant agents of socialization" (1991). Ultimately, then, the influences of mass media produce a set of sociocultural sexual scripts which create a "Madonna/whore dichotomy," causing many young women to "lose an ability to speak about what they know, see, feel, and experience" (Tolman, 325, 1994). Gagnon and Simon's sexual scripts theory posits sex acts of all kinds result from the "complex psychosocial process of development" and are "embedded in social scripts" which make the "physical acts possible." Sexual activity, in their view, then, is no more biologically dictated than any other form of behavior and may actually exist in a "subordinate position" to sociocultural influences. And the concept of the "psychosexual drive" as an innate "biological attribute may prove a major obstacle to the understanding of psychosexual development." Further, Gagnon and Simon find the idea of "innate sexual capacities" which enable the "direct expression" of "biological drives" in complex psychosocial activities quite unlikely. They argue there is no instinctual mechanism controlling and directing sexual behavior and assignment of sexual meanings to infant and childhood behaviors is only done by adults who have "considerable training in adult language" and an "overdetermined conception of sexuality." The Freudian "overemphasis," then, on a "search for continuity with infant and childhood experiences" and adolescence "may be dangerously misleading." Rather, Gagnon and Simon argue the sexual development of adolescents represents a break with past "sexual experience." The Freudian obsession with sexual behavior, then, results in assigning sexual interpretations to non-sexual behavior. Instead of a biological drive model of sexual

behavior, sexual scripts inform sexual behavior. A script “defines the situation, names the actors, and plots the behavior” and are dependent upon the “process of sexual learning without depending on nonbehavioral elements.” This viewpoint “reorders the sources of meaning” and how we think about “sexual experience” (Gagnon, Simon, 6-13, 1973).



Sexual activity results from “a complex set of motivations,” and an individual “organizes that activity” in accord with “numerous external factors and influences.” Society plays a significant role in sexual behavior and “individualistic approaches . . . explain only a . . . small part” of human sexuality which, in actuality, is the result of the individual’s desires and their intersection with society. Scripting theory posits “sociocultural processes” frame the construction and interpretation of “our sexual fantasies and thoughts,” “patterns of sexual conduct . . . are locally derived,” and “biological instincts” play a small role—if any—in comparison to “socially determined scripts”. Scripting theory, then, makes four assumptions regarding sexual scripts: they are “locally derived,” instinct plays no role, scripts are learned behavior, and they may be modified by the individual (Laumann 3-6, 1994).

In advertisements, women often take a “passive role” which places emphasis on their physical appearance, implying their purpose is to be “admired, manipulated, and used by men” (Gunter, 2002). Coltrane and Adams have demonstrated advertisements tend to depict women as sex objects “regardless of the primary viewing audience” (Monk, et. al. 202, 2008). Coltrane and Messina argue, advertisements have a profound effect on attitudes and gender expectations (Monk, et. al., 2008). These gendered presentations effect young women’s internal conceptions of self (Andsager, et. al., 2002). Women, then, “learn their role as the object of [male] gaze” and become oblivious to the objectification of women in mass media and, indeed, even their own objectification (Monk, et. al. 202, 2008). Monk and others also found women “were much more likely to appear” than men when sex was used in advertisements and men are not being “objectified . . . regardless

the gender of the targeted audience" (Monk, et. al. 207, 2008). Monk further found magazine advertisements targeted at male viewers were far more likely to contain objectification of the female form (2008). Tolman argues the "crushing conventions of femininity" serve the "purpose of maintaining cultural standards" which prevent women's "empowerment." Desire is repressed and young women come to "know themselves from the perspective of men. . . losing touch with their own bodily feelings and desires." Methods for "silencing and denigrating women's sexual desire," argues Tolman, "are deeply entrenched in this patriarchal society." These oppressive sociocultural structures deny women pleasure and "sexual agency" and often result in internal conflict (Tolman, 325, 1994). According to Asher, movie depictions of young women in "control of their sexuality . . . are rare and . . . generally released only to limited audiences." Pop culture, then, ignores the effects of "its abuse because it does not see young women as human beings" having agency over their desire but, rather, turns them into objects to be "conquered." This results in young women learning to view themselves in "relation to boys and men." Ultimately, they lose their voices and inhabit an "awful space" of the "two-dimensional images they see on screen and in glossy color" (23, 24, 2002).

