

Sexual Objectification of Women, Media and Related Mental Health Risks: A Review

*Neha Rao, **Dr. Manpreet Ola, ***Dr. Vikas Sharma

*M.Phil Clinical Psychology, Amity Institute of Clinical Psychology, Amity University, Gurugram

**Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Clinical Psychology, Amity University, Gurugram

***Head of Department, Amity Institute of Clinical Psychology, Amity University, Gurugram

Abstract: Every woman has suffered from sexual objectification more than once in their lifetime and these experiences have its consequences. This review focuses on the definition of sexual objectification and its consequences in a person's life. It also discusses the influence of media on objectifying women while also putting light on the related mental health risks of sexual objectification among women.

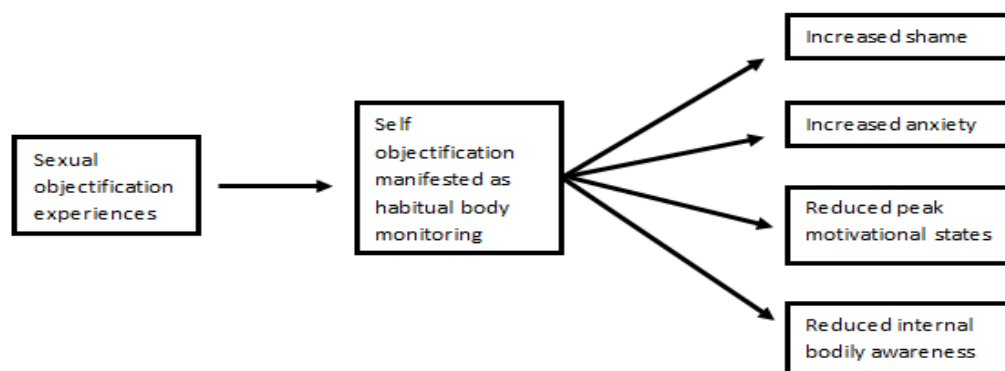
Keywords: Objectification, Sexual Objectification, Self Objectification.

1. INTRODUCTION

Growing up in the patriarchal society where women are always treated as an object has led feminist theorists to direct their attention on the increasing tendency of western culture to objectify women. Objectification is seeing or treating a person as a commodity. Objectification usually occurs in sexual nature where a person is primarily viewed as an object of sexual desire. Both men and women are the victims of sexual objectification but women are more objectified than men while women report more sexual objectification experiences than do men (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Most women have gone through sexual objectification at least once in their lifetime. Bartky (1990) defined sexual objectification as "when a woman's body parts are separated from her and reduced to a mere instrument with the capability of representing her". Sexualization of women's bodies can range from sexual evaluation (gazing) to sexual violence (rape). Evidence of sexual objectification can be found everywhere, from women's subjective experiences to media and film industry, to specific cultures where women are portrayed as sexual objects.

2. OBJECTIFICATION THEORY

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) theory postulates that experiences of sexual objectification lead women to internalize the observer's perspective of their bodies and to adopt a peculiar way of treating themselves as an object to be looked upon and evaluated in regards of those experiences. This phenomenon is known as self-objectification and is characterized by habitual body surveillance. According to this theory, there are consequences of self-objectification and body surveillance such as shame, anxiety, derailment in achieving peak motivational states (flow) and decreased awareness of internal bodily states.



Self objectification can be conceptualized in both trait and state. Trait self objectification is an extent to which a woman has internalized other person's perspectives of their body and are severely fixated with body appearance while state self objectification is an incidental awareness of an observer's perspective towards their body and their fixation with body appearance (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1998).

3. OBJECTIFICATION AND MEDIA

Sexually objectifying women is a common occurrence in the media. Davis (2018) found in textual analysis of two social media sites that female college students are portrayed as sexual and submissive objects to be used by men. Women's breast and buttocks are highly sexualized than other parts of the body. Sexiness has been depicted in social media by portraying unachievable beauty standards for women. Sexual intimacy has also been compromised for many women with body image issues. Results of a survey suggested that body shame, appearance anxiety, and body image self-consciousness during physical intimacy and exposure to sexually objectifying television and magazines is partially mediated by body surveillance (Aubrey 2007).

Adolescent girls suffer more body shame and body surveillance than adolescent boys (Knauss et.al.2008). Supporting the results Vandebosch and Eggermont (2012) discovered a direct relationship between exposure of sexually objectifying media and internalization of body surveillance, self objectification and body ideals among adolescent girls.

Objectification just isn't limited to television and magazines where they sexually highlight separate body parts of woman but it has been seen in video games as well. A meta-analysis (Karsay et.al. 2018) indicated video game use created stronger self objectification effects instead of television use as video games have high sexual depiction of both sex characters (Burgess et. al. 2007, Lynch et.al. 2016).

