



Reports

Is objectification always harmful? Reactions to objectifying images and feedback as a function of self-objectification and mortality salience[☆]Jamie L. Goldenberg^{a,*}, Douglas P. Cooper^a, Nathan A. Heflick^a, Clay Routledge^b, Jamie Arndt^c^a University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, USA^b North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND, USA^c University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA

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ABSTRACT

From the perspective of terror management theory, awareness of death induces a need for validation of important values. Thus, for women who place a high value on their appearance (e.g., high self-objectifiers), mortality salience should increase positive reactions to objectifying experiences relative to women who do not highly value appearance. Two studies supported this hypothesis. Self-objectification moderated favorable reactions to objectifying stimuli (Study 1) and state self-esteem in response to an objectifying comment (Study 2) when women were primed with death. Together, the studies illustrate the complexity of reactions to objectification and, by highlighting conditions in which objectification serves a psychological function, help to explain the pervasiveness of the phenomena.

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Katie Couric and Hillary Clinton both reached the near tops of the traditionally male professions of news and politics, yet commentary on the performance of each often included analysis of wardrobe choice, hair style, and the decision to show or not show their legs. In sports, the head of FIFA, the international governing body for soccer, suggested that professional female soccer players should wear more revealing clothes to improve ratings. These are but a few of the prevalent examples of the objectification of women. They are especially alarming given the common sense, politically correct, and empirically validated notion that objectification psychologically harms women (e.g., Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In this research, however, we pose the question: Do some women, under some circumstances, reap psychological benefits from objectification?

Integrating research on terror management, the need for validation of the self, and objectification of women, we posit that under conditions in which the need for validation is strong (e.g., mortality salience; MS), women who place high value on their physical appearance (high self-objectifiers) may respond especially favorably to objectifying images and feedback because such events serve to validate the way they see themselves and their social world.

Objectification, Self-Objectification, and Validation of the Self

Objectification refers to when a woman's body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated from her person, or regarded as if they are capable of representing her (Bartky, 1990). Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) starts with the premise that the objectification of women permeates our culture in both interpersonal encounters (e.g., Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001) and in media portrayals (e.g., Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003). Consequently, women learn to internalize observers' perspectives on their own body and chronically monitor themselves in terms of how others would evaluate their appearance—that is, they self-objectify. Situations that induce a state of self-objectification (e.g., trying on a swimsuit, but not a sweater) have been found to increase women's body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann, 2001), and feelings of shame and restrained eating (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998). Further, due to the regulatory resources such monitoring requires, self-objectification impairs cognitive performance (e.g., Quinn, Kallen, Twenge, & Fredrickson, 2006). In addition, when women (but not men) are objectified, they are perceived more negatively (e.g., less competent) by others (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Heflick, Goldenberg, Cooper, & Puvia, 2010).

In light of the costs of objectification, it seems surprising that women objectify other women (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005) as well as their selves. But as many women know, and as many others have witnessed on such television shows as *Sex and the City* and *The Real Housewives*, commenting on one another's appearance is a ritual that often accompanies women's interactions with one another (e.g., Knapp, Hopper, & Bell, 1984). Why might this be? We suggest that the objectification of women and the consequent self-objectification by

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women reinforces one of the ways they structure and interpret their social world, laying the foundation for self-worth that is rooted in the value placed on physical appearance. To the extent that this occurs, women who are high, relative to low, self-objectifiers may reap certain psychological benefits when exposed to images and evaluations that highlight physical appearance because they highly value this domain.

This position is consistent with a number of social psychological perspectives. Self-verification theory (e.g., Swann, 1983), for example, asserts that people maintain a sense of predictability and structure by creating social worlds that enable others to see them as they see themselves, especially when the self-view is highly important and central to one's identity (Pelham & Swann, 1994; see also symbolic self-completion theory, Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Further, research on self-affirmation theory (e.g., Steele, 1988) has demonstrated that the affirmation of important values makes people less defensive when the self is threatened (e.g., Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000). Likewise, Crocker and colleagues' (e.g., Crocker & Knight, 2005) view of self-esteem suggests that experiences and feedback in domains in which one's self-esteem is contingent accounts for fluctuations in individuals' level of state self-esteem (e.g., Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002) and other indices of well-being (e.g., Crocker & Park, 2004). Thus, from at least three major social psychological perspectives, one could expect that people who place a high value on their appearance (i.e., high self-objectifiers) may obtain some measure of psychological protection from objectifying stimuli and experiences.