### **Method**

Forty-one Facebook profiles of young single adults were selected for the study using snowball sampling. The sample included nineteen female and twenty-two male profiles. Subjects were selected using the Facebook "Find Friends" feature which presents a list of possible "Friends" to which users can send a request to connect, that is become "Friends." The "Facebook" algorithm selects the list of possible "Friends" by common connections; that is, the user searching for new "Friends" is given a list of possible choices with mutual connection(s) to other Facebook user(s) to which the searcher is already connected. The first qualified nineteen female and twenty-two male profiles of single young adults were selected from the Facebook list of potential "Friends" for the current study.

The researcher read the "About" text for each profile to determine eligibility for inclusion. Many of the subject profiles selected. T indicated a university affiliation; that is, those included were actively involved in higher education or had recently graduated. Profiles indicating the subjects were underage—usually by mention through text or image of a high school affiliation, were not included. Profiles which indicated the subject was married or in a relationship were similarly not included as the goal of the current research is to examine the behavior of young single adults. Approximate age of subjects was determined by the user's affiliation with an institution of higher learning and/or through visual inspection of profile images and text; for Facebook, only displays a user's birthdate—if the user has shared the information. Sexual



orientation was determined by the "Interested In" field of the user's profile. While LGBT subjects were not specifically excluded, no LGBT subjects were sampled, probably as a result of the size of the sample. In order to include LGBT subjects, experience gained in the current research indicates one would need to sample a far larger number of profiles.

Facebook profiles include a "Photo Albums" feature by default. New Facebook profiles are created with at least three default albums, "Timeline," "Cover" and "Profile." The "Timeline" photo album contains photos uploaded or shared by the user on their Facebook home page; the "Cover" album contains the main header images uploaded by the user; the "Profile" album contains images uploaded by the user for the avatar or identity image. The research focused on the "Profile" album for the sample. However, some users had created secondary custom albums which were also sampled if the content consisted of images of the profile holder. Some Facebook users do not include images of themselves in their profiles or do not make them public, so out of necessity such profiles were not included.

### **Scale**

A quantitative four dimension scale was constructed by drawing on other content analysis scales found in the literature. Hatton and Traunter's content analysis of sexualized "Rolling Stone" cover images provided the primary model for the current scale (2011). The scale was further refined, based on Baker's content analysis scale created for a study of sexualized images of women in advertisements found in black and white oriented men's and women's magazines (2005). The scale constructed by Reichert and others also informed the construction of the current scale (1999). And, because the current research concerned itself with a collection rather than a single image, an additional variable measured the number of sexualized images in each profile. Thus the scale measured five variables. Sex being the nominal grouping variable, the four scaled variables included: clothing, pose, body emphasis, and number.

**Clothing (0 - 5):** Images with unrevealing dress or sports attire—while in the act of playing the sport—were awarded 0 points. Slightly revealing clothing, modestly low necklines and/or bare arms and shoulders were awarded 1 point. Images in somewhat revealing dress such as exposed midriffs or moderately low necklines were scored 2 points. Skin tight clothing and/or plunging necklines displaying cleavage scored 3 points. Revealing clothing such as swimsuits—especially bikinis, g strings, and lingerie received a score of 4 points. Images in which the subject is partially nude scored 5 points.

**Pose (0 - 3):** Poses that were not sexualized—standing, playing, eating, properly seated at a desk or table—scored 0 points. Mildly sexually suggestive poses where the subject's arms were overhead, in a body builder pose, arm or arms bent with one or both hands behind

the head, or arms held away from the side rather than hanging loosely, body facing the camera and face turned away, or the subject was canting scored 1 point. Overtly sexual poses, such as sitting with the legs splayed, sitting with one leg bent and the other thrust out and slightly bent—perhaps with an arm wrapped around the bent leg, the chest thrust forward, or arms held away from the side with chest thrust forward scored 2 points. Highly suggestive poses such as the subject kneeling or lying on a bed in a sexually suggestive manner such as the arms raised and hands behind the head, scored 3 points.

**Body Emphasis (0 – 3):** Those images in which the chest, buttocks, or genitals were not the focus scored 0 points. Images in which one of these body parts were the focus scored 1 point. Images where one of the body parts was the main focus of the image such as breast, chest, buttocks, or cleavage scored 2 points. If the pants or shirt were unbuttoned, pulled up, apart, or pushed down or where the subject was dismembered—that is the image showed cleavage with the head cut off, a score of 3 was given.

