



Skin tone surveillance, depression, and life satisfaction in Indian women: Colour-blind racial ideology as a moderator

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ABSTRACT

Consistent with objectification theory, many studies have shown that self-objectification (and body surveillance) is associated with depression and dissatisfaction with life. Critically, however, much of this research has been conducted with White women attending university in North America. To extend this literature, we investigated whether greater skin tone surveillance – a group-specific manifestation of self-objectification among women of colour – is linked to higher depression and lower life satisfaction among Indian women. Given that some system justifying ideologies provide a protective well-being effect for lower status individuals, we considered whether colour-blind racial ideology (i.e., the minimization/denial of White privilege) weakened the relations between skin tone surveillance and poorer well-being outcomes. Data were collected via Amazon Mechanical Turk; participants included Indian women ($N = 177$) between the ages of 19–30 living in India. Participants completed measures of skin tone surveillance, colour-blind racial ideology, depression, and life satisfaction. Results revealed that skin tone surveillance was associated with higher depression (and more strongly among women higher in colour-blind racial ideology). Moreover, skin tone surveillance was associated with lower life satisfaction only among women lower in colour-blind racial ideology. Implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Across cultures, women are frequently portrayed and treated as sexual objects (Bartky, 1990; Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015; Vandenbosch, Muise, Eggermont, & Impett, 2015). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) proposed objectification theory as a framework for understanding the effects of chronic sexual objectification. According to objectification theory, routine experiences of sexual objectification (in media, interpersonal encounters, etc.) reduce women and girls to their body parts and encourage women and girls to adopt a view of themselves as objects (i.e., to self-objectify). Self-objectification can manifest as excessive body-appearance monitoring which is known as body surveillance. Extensive research conducted primarily on White college women living in North America, Australia, and the UK has shown that self-objectification and body surveillance are associated with greater body shame and appearance anxiety, reduced flow (i.e., the inability to fully engage in the present moment; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and lower internal bodily awareness; in turn, these fac-

tors are linked to negative outcomes including depression, sexual dysfunction, disordered eating, and poorer well-being (for reviews see Calogero, 2012; Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 2011; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Presently, we focus on depression and dissatisfaction with life as outcomes of self-objectification.

As noted, self-objectification can contribute to depressive symptoms including persistent feelings of sadness, loss of pleasure, rumination, and negative thoughts about oneself (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). Media depict the ideal woman as ultrathin, a body type that most women do not meet. Women also tend to be subjected to appearance-related comments (e.g., weight criticisms, compliments), which have been shown to predict greater body surveillance (Calogero, Herbozo, & Thompson, 2009; Herbozo, Stevens, Moldovan, & Morrell, 2017) and appearance anxiety (e.g., Dion, Dion, & Keelan, 1990). For women who self-objectify, depression likely ensues out of feelings of shame and hypervigilance with respect to how their bodies appear to others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Consistent with this rationale, studies have shown that chronic body surveillance is connected to depressive symptoms (see Jones & Griffiths, 2015 for a systematic review). Specifically, higher levels of self-objectification are linked to greater depressive symptoms, with body shame and appearance anxiety often mediating this link (e.g., Miner-Rubino, Twenge, & Fredrickson,

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2002; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Szymanski & Henning, 2007). Taken together, research suggests that repeatedly scrutinizing one's body is associated with persistent feelings of sadness, at least in part due to greater body shame and appearance anxiety.

Despite the established link between self-objectification and depression among (primarily) White women, Grabe and Jackson (2009) found no relation between self-objectification and depression among Asian American women. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) cautioned that self-objectification experiences may differ across women from different social categories. It is possible that the typical body shape and size measures of self-objectification (e.g., body surveillance) do not capture the unique self-objectification experiences of women from different racial and ethnic groups. For some groups of women, physical features other than body shape and size may be particularly relevant for personal scrutiny. Hence, measuring culturally specific forms of self-objectification might be more useful in investigating mental health outcomes for racially and ethnically diverse groups of women.

Research on self-objectification has also considered relations with indices of general well-being. Life satisfaction, or a person's cognitive evaluation of their life overall, is a key component of subjective well-being (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). To the extent that an individual's perceived life circumstances match their own standards for life, life satisfaction is high (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Sexual objectification communicates the notion that a woman's appearance is an important indicator of her overall value to others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Hence, when women self-objectify they place high emphasis on their appearance as indicative of their self-worth and may become more dissatisfied with life overall. Consistent with this assertion, research shows that women who more frequently monitor their bodies experience lower life satisfaction. For example, in a sample of 227 (primarily) White undergraduate women aged 18–31, Mercurio and Landry (2008) found that self-objectification related negatively with life satisfaction, with this relation explained by greater body shame and lower self-esteem. Thus, women who self-objectify are more likely to be dissatisfied with life, and feelings of greater shame about their bodies and lower confidence in self-worth account for this association.

