



Reports

Sinful flesh: Sexual objectification threatens women's moral self[☆]Zhansheng Chen^{a,*}, Fei Teng^{a,*}, Hong Zhang^b^a The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong^b Nanjing University, China

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sexual objectification can lead to sinful feelings among women.
- Feeling of contamination accounts for the effect of sexual objectification on sinful feelings.
- Women with higher perceived responsibility for their objectification are more likely to experience sinful feelings.

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ABSTRACT

The current investigation examined whether sexual objectification leads to perceived contamination in women victims, which, in turn, triggers sinful feelings. The results of three experiments provide converging support for these predictions. Female participants reported greater sinful feelings than their non-objectified counterparts, after receiving objectifying comments on their physical appearance from an alleged male partner (Experiment 1) or recalling a past experience of objectification (Experiments 2 and 3). Furthermore, perceived contamination mediated the effect of objectification on sinful feelings. We also found that perceived personal responsibility of being objectified moderated the above effects, such that the effects were only observed among participants who perceived themselves as highly responsible for objectification experience, but not among those who perceived low personal responsibility. These findings contribute to the literature by explaining why objectification elicits sinful feelings in female victims and who is more susceptible to this influence.

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Introduction

Sexual objectification refers to the tendency to value women solely on the basis of the utility of sexual parts or sexual functions (Bartky, 1990, p. 26). It happens on a daily basis through mass media portrayals (Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003) as well as interpersonal encounters (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001), and prior research has thoroughly documented its degrading effects on women. For example, comparing to their non-objectified counterparts, objectified women were attributed less mind (Loughnan et al., 2010), regarded as less competent (Heflick, Goldenberg, Cooper, & Puvia, 2011), and even viewed as less than human (Vaes, Paladino, & Puvia, 2011). The present investigation extended the literature to examine the effects of sexual objectification on women's self-perception. Specifically, we investigated whether sexual objectification would lead women to feel contaminated, which triggers sinful feelings.

Objectification, Sinful Feelings, Perceived Contamination

According to Nussbaum (1995), treating a person as a tool rather than as an end to him/herself leads to the denial of subjectivity and thus will preclude the person from moral concern (Nussbaum, 1995). Consistent with this proposal, Loughnan and colleagues found that objectified women were attributed less moral patiency, such that they were regarded as undeserving of being treated morally (Loughnan et al., 2010). Similarly, recent research has elucidated a link between rape proclivity and objectification; Rudman and Mescher (2012) found a positive correlation between men's rape proclivity and their objectifying women through associating them with objects, tools, and things.

While these questions are of broad interest and have advanced our understanding of the consequences of objectification, other questions exist unanswered. In particular, we are interested in whether women will internalize the perspective of others so that they feel sinful after they are sexually objectified. Indirect evidence in the literature suggests such a possibility. For instance, women usually feel ashamed and self-disgusted following objectification induced by either putting on provocative swimsuits (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998) or writing objectification-related words (e.g., weight, sexiness; Roberts & Gettman, 2004). Shame and disgust are typical emotions related to an

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* Corresponding authors at: Department of Psychology, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong.

E-mail addresses: chenz@hku.hk (Z. Chen), tengfei@hku.hk (F. Teng).¹ The first two authors contributed equally to this work.

individual's moral sense (Haidt, 2003; Miller, 1997). Moreover, after being objectified, women showed signs of social withdrawal by limiting their presence in social scenarios (Saguy, Quinn, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2010). The urge to hide is another manifestation of moral inferiority (for a review, see Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that objectification may threaten the moral self of female victims. Further, we believe that this perceived contamination following objectification may account for the “moral inferiority” we are proposing also occurs.

Moral impurity is contagious (Rachman, 2006). People, usually victims of an immoral deed or violation, feel themselves being mentally contaminated or polluted by an “immoral human source” by way of physical contact (e.g., touching), as well as non-physical contact (e.g., seeing; Rachman, 2006, p. 19). The immoral deed can be betrayal, degradation, emotional abuse, or even humiliation (Rachman, 2004, 2006). When individuals, as victims, participate in a situation deemed as immoral, they will be likely to experience these internal emotional charges of being polluted or contaminated and thus feel themselves as immoral. Because objectification is immoral, given the fact that it contributes to perception of the person as a tool or object (Nussbaum, 1995), we predicted that women victims would feel contaminated or polluted following objectification.

