



“Being sexy” and the labor market: Self-objectification in job search related social networks



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ABSTRACT

When searching for jobs, many people resort to presenting themselves in ways construed to appeal the most to potential employers. Subsequently, they are prone to self-objectification (SO), a phenomenon studied so far in social psychology, but insufficiently in media psychology, and even less so in the context of job search through social networks. Whereas prior research shows mostly negative, i.e., dehumanizing SO effects, positive effects were also identified, e.g., reduced uncertainty and increased self-efficacy perceptions. The present correlational study proposes and validates a scale for job-search related SO, and applies this to verify a conceptual model of SO effects and predictors, based on a survey involving $N = 258$ social network users and structural equations modeling. A positive SO effect on job related self-efficacy and well-being was found. The study adds to social networks research, as well as to social psychological SO research, emphasizing positive SO effects. Implications for further research, practice and development are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the search for jobs, people often try to look attractive to a potential employer, assuming that higher attractiveness will increase their chances to obtain the desired job (Baert & Decuyper, 2014). In doing so, they often employ social networking tools, such as LinkedIn, in order to get in contact with as many potential employers as possible. This, in turn, leads to an individualized process of personal adjustment and presentation with that particular social network (Cingano & Rosolia, 2012). To paraphrase a frequent casual expression, this behavior is a way of trying to “be sexy” on the labor market.

The analogy between job search and the search for sex is neither inappropriate nor uncommon (Sharone, 2014). Social psychology and social media research (Noll & Frederickson, 1998; de Vries & Peter, 2013) have described behaviors aimed at increasing personal attractiveness by emphasizing superficial individual attributes rather than deeper qualities. This phenomenon was termed

self-objectification (SO) and it has been mostly examined so far in the context of relationships with a certain sexual background, but only seldom as to date in the context of professional relationships and job search. Therefore, the present study examines SO in the context of job search related social networks. To assess job search related self-objectification, the JS-SOQ questionnaire was developed and the corresponding scales were validated.

2. Objectification and self-objectification

Objectification has been initially defined from a feminist perspective as a view of, or an attitude towards, women as sex objects. This could be either men's view of women (objectification), or women's view of themselves (self-objectification – SO) (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Contrasting observable (e.g., weight, body mass index, sex appeal) and non-observable (e.g., health, strength, fitness) body characteristics, Noll and Frederickson (1998) defined SO as “valuing one's own body more from a third-person perspective, focusing on observable body attributes (e.g., ‘How do I look?’), rather than from a first-person perspective, focusing on privileged, or non-observable attributes (e.g., ‘What am I capable of?’ ‘How do I feel?’)” (p. 624). Objectifying a person reduces her/him to a specific (sexual) role, thus eluding human attributes such

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as subjectivity (Landau, Sullivan, Keefer, Rothschild, & Osman, 2012) or competence (Grey, Horgan, Long, Herzog, & Lindemulder, 2016). Thus, objectification appears dehumanizing, diminishing perceptions of warmth and morality (Noll & Frederickson, 1998). Nevertheless, objectification of women appears to be connected with cultural values and beauty standards (Landau et al., 2012). Consequently, objectified women may also adopt a self-objectifying attitude, thus decreasing self-esteem and well-being, which in the long run may result in behavioral disorders and depression (Jones & Griffiths, 2015; Noll & Frederickson, 1998). Whereas the negative consequences of SO are beyond dispute, a thorough overview of the phenomenon must also include positive aspects. As Landau et al.'s (2012) subjectivity uncertainty theory suggests, objectification and SO may receptively or actively reduce uncertainty, thus increasing individual perceptions of self-efficacy and the individual well-being (Goldenberg, Cooper, Heflick, Routledge, & Arndt, 2011).

More recent research gradually moved beyond sexual objectification, extending the scope of the concept, e.g., to eating behavior and body image (e.g., Holland & Tiggemann, 2016), sport participation (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011; Varnes et al., 2015), or mass-media consumption (Karsay & Matthes, 2016). While a large part of objectification research remains focused on women (e.g., Grey et al., 2016; Karsay & Matthes, 2016; Varnes et al., 2015), newer research introduces studies of men (e.g., Fox & Rooney, 2015; Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2016), or equally examines both genders (e.g., Jones & Griffiths, 2015; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011).