**Number (0 – 3):** For profiles displaying no images with sexualized content, a score of 0 points was given. Profiles with 1 – 3 sexualized images scored 1 point. Profiles with 4 – 6 sexualized images scored 2 points. Profiles with 6 or more sexualized images received a score of 3 points.

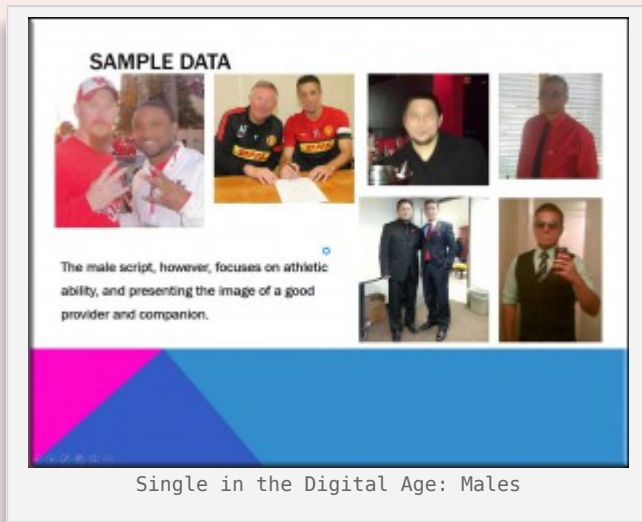
### **Reliability**

SPSS inter-item reliability procedures produced a Cronbach's Alpha of .919, considered excellent (Appendix II, Figure 1). SPSS Principal Component Factor Analysis procedures performed on the data file revealed uni-dimensional fit for the components of the scale with high loadings: clothing = .948; pose = .858; body emphasis = .929; number = .910. Clothing accounted for 83.166% of variance; pose, 8.6935%; body emphasis, 5.398%, and number, 2.742% (Appendix II, Figure 2). That is, if the subject wore revealing clothing they were also likely to exhibit sexualized poses; emphasize chest, buttocks, or genitals; and include a higher number of sexualized images.

### **Coding**

The researcher entered the sex and each of the four scaled variable scores into an SPSS dataset as the profiles were viewed. Following data collection, the data file was split on the sex dimension, and descriptive statistics procedures provided information necessary for the assignment of the profiles into four categories: non-sexualized, slightly sexualized, moderately sexualized, and hyper-sexualized. An independent coder then viewed the forty-one profiles and was consulted to establish agreement on the assignment of each profile to one of the four categories. No conflicts with the category assignments presented in the discussion.

### **Results**



The data file was subjected to inferential analysis by SPSS statistical software. The file was split into the two groups by sex and SPSS descriptive statistics obtained for both groups (Appendix 1, Figure 1). The female profiles mean score is 5.264 for an N of nineteen with a standard deviation of 3.70586. The male profiles mean score is .0909 for an N of twenty-two with a standard deviation of .2924. Boxplots (Appendix 1, Figure 2) and a bar graph (Appendix 1, Figure 3) were produced to display the results graphically.

One of the most striking features of the boxplots is how little dispersion exists among the male profile scores as compared to the female profile scores. In short the male profiles rarely displayed sexualized images, resulting in little variance; whereas the female profiles often displayed sexualized and even hyper-sexualized images and greater variance. Males, in keeping with the body of literature on this topic, were not very likely to present sexualized or objectified images. Rather, males were more likely to present themselves fully clothed in business, formal, or sports attire. The highest score achieved by any male profile is one point and only two of the male profiles contained even this modest level of sexualized content. For most male profiles there were no overtly sexualized images.

An SPSS generated frequencies table of the results (Appendix 1, Figure 4) revealed two female profiles scored 0, six scored 1 – 4 points, four scored 5 – 8 points, and five scored 9 – 13 points. The scores are categorized as follows: 0 points, non-sexualized, 1 – 4 points, slightly sexualized, 5 – 8 points, moderately sexualized, 9 – 13 points, hyper-sexualized. It is interesting to note nearly half of the female profiles are moderately or hyper-sexualized which seems to indicate sexualized presentations of women in advertising and mass media leads them to sexualize or even hyper-sexualize their personal Facebook profiles and, perhaps, their offline presentations of self. Next single sample t-tests were performed for each of the two groups using the test value 0 which indicates the profile was not sexualized. The results for the female group are highly significant p



= .000 two tailed (Appendix III Figure 1). Conversely the male profiles were found not to be significantly sexualized. The dataset was then submitted to independent samples t-test procedures to determine if the male and female groups differed from one another. The analysis found the two groups were significantly different  $p = .000$ , with females presenting a range of profiles from non- to hyper-sexualized (Appendix III Figure 1).