1.1. *Self-objectification and women of colour*

Although most research on self-objectification or body surveillance has been conducted with White women in the U.S., Canada, and Australia, more recently researchers are considering the unique self-objectification experiences of women of colour (e.g., Buchanan, Fischer, Tokar, & Yoder, 2008; Choma & Prusaczyk, 2018; Frederick, Kelly, Latner, Sandhu, & Tsong, 2016; Velez, Campos, & Moradi, 2015). Relative to White women, the sexual objectification experiences of women of colour differ in meaningful ways. Watson, Robinson, Dispenza, and Nazari, (2012) found that the sociohistorical effects of slavery and patriarchy have uniquely shaped the sexually objectifying experiences of African American women. For instance, the “Jezebel” stereotype, historically rooted in the slavery era, portrays lighter-skinned African American women as promiscuous, seductive, and animalistic (Collins, 1990; Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010). Unsurprisingly then, African American women are more likely than White women to report incidences of sexual objectification (Watson, Marszalek, Dispenza, & Davids, 2015). Moreover, in countries with histories of British colonialization or White settlement, cultural norms continue to exist depicting lighter-skinned women of colour as more prestigious and sexually attractive than their darker-skinned counterparts (see Charles, 2009, 2011). In India, for instance, interpersonal and workplace interactions often communicate the message that lighter (vs. darker) skinned Indian women are more attractive and higher in

social status (see Hunter, 2011). Indian media outlets also routinely advertise skin bleaching products such as *Fair and Lovely* in which commercials depict the economic and social advantages of Whiteness (Hunter, 2011); when a darker Indian woman uses *Fair and Lovely*, she is immediately rewarded with a romantic relationship, implying that lighter skin tone is an important indicator of her worth and sexual attractiveness. Overall, these studies suggest that race is an integral component of sexual objectification, with sexual desirability and worth closely connected to skin colour.

Given that the sexual objectification experiences of women of colour are connected to lighter skin tone, Whiteness may be a relevant beauty ideal for women of colour. Consistent with this notion, women of colour anticipate being evaluated based on their skin tone (Bond & Cash, 1992) and indicate that they would lighten their skin tone if they had the chance (Wallace, Townsend, Glasgow, & Ojie, 2011). Thus, some women of colour might also internalize a White beauty ideal as their own personal standard (Bond & Cash, 1992; Hunter, 2011). In this way, skin tone may be an especially relevant physical feature for women of colour to monitor. That is, they might habitually scrutinize and question the attractiveness of their skin tone from an outsider's perspective or engage in a group-specific form of self-objectification known as *skin tone surveillance* (Buchanan et al., 2008; see Choma & Prusaczyk, 2018; Harper & Choma, 2018).

Skin tone surveillance is conceptually akin to body surveillance. Body surveillance has long been considered a manifestation of self-objectification (see Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2009; Lindner, Tantleff-Dunn, & Jentsch, 2012; McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Moradi, 2010). As a construct, body surveillance encompasses the monitoring of one's physical body (e.g., body shape and size), and is typically measured using McKinley and Hyde (1996) Objectified Body Consciousness Surveillance Subscale. However, since its development, objectification theory as a framework has enabled researchers to consider how unique cultural pressures other than thinness ideals influence the manifestation of body surveillance across diverse groups of women (Moradi, 2010). In this vein, the Skin Tone Surveillance Scale is a modified version of the body surveillance scale specifically measuring the monitoring of one's skin tone among women of colour. As argued by Buchanan et al. (2008) and Choma and Prusaczyk (2018), incorporating skin tone surveillance into the framework of objectification theory directly addresses Fredrickson and Roberts' claim that self-objectification may manifest differently depending on women's race and ethnicity (see also Moradi, 2010). Accordingly, skin tone surveillance may be a particularly useful measure of self-objectification for women of colour, allowing a direct way to test the tenets of objectification theory among women of colour.

To date, a handful of studies have investigated skin tone surveillance among women of colour. Consistent with objectification theory, research indicates that the internalization of the White beauty ideal (Harper & Choma, 2018) predicts greater skin tone surveillance among Indian women living in India. Further, in a sample of African American women attending a university in the U.S., Buchanan et al. (2008) found that higher skin tone surveillance was associated with greater skin colour dissatisfaction and body shame, paralleling findings with White women wherein body surveillance is associated with body dissatisfaction and body shame. Extending this work, in community samples of African American women in the U.S. and Indian women in India, Choma and Prusaczyk (2018) demonstrated that higher skin tone surveillance also was related to greater skin colour dissatisfaction as well as skin bleaching behaviour (of note, skin tone surveillance was a considerably stronger correlate of skin colour dissatisfaction and skin bleaching behaviour than body surveillance).

Given limited research conducted on the effects of skin tone surveillance, it remains unclear the extent to which skin tone

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