



Brief research report

# Does the work environment matter? Sexual objectification and waitresses' body dissatisfaction



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## ABSTRACT

We investigated the relations between working in sexually objectifying restaurant environments and body dissatisfaction in a sample of 252 United States waitresses. Supporting our hypotheses, results indicated that working in sexually objectifying restaurant environments was positively correlated with waitresses' body dissatisfaction. Our findings also supported a theorized serial three-chain mediation model in which working in sexually objectifying restaurant environments was related to body dissatisfaction through more thin ideal internalization and greater self-objectification/body surveillance. Furthermore, thin ideal internalization had a direct, unique link to body dissatisfaction. Our findings highlight the importance of working conditions and internalization processes in understanding waitresses' body image concerns.

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## 1. Introduction

Body dissatisfaction has been called a “normative discontent” (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985) among women because of its prevalence in United States culture, with combined reports suggesting that 69%–93% of women experience ongoing displeasure of their body and/or body parts (Pruis & Janowsky, 2010; Runfola et al., 2013). In addition, women consistently report more body dissatisfaction than men (Yean et al., 2013). Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) offers some insight into why these high rates of body discontent and gender differences in body dissatisfaction might occur. That is, women's body dissatisfaction may stem, in part, from their experiences of being sexually objectified and treated as a physical object valued for its use primarily by men.

Objectification theory posits that experiences of both external and internalized objectification are important in understanding mental health problems, such as disordered eating and depression, which disproportionately affect women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Reviews of the empirical research provide much support for these assertions (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011); however, most research to date has focused on interpersonal

(e.g., unwanted sexual advances) and cultural (e.g., depictions of women as sexual objects in the media) manifestations of external objectification. Very little research has investigated objectification that occurs at the environmental level (Szymanski et al., 2011). In addition, most objectification theory research has been conducted with college women (Szymanski et al., 2011). Thus, there is a need to extend this research to other subgroups of women. The purpose of this study was to examine the relations between working at sexually objectifying restaurant environments (SOREs) and body dissatisfaction among waitresses. In addition, we incorporate two internalization processes (i.e., thin ideal internalization and self-objectification) posited in objectification theory as potential explanatory variables in understanding how SOREs might be linked to body dissatisfaction.

According to Szymanski and Feltman (2015), SOREs (e.g., Hooters, Twin Peaks) promote and intensify the sexual objectification of women by putting waitresses' bodies on display and eliciting the male gaze. SOREs may heighten risk for body dissatisfaction by intensifying sociocultural pressures to be conventionally attractive, buxom, and thin; emphasizing a third-party perspective on the body; and fostering competition among waitresses to achieve the perfect body (Moffitt & Szymanski, 2011; Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986). SOREs regulate and enforce female servers' appearance in ways that draw attention to their physical and sexual attributes, such as mandating them to wear tight and revealing uniforms or clothing that highlight their body parts (e.g., breasts, upper legs, and/or buttocks), having stringent

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weight rules, and sanctioning them if they do not comply with the restaurant's appearance standards (Leonard, 2014; Moffitt & Szymanski, 2011). This is illustrated in the following participant quote taken from Moffitt and Szymanski's (2011) qualitative study:

"Now, you have a full on like booklet, and it's like the Hooters' image and each page is dedicated to like nails, hair, makeup, brushing your teeth, wearing deodorant, like I mean, down to the freakin T. . .promising that not only will you stay the same weight, height, you know, but you won't drastically change your hair, wear your makeup every day, you know what I mean? (p. 83)."

SOREs also explicitly condone men's "right" to view, gawk at, and visually scrutinize female worker' bodies and to appraise their physical and sexual attractiveness (Szymanski & Feltman, 2015). Finally, SOREs foster appearance comparisons and competition among waitresses and the use of beauty to obtain power and currency in their work environment (Moffitt & Szymanski, 2011). We posit that the constant attention and pressure to maintain the ideal body in SOREs may lead to body dissatisfaction. Previous research has shown that women who work in other environments (i.e., acting, sports, modeling, dancing) that have body weight restrictions and appearance standards are more likely to engage in disordered eating than women who do not work in these types of environments (Striegel-Moore et al., 1986). Furthermore, experiences of body evaluation have been linked to disordered eating (Moradi & Huang, 2008) and engaging in upward appearance based comparison is consistently related to body dissatisfaction (Myers & Crowther, 2009).