Pornography has also portrayed unattainable sexual goals and has sexualized woman's body to extreme levels, depicting woman as subordinate objects controlled by men. Hernandez (2011) researched on consumption of pornography and gender discrimination, results indicated correlation between the consumption and attitude suggesting sexual violence against women, mail entitlement and sexual exploitation. Asian American women are often portrayed as sexually subservient, childlike, and exotic (Root, 1995) while African American women has been shown as sexually aggressive (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004)

Advertisement has also seen highlighting women body parts in gains for higher sales. In a study 59 beer commercial were examined and it was found that women might have appeared less in it the commercial but their bodily exposure was greater (C. Hall and Crum, 1994).

In more recent studies it was found that music videos have also been objectifying a women's body in great details. Aubrey and Frisby (2011) studied correlation between music videos and sexual objectification in their study and found out that female artist are more sexually objectified than male artists. Hip-hop, pop and R&B music videos were more sexually objectifying than other music videos. The result of this study was also examined on young men it was found out that men who were exposed to extreme sexually objectifying videos had significantly more opposing sexual beliefs and were acceptable of interpersonal violence as compared to men who were less exposed to such videos.

Objectification of women has not been limited to just media. Environment, situation and subcultures have also been objectifying women in one way or the other. Profession like dancing, modeling, films, cheerleading and others has been seen enhancing women objectification. Places like casinos and restaurants where women are asked to dress in a sultry ways are also enhancing objectification of women.

4. OBJECTIFICATION AND MENTAL HEALTH RISKS

Fredrickson and Roberts, (1997) has linked the psychological consequences of objectification to mental health risks such as depression, sexual dysfunction and eating disorders. Evidence was discovered by Noll and Fredrickson (1998) and Moradi and Huang (2008) that self- objectification leads to mental health risks specifically disordered eating. According to Tiggerman (2018) women suffer mild form of disordered eating, depressed mood and low sexual satisfaction on daily basis when they have negative body image. Objectification has also been linked to body dissatisfaction (Muehlenkamm, 2005).

Norms and media have propagated certain body appearance for women and how this propagation has affected our normal lives. Parents have certainly hanged on to certain norms of women body appearance. Rodgers & Chabrol (2009) review of 56 studies has shown the parental criticism, teasing, and support for weight loss with their daughters significantly

impacted girls' body image and eating behaviors. Parents have been influencing a girl's body image. Lowes and Tiggerman (2003) found that mother's body dissatisfaction is significantly related to a girl's body dissatisfaction and that their mother's diet and exercise behaviors influence their behavior.

Peers have also been seen contributing in the objectification of fellow peers. Teasing about weight and appearance is the most common forms of objectification in peer groups or adolescents. Carlson Jones (2011) study on 304 girls indicated that girls engaging in appearance conversation have higher body dissatisfaction. Paxton et al. (2005) study indicated that, girls have a strong belief that thinness is attractive to boys while also validating this belief with male participants. The majority of male participants likened girls' thinness to attractiveness. Authors argued that this could be because of internalization of thin beauty ideal.

Sexual objectification is just not related to clinical mental health risks but is also have is influence on other psychosocial constructs. Studies by Breines, Crocker, & Garcia (2008) and Mercurio & Landry (2008) shown that poorer self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, less relationship satisfaction, lower levels of global well-being, risk-taking, self-harm, and negative attitudes toward breastfeeding have also been linked with sexual objectification.

Oppressions such as heterosexism, ableism and racism also intersect with sexual objectification. Haines et al. (2008) found that more self-objectification was related to more internalized heterosexism among lesbians and the relations between internalized heterosexism and negative eating attitudes and depressive symptoms is partially mediated by sexual objectification. Similarly, internalized racism has been seen among African American women who indulge into high skin tone monitoring which is directly related to higher levels of body shame leading to skin tone dissatisfaction (Buchanan, Fischer, Tokar, and Yoder, 2008).

Substance use is also bee studies in relation to sexual objectification. Zucker et al., (2001) and Zucker & Landry (2007) found that tobacco ads portraying women' sexiness and thinness has increased the rates of being a smoker among undergraduate women. Similar phenomenon has happened with alcohol consumption as they media communicate women are more desired and admired by men when they smoke and drink alcohol (Jhally, 2007; Katz & Kilbourne, 2004). Work place sexual harassment has also been seen related to acohol consumption (Rospenda, 2002). Streicher-Bremer's (2001) qualitative study found that Substance abuse of Heroin has been connected to experiences of sexual abuse, prostitution, and rape. Drug and alcohol abuse has been seen in lesbian who suffer from sexual orientation based hate crime (Descamps, Rothblum, Bradford, & Ryan, 2000).