A first step beyond the boundaries of sexual objectification was taken by understanding the objectification of social targets as a matter of self-worth and power over others (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008), as uncertainty compensation in social life (Landau et al., 2012), or more generally as a strategy to interpret and structure the social environment (Goldenberg et al., 2011). Individuals and, specifically, their roles, can be objectified not only in potentially sexual relationships, but also in task-related workplace interactions where persons can be narrowly viewed in terms of their usefulness. For instance, Landau et al. (2012) investigated workplace scenarios including (imaginary) employees deviating from company policy, and managers (the study participants) who feel threatened in their control over the workplace, downplay the employees to simple role schemas, and finally punish or fire them. Even more pragmatically related to daily realities, Harris (2016) conducted field studies in palliative and hospice care settings, where caregivers under environmental and structural stress objectified their patients, consequently showing insensitivity to human suffering. Landau et al. (2012) also points at objectification in intercultural settings, where unfamiliar cultures are reduced to superficial attributes like food ingredients or décor styles.

To remain in the workplace-related context, few studies so far address objectification and SO within job search behavior. Sharone (2014) describes job search between self-subjectification (“chemistry games”) and self-objectification (“specs games”). In both, job search is seen as similar to (sexual) partner search and dating, where the jobseeker is trying to look attractive (or “sexy”, to use a common expression) to the potential employer. Jobseekers perform face-work, trying to present a desirable self to others (Goffman, 1959; also; Baert & Decuyper, 2014). Self-subjectification designates the search for an interpersonal fit between jobseeker and company based on deeper qualities on both sides, which may also include an emotional relationship. In self-objectification, the fit is reduced to specific keywords (“specs”) corresponding to established norms and values of the organizational culture, and superficially describing both sides involved. Although competence is clearly more relevant at the workplace, individuals may also expect to be evaluated, and evaluate themselves, on the basis of

appearance, therefore engaging in efforts to attract attention to their own appearance (Goldenberg et al., 2011; Landau et al., 2012).

3. Self-objectification and social media

Objectification and SO have often been examined and discussed in the context of traditional mass media such, as printed media, commercial ads, or music videos (e.g., Grey et al., 2016; Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003; Karsay & Matthes, 2016; Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2016). Interactive media and the Web 2.0 offer powerful possibilities of self-presentation, from simple selfies to extensive personal profiles, all prone to stereotyping and SO (Döring, Reif, & Poeschl, 2016). Focusing on social media, de Vries and Peter (2013) conducted laboratory experiments showing that women portraying themselves in social network profiles inclined to SO. The effect was stronger when the participants perceived online audience, and when they were primed with sexually objectifying media contents. Similar effects were found in Facebook (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), Instagram (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016), or Tinder (Ranzini, Lutz, & Gouderjaan, 2016). We are not aware of any SO studies on job search in professional social networks (e.g., LinkedIn, XING etc.).

de Vries and Peter (2013) maintain that technology use, in particular the use of social media, increases users' tendency to SO. They explain the phenomenon, on the one hand, by considering the receptive use of social media that has an impact on users' social perceptions, as explained above. On the other hand, the active and generative use of social media involves the creation of personal, self-related content that can be received by other users and have a potentially positive influence on others' perception of the self-presenting person. In other words, it is the technology affordances that have an influence on the individuals' SO, mainly by giving them a powerful instrument of self-presentation. In particular, the job search represents a context that stimulates an active self-presentation. As such, the stronger the desire and the more immediate the perspective of a job change, the more pervasive the self-presentation of social media users may be (Cingano & Rosolia, 2012). As technology acceptance theories maintain, the performance expectation related to a social media system will positively influence its use for self-presentation (Venkatesh, Thong, & Xu, 2012; Wirtz & Göttel, 2016).

4. Research model

Summarizing the theoretical considerations presented above, a conceptual model was hypothesized and tested, as depicted in Fig. 1, where the latent variables are represented by ellipses and the observed variables by rectangles. The arrow lines represent the hypothesized directions of influence. SO is expected to (positively or negatively) influence Job-Related Self-Efficacy (JRSE), which in turn will increase individual Well-Being (WB). In this context, self-efficacy is regarded as a means of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943), and thus it is considered to be tightly connected with WB. Further, SO will be influenced by the users' Performance Expectancy (PE) towards the professional social network. PE will be predicted by the

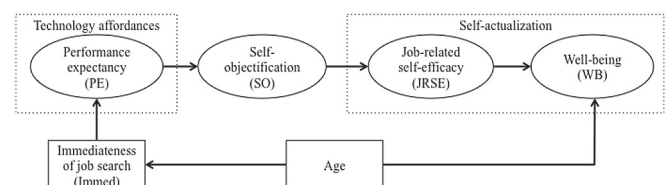


Fig. 1. The proposed research model.

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