Some findings within the objectification literature, though often de-emphasized or unexpected, are consistent with this suggestion. For example, Fea and Brannon (2006) found that women high in trait self-objectification exhibited less negative mood in response to an appearance compliment (comparable to a compliment about their character) from a female experimenter as compared to a neutral condition. Low self-objectifiers' mood did not differ as a function of conditions. Along these lines, in Gapinski, Brownell, and LaFrance (2003), women who were in a state of self-objectification experienced less negative mood after overhearing a confederate criticize their own weight as compared to an irrelevant conversation, presumably, the authors suggested, because this facilitated a favorable social comparison. Additionally, Breines, Crocker, and Garcia (2008) found that within-person increases in state self-objectification predicted decreased well-being except among women with high, and highly appearance-contingent, self-esteem, who reported increased well-being when self-objectifying.

These findings suggest that woman who self-objectify may obtain a sense of validation from events that highlight the value of appearance. At the same time, there is contradictory evidence. Women who judge themselves on their appearance sometimes respond negatively to objectification (e.g., in Fredrickson et al., 1998, Study 1, women high in trait self-objectification responded most negatively to the objectification manipulation). Such inconsistency may result because objectification can have different consequences depending on, not just individual differences in the value placed on one's appearance, but situational needs for self-validation.

Terror Management Theory and the Need for Validation

According to terror management theory (TMT; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991), people face a particularly trenchant need for self-validation in light of their awareness of personal mortality. TMT asserts that people obtain a sense of enduring meaning and significance by identifying with, and living up to, culturally-derived systems of value. Indeed, research supports the TMT hypothesis that awareness of death motivates individuals to try and validate their (most often positive) view of the self and culturally-derived identities (e.g., see Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008 for a review).

Physical appearance has been shown to be one domain in which some people seek to affirm their worth and strive to meet particular standards in the face of mortality awareness. For example, reminders of mortality increase the desire to suntan, but only amongst those who derive self-esteem from having tanned skin (Routledge, Arndt, & Goldenberg, 2004). More generally, Grabe, Routledge, Cook, Andersen, and Arndt (2005) found that women self-objectified more than men when reminded of mortality, but not in a control condition, and somewhat unexpectedly, women objectified other women to a degree equal to men only following the provocation of death-related thought. The authors speculate that this is due to women more highly evaluating themselves on the basis of appearance. Accordingly, this study documented that after an MS but not control treatment, the importance of appearance to self-esteem predicted increased self-objectification among men and women. On the basis of these findings, and evidence that people seek validation in the domains in which they derive meaning and value as a means to confront existential fears associated with death, we embarked on the current research.

Current Research

The research examined whether individual differences in self-objectification moderate women's reactions to objectifying stimuli and feedback when faced with the awareness of death. Two hypotheses follow from the foregoing analysis. First, to the extent that the objectification of women validates an important aspect of high self-objectifying women's identity, after a reminder of mortality, they should respond more favorably to stimuli that feature the objectification of women than low self-objectifying women. Second, when death-related thought is active, high self-objectifiers should experience a boost to their self-esteem (relative to women low in self-objectification) in response to receiving an objectifying compliment.

Study 1: Media Reactions Study

The *Sports Illustrated Swim Suit Issue* is a quintessential example of an appearance-oriented evaluation of women, and thus a picture of the magazine cover was used as the objectifying image for this study. Although it is expected that women would generally report relatively disapproving evaluations of such an objectifying depiction, we hypothesized that when mortality concerns are active, higher self-objectification should promote more favorable reactions. As in Grabe et al. (2005), we did not expect high self-objectifiers to endorse such stimuli in the absence of a mortality reminder.

Methods

Participants

One hundred and twenty-two Caucasian female college students (M age = 20.11, SD = 3.87) participated. Participants were restricted to Caucasian because the objectifying and non-objectifying images featured Caucasian women.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from introductory psychology classes and were awarded course credit for participation. They completed materials in small groups and were told they would be pilot testing materials for future studies.

Materials

Self-objectification Questionnaire (SOQ). Developed originally by Noll and Fredrickson (1998), the SOQ is designed to measure how important appearance is relative to the body's competence. Following Fredrickson et al. (1998), participants were asked to rank 10 items (5 appearance-related and 5 competence-related) from 0 "having the

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