### **Discussion**

The current study investigated the incidence of sexualized images in Facebook profiles. The findings suggest single females are far more likely to post sexualized and hyper-sexualized images of themselves to their Facebook profiles. This is almost certainly a result of exposure to sociocultural scripts which sexualize and hyper-sexualize females in magazine and billboard advertisements, music videos, television, and movies. The data indicate single males are more likely to present themselves in business, sports or formal attire. In short, the profiles of single females focused more on their sexuality; whereas the profiles of single males focused on their professional assets and wage earning potential. Indeed, single females seem intent on presenting an image of a fantasy girl or Playboy Bunny rather than a multi-dimensional person, while single males seem intent on presenting an image of their potential as a good provider and companion.

The frequent use of sexualized and hyper-sexualized images of young single women available on Facebook is disconcerting. Perhaps the females have been influenced by the hyper-sexualized images so common in mass media. Many of these young women have presented themselves in a sexualized and hyper-sexualized manner which objectifies and depersonalizes. Further, these young women may actually be placing themselves in jeopardy to sexual predators known by the police and courts to use Facebook and other popular social media sites to search for potential victims. In some states, sexual predators are proscribed by law from using Facebook, but this often does not deter them and many states do not yet have such statutes in place.

Further research is needed to better understand the way young single women depict themselves on Facebook and how this relates to the objectification of women in mass media as well as the influence of the sociocultural the sexual scripts produced and reproduced by pop culture. The current preliminary study indicates Facebook offers a lucrative area for gaining a better understanding of human sexual behavior on and off social networking sites and, perhaps, a deeper understanding of how our male dominated culture robs women of sexual agency. Textual analysis of the tags and comments young single males and females add to their photographs is one area which seems to offer an abundance of data and cause for concern. Many of the young women in the current study expressed themselves textually in ways which indicate a high level of insecurity about their bodies and their

physical attractiveness. Though not operationalized for the current study, perhaps those who are the most insecure are also more likely to create hyper-sexualized presentations of self. So further study may well find it profitable to operationalize a variable to measure insecurity and examine the relationship between hyper-sexualized presentations and self-doubt. Researchers might also replicate the current research using a larger sample size, random sampling, and/or focusing on the Facebook profiles of older adult male and female users.

#### **Multimedia**

[Single in the Digital Age Synopsis](#)

**Power Point Presentation: Single in the Digital Age**

[Download \[255.87 KB\]](#)