In addition to direct relations, working in SOREs is likely to be related to waitresses' body dissatisfaction indirectly via internalization of the thin ideal and self-objectification in serial. Moradi and Huang's (2008) review of the empirical research on objectification theory revealed that experiences of interpersonal and cultural manifestations of sexual objectification are related to both internalization of cultural standards of beauty and self-objectification (i.e., regularly monitoring the appearance of one's body), which in turn are related to greater shame about one's physical body. Body shame then is related to disordered eating and depression. In addition to these indirect effects, direct effects among variables are also frequently observed. Recent empirical evidence suggests that these dynamics may be at play in helping explain how working at SOREs may relate to body dissatisfaction. For example, many of the Hooters' waitresses in Moffitt and Szymanski's (2011) qualitative study described adopting the SORE's regulated appearance standards to such a degree that they began changing their everyday beauty routines and applying these standards outside the SORE. They also reported watching their weight, adjusting their clothing repeatedly at work, monitoring their physical appearance, enhancing their physical appearance (e.g., wearing stomach bands and/or padded bras), and feeling self-conscious about and uncomfortable with their own bodies. Relatedly, Szymanski and Feltman (2015) found support for the mediating roles of interpersonal sexual objectification experiences, self-objectification, body shame, and depression in the SOREs and job dissatisfaction link. Finally, other non-SOREs research has linked thin ideal internalization and self-objectification specifically to women's body dissatisfaction (Bessenoff & Snow, 2006; Slevec & Tiggemann, 2011).

In sum, we hypothesized that working in higher levels of SOREs would be related to more body dissatisfaction among waitresses. We also hypothesized a fully saturated three-stage serial chain of mediation from SOREs to body dissatisfaction via more thin ideal internalization and greater self-objectification. Given the known relations between body mass index (BMI) and body dissatisfaction (Slevec & Tiggemann, 2011), we controlled for BMI in our analyses.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

Data for the current study were collected as part of a larger study that examined the mediating roles of gendered structural/organizational power, personal power, and rumination in the link between SOREs, anxiety, and disordered eating using a national sample of waitresses (Szymanski & Mikorski, 2017). Besides this published study and the current one, there are no other papers under review or future plans to use this dataset. The Institutional Review Board at our university approved this study. As reported earlier, the sample consisted of 252 United States' waitresses aged 18–66 years old ( $M = 30.63$ ,  $SD = 12.01$ ). Participants were predominantly White (87%) and from the working (36%) or middle (56%) social classes. Approximately half of the respondents (49%) were currently enrolled in college. Of the 51% who were not currently students, 8% attained less than a high school diploma, 51% a high school diploma, 25% a two-year college degree, 12% a four-year college degree, and 4% graduate degree. Most participants ( $n = 231$ ) provided the name of the restaurant where they worked and 187 different restaurants or restaurant chains were represented.

As reported earlier (Szymanski & Mikorski, 2017), participants completed an online survey. They were recruited through a department of psychology's human research pool at a large United States Southeastern public university (24%) and paid advertisements placed on Facebook (74%). Participants either received course credit for their undergraduate course or could enter into a raffle awarding a \$50 online merchant gift card to six randomly selected persons.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Sexually objectifying restaurant environments

We used the 15-item Sexually Objectifying Restaurant Environment Scale (Szymanski & Feltman, 2015) to assess how much waitresses perceive their work environment as putting women's bodies and sexuality on display and eliciting the male gaze. Example items include "In the restaurant I work, female servers/waitresses are required to wear uniforms or clothing that accentuate their breasts," "The restaurant where I work has products (e.g., magazines and calendars) and/or events (e.g., bikini contests, hula hooping, playing Twister), that encourage male customers to look at women's bodies," and "In the restaurant I work, male customers evaluate the appearance of female servers/waitresses." Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Mean scores were used, with higher scores indicating more SOREs.

As reported by Szymanski and Feltman (2015), internal consistency ( $\alpha = .96$ ) and structural validity via exploratory factor analyses were demonstrated. Construct validity was supported by positive correlations between scores on the SORE scale and waitresses' self-reported views of their restaurant as being a "sexualized work environment," the restaurant catering to male customers, the representation of male customers in their restaurant, and tolerance of sexual advances in the restaurant. Furthermore, among the subgroup of waitresses working in chain/franchise restaurants, those working in known SOREs (e.g., Hooters, Tilted Kilt) scored higher on the SORE scale than waitresses not working in these types of restaurants (Szymanski & Feltman, 2015).

#### 2.2.2. Internalization of the thin ideal

We used the 8-item Internalization subscale of the Socio-cultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire (Heinberg, Thompson, & Stormer, 1995) to assess how much an individual accepts and internalizes societal standards of beauty. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*Completely disagree*) to

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