Research on female victims of sexual assault also provides indirect evidence to our prediction. Sexual assault or harassment is an extreme form of sexual objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). It involves dehumanizing women and using them as mere sexual tools while completely neglecting their subjectivity and feelings. Perhaps not surprisingly, research shows that victims of sexual assault often feel contaminated. For example, Fairbrother and Rachman (2004) assessed post-assault feelings of female victims through questionnaires and interviews. Most participants in this study (more than 68%) reported that they felt mentally contaminated and had the urge to wash themselves. Although sexual assault or harassment is not rare in women's daily lives, especially in the work environment, it happens less frequently than the subtle form of objectification, such as objectifying compliments on women's appearance. In the present study, we directly tested whether the less violent form of objectification would lead women to feel contaminated.

Moreover, contamination often has a moral component (Rachman, 2004, 2006). According to the Archbishop of Glasgow in the late 1600s, Robert Leighton (1693), “The soul and body of all mankind are stained by the pollution of sin” (p. 114). That is, people who feel contaminated by an immoral deed would, in turn, experience a moral inferiority in themselves. Although never directly tested, indirect evidence supports such a causal association between contamination and moral impurity. For instance, women who had endured a sexual assault reported feeling morally tainted (Fairbrother & Rachman, 2004). Similarly, Fairbrother and colleagues found that women felt immoral and ashamed after being contaminated by imagining having a non-consensus kiss with a man (Fairbrother, Newth, & Rachman, 2005). Therefore, we predicted and tested the hypothesis that when being objectified, women will feel contaminated, which will, in turn, induce a sense of moral impurity in them.

The moderating role of perceived personal responsibility

Certainly, not all victims feel the same levels of contamination when being involved in an immoral deed (Herba & Rachman, 2007; Radomsky & Elliott, 2009). One individual difference variable that may moderate this effect is perceived personal responsibility, which refers to the extent to which the victims perceive themselves accountable for the immoral treatment. For example, when being objectified, a woman might either hold the perpetrator responsible for delivering such an immoral treatment, or she may think her own behavior was influential in causing the interpersonal mistreatment. Salkovskis (1999) proposed that an inflated sense

of “responsibility for harm to oneself or other people” (p. S31) may connect intrusive thoughts and compulsions accompanied with perceived contamination. Moreover, Radomsky and Elliott (2009) found that when involved in an immoral violation, victims' perceived personal responsibility was highly predictive of the perceived mental contamination in the form of heightened perceived dirtiness and cleansing urges. In sum, the victims' perceived personal responsibility can influence their perceived degree of contamination. As objectification might influence female victims' moral sense through perceived contamination, it is therefore reasonable to further expect that perceived personal responsibility would moderate the effect of objectification on women's moral sense.

Research overview

In sum, we examined whether sexual objectification elicits women to experience moral impurity, and whether this is accounted for by changes in their perceived contamination. Across three studies, we examined these hypotheses. Participants were objectified either by receiving objectifying comments (Experiment 1) or by recalling a past experience of objectification (Experiments 2 and 3). Next, participants indicated their perceived contamination. Finally, participants indicated their sinful feelings on self-reported items adapted from past research (Gino & Desai, 2012). Further, we measured participants' individual difference on perceived personal responsibility of being objectified, and examined whether such an individual difference variable would moderate the associations among objectification, perceived contamination, and sinful feelings (Experiment 3).

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 directly tested whether objectification elicits sinful feelings in female victims and whether perceived contamination mediated this effect. We led female participants to believe that they were interacting with a male participant via an Internet connection, as the perpetrators of female objectification are predominantly men (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). We then manipulated sexual objectification by providing comments either focusing exclusively on their physical appearance or on their general character (Calogero, Herbozo, & Thompson, 2009). Next, we used perceived dirtiness as the index of contamination, because the central component of contamination is the feeling of dirtiness (Rachman, 2004, 2006) and past studies have shown repeatedly that victims of immoral deeds perceived themselves as dirty (Elliott & Radomsky, 2009; Fairbrother et al., 2005; Radomsky & Elliott, 2009). Finally, we assessed participants' sinful feelings as well as their cleansing urges, a usual consequence of feeling contaminated. We predicted that participants in the objectification condition, relative to those in the control condition, would feel dirtier, which, in turn, would trigger higher sinful feelings and stronger cleansing urges.

Method

Participants

40 female undergraduate students from a university in Hong Kong (mean age = 20.4, *SD* = .86) participated in exchange for a monetary reward.

Procedure

Upon their arrival, participants were asked to work on several separate tasks, including an online impression formation task. After seated in front of a computer, participants learned that they would connect via the Internet with a male participant sitting in another room. Participants were instructed to type into the computer a brief self-introduction for two minutes with the knowledge that their assigned partner watched them through the video camera. During this

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