**Appendix I**

**Descriptives**

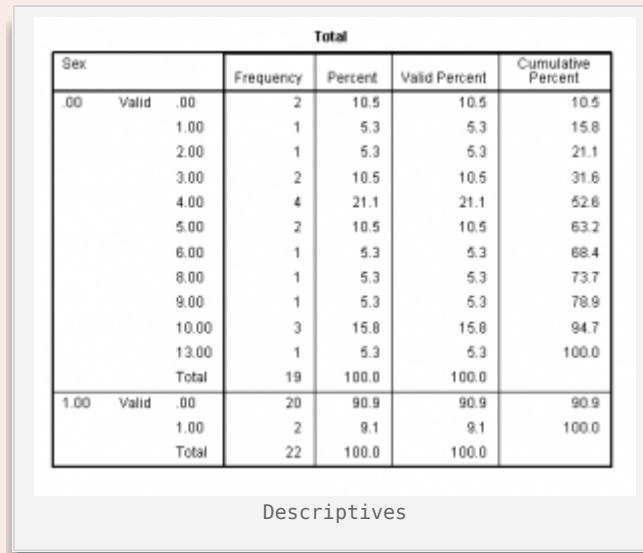


Figure 1

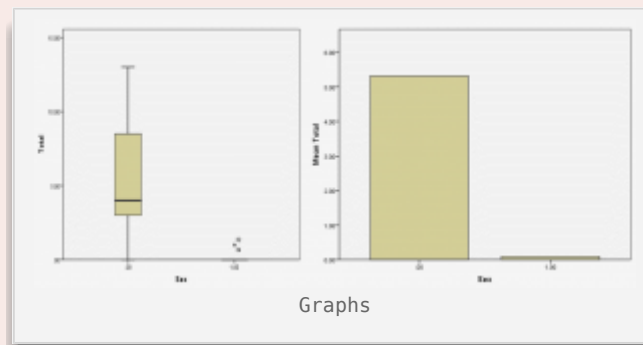


Figure 3  
Frequencies

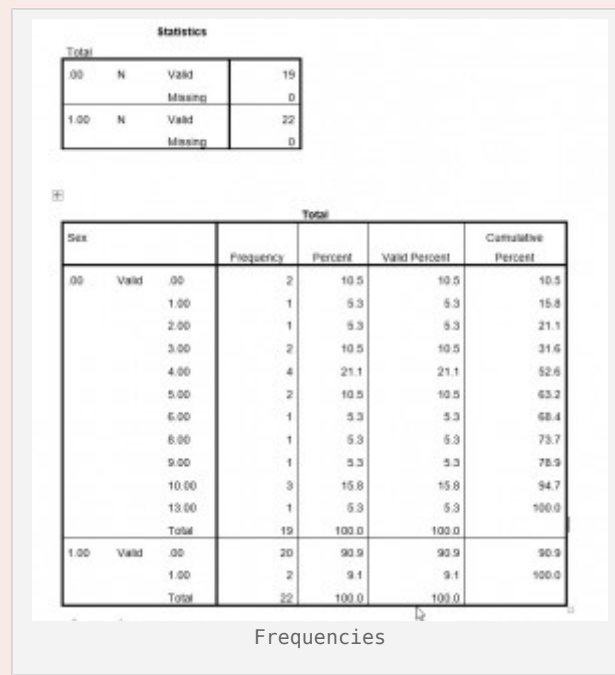


Figure 4  
Appendix II  
Factor Analysis

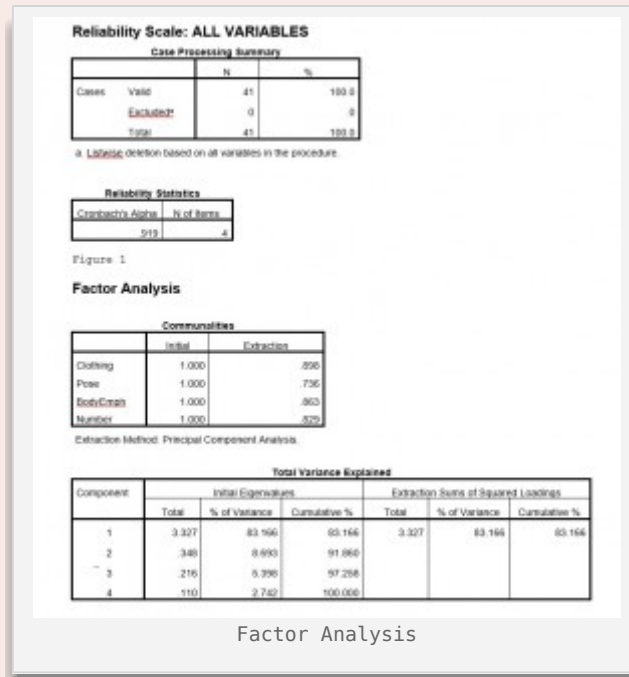


Figure 1  
Appendix III

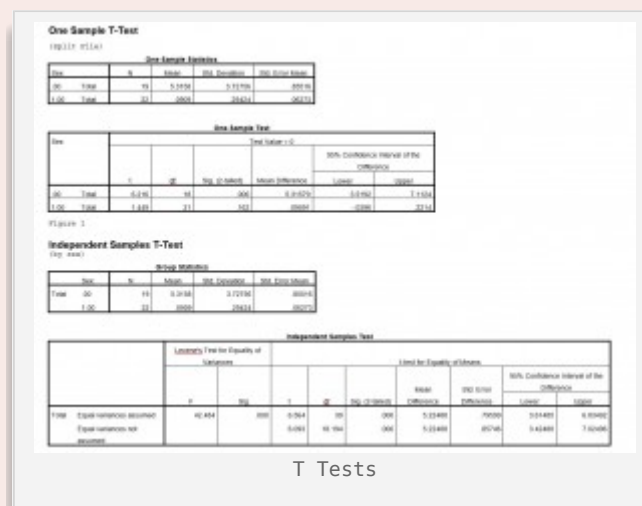


Figure 1  
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