5. CONCLUSION

Taken together, the studies reviewed highlight the understanding of objectification theory and how experiences of sexual objectification can lead to various mental health risks such as depression, disordered eating, substance use, sexual dysfunction and in some cases post traumatic stress disorder. Media has a part to play in internalizing self objectification among women and how it promotes certain ideals related to women's body. These ideals have lead to higher body surveillance and body shame. Most of the researches have been done in the U.S. and Australia so it is difficult to say if women from different countries have similar consequences of being objectified. The theory requires to be researched more and the consequences of both type of sexual objectification needs to be studies extensively. The groundwork of the theory was based on women's experiences while men also face from sexual objectification one time or the other in their lifetime which is also an area of research for future study.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. New York: Routledge.
- [2] Breines, J. G., Crocker, J., & Garcia, J. A. (2008). Self-objectification and wellbeing in women's daily lives. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34, 583-598.
- [3] Buchanan, T. S., Fischer, A. R., Tokar, D. M., & Yoder, J. D. (2008). Testing a culture-specific extension of objectification theory regarding African American women's body image. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 36, 697-718.
- [4] Burgess, M. C., Stermer, S. P., & Burgess, S. R. (2007). Sex, lies, and video games: The portrayal of male and female characters on video game covers. *Sex Roles*, 57, 419-433
- [5] Burgess, M. C., Stermer, S. P., & Burgess, S. R. (2007). Sex, lies, and video games: The portrayal of male and female characters on video game covers. *Sex Roles*, 57, 419-433

- [6] Burgess, M. C. R., Stermer, S. P., & Burgess, S. R. (2007). Sex, lies, and video games: The portrayal of male and female characters on video game covers. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 57(5-6), 419–433
- [7] Lynch, T., Tompkins, J. E., van Driel, I. I., & Fritz, N. (2016). Sexy, strong, and secondary: A content analysis of female characters in video games across 31 years. *Journal of Communication*, 66, 564–584
- [8] Davis, S. E. (2018). Objectification, Sexualization, and Misrepresentation: Social Media and the College Experience. *Social Media+ Society*, 4(3), 2056305118786727.
- [9] Descamps, M. J., Rothblum, E., Bradford, J., & Ryan, C. (2000). Mental health impact of child sexual abuse, rape, intimate partner violence, and hate crimes in the National Lesbian Health Care Survey. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, 11, 27-55.
- [10] Feltman, Chandra Erin, "Instagram use and self-objectification: The roles of internalization, comparison, appearance commentary, and feminism. " PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 2018.
- [11] Fredrickson, B. L., & Harrison, K. (2005). Throwing like a girl: Self-objectification predicts adolescent girls' motor performance. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 29, 79–101.
- [12] Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. (1997). Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 173–206.
- [13] Fredrickson, B. L., Roberts, T., Noll, S. M., Quinn, D. M., & Twenge, J. M. (1998). That swimsuit becomes you: Sex differences in self-objectification, restrained eating, and math performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 269–284.
- [14] Haines, M. E., Erchull, M. J., Liss, M., Turner, D. L., Nelson, J. A., Ramsey, L. R., & Hurt, M. M. (2008). Predictors and effects of self-objectification in lesbians. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 2, 181-187.
- [15] Harper, B., & Tiggemann, M. (2008). The effect of thin ideal media images on women's self-objectification, mood, and body image. *Sex Roles*, 649-657.
- [16] Jennifer Stevens Aubrey (2007) The Impact of Sexually Objectifying Media Exposure on Negative Body Emotions and Sexual Self-Perceptions: Investigating the Mediating Role of Body Self-Consciousness, *Mass Communication and Society*, 10:1, 1-23
- [17] Karsay, Kathrin & Knoll, Johannes & Matthes, Jörg. (2018). Sexualizing Media Use and Self-Objectification: A Meta-Analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 42. 9-28.
- [18] Mercurio, A. E., & Landry, L. J. (2008). Self-objectification and well-being: The impact of self-objectification on women's overall sense of self-worth and life satisfaction. *Sex Roles*, 58, 458-466
- [19] Moradi, B., & Huang, Y. P. (2008). Objectification theory and psychology of women: A decade of advance and future directions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 32, 377–398.
- [20] Muehlenkamp, J. J., & Saris-Baglama, R. N. (2002). Self-objectification and its psychological outcomes for college women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26(4), 371-379.
- [21] Noll, S. M., & Fredrickson, B. L. (1998). A mediational model linking self-objectification, body shame, and disordered eating. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 22, 623–636
- [22] Rospenda, K. M. (2002). Workplace harassment, services utilization, and drinking outcomes. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 7, 141-155.
- [23] Streicher-Bremer, J. L. (2001). Expanding the understanding of heroin addiction in women who were sexually abused as children. *Dissertation Abstracts International: The Sciences and Engineering*, 61, 6150.
- [24] Swim, J. K., Hyers, L. L., Cohen, L. L., & Ferguson, M. J. (2001). Everyday sexism: Evidence for its incidence, nature, and psychological impact from three daily diary studies. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57, 31–53.
- [25] Tiggemann, M. (2011). Mental health risks of self-objectification: A review of the empirical evidence for disordered eating, depressed mood, and sexual dysfunction. In R. M. Calogero, S. Tantleff-Dunn, & J. K. Thompson (Eds.), *Self-objectification in women: Causes, consequences, and counteractions* (p. 139–159). American Psychological Association.