



A systematic review of the relationship between trait self-objectification and personality traits

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ABSTRACT

People who internalize an observer's perspective of their bodies are understood to experience 'self-objectification', a process which is associated with increased risk of poor body image, depression, and eating disorders. The aim of this paper is to systematically review the literature which has explored the relationship between trait self-objectification and personality traits. Five databases were searched and records were included for review if they: (a) used quantitative methodologies; (b) were published before March 2018, inclusive; (c) were published in a peer-reviewed journal, and; (d) were available in English language. The search yielded a total of 2636 unique articles: 16 studies within 15 articles met all inclusion criteria. The results were collated using narrative synthesis. Self-objectification was most consistently and positively associated with neuroticism, perfectionism, and narcissism across multiple studies. Insufficient research was available to draw conclusions regarding the relationship between self-objectification and other personality traits, and sex moderation effects were indeterminate. Clinical applications and theoretical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Objectification is a psychological process whereby people in highly sexualised societies are reduced to physical objects that exist for the use and pleasure of others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Objectification theory posits that, due to the experience of being objectified by others, individuals also learn to place emphasis on their own physical appearances in order to appeal to others and influence how they are treated. As individuals internalize an observer's perspective, they experience *self-objectification*, and thus learn to treat their own bodies as objects. Self-objectification is associated with several detrimental outcomes, including depression, anxiety, body image concerns, and disordered eating (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Jones & Griffiths, 2015). Although originally described in relation to women, there is evidence indicating that these processes and outcomes also occur for both women and men (Oehlhof, Musher-Eizenman, Neufeld, & Hauser, 2009).

Given the prevalence of objectification and self-objectification processes (e.g., Holland, Koval, Stratemeyer, Thomson, & Haslam, 2017), it is important to identify the factors which influence the development of clinical outcomes such as disordered eating. Individual differences, such as personality, often influence the relationships between cognitions and behavioural outcomes, and contribute towards understandings of human behaviour (Paunonen, 2003; Paunonen &

Ashton, 2001). Personality is characterised by stable patterns of thoughts, emotions, and behaviours which differ between individuals (Cattell, Eber, & Tatsuoka, 1970; Costa & McCrae, 2008; Eysenck, 1950). Personality traits have been demonstrated to predict behaviour in many contexts including risky driving (Ulleberg & Rundmo, 2003), voting patterns (Barbaranelli, Caprara, Vecchione, & Fraley, 2007), and academic performance (Poropat, 2014). The literature exploring the role of personality in objectification processes (and their outcomes) is limited, but growing. Hence, this review aims to systematically synthesise the literature in this area.

1.1. Self-objectification and objectification-relevant outcomes

Self-objectification can be conceptualised as either *state* or *trait* based (Calogero, 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), and the differences in how they are conceptualised allow for differential predictions of behaviour. State self-objectification is understood to be a temporary experience in which a person views their body from an observer's stance, triggered by environmental cues. The effects of state self-objectification are typically explored by placing participants in an experimentally induced objectifying condition (e.g., wearing a swimsuit) and comparing responses to a baseline or control condition (e.g., wearing full clothing). State self-objectification has been associated with an increase in short-term negative consequences, including

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immediate and lingering thoughts related to the body (Quinn, Kallen, & Cathey, 2006), increased body dissatisfaction (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008), restrained eating (Fredrickson et al., 1998), poor performance on cognitive and academic tasks (Fredrickson et al., 1998; Quinn, Kallen, Twenge, & Fredrickson, 2006), poor athletic performance (Fredrickson & Harrison, 2005), and negative affect (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Roberts & Gettman, 2004). These effects appear to be more pronounced in women relative to men (Fredrickson et al., 1998; Oehlhof et al., 2009), and stronger in individuals with low self-esteem (Thøgersen-Ntoumani, Ntoumanis, Cumming, Bartholomew, & Pearce, 2011).

To contrast, trait-based self-objectification is the consistent tendency to self-objectify. Thus, rather than being experimentally induced, it is typically measured by self-report. Trait self-objectification is associated with a number of negative outcomes, again particularly when self-esteem is low (Breines, Crocker, & Garcia, 2008). Research has identified associations between trait self-objectification and depression (Jones & Griffiths, 2015), decreased personal wellbeing (Breines et al., 2008), decreased sexual self-esteem (Calogero & Thompson, 2009), and fewer safe sex behaviours (Anderson, Holland, Koc, & Haslam, 2017). Other well-established correlates of trait self-objectification include negative body image (Aubrey, 2007; Calogero & Thompson, 2009; Greenleaf & McGreer, 2006), reduced awareness of bodily functions like hunger and satiety (Ainley & Tsakiris, 2013; Myers & Crowther, 2008), and an over-evaluation of physical appearance (Calogero & Thompson, 2009; Greenleaf & McGreer, 2006; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004). Due to these factors, trait self-objectification is associated with the development of eating disorders (Calogero, Davis, & Thompson, 2005). In fact, several eating disorder treatment protocols include components aimed to decrease self-objectifying cognitions and behaviours. For example, enhanced cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT-E) involves a module aimed to reduce the importance of shape and weight in self-evaluation (Fairburn, 2009). Trait self-objectification is important to understand due to these clinically relevant psychological outcomes.

1.2. Personality traits and psychological outcomes

It is important to understand how personality might relate to self-objectification. Due to its temporary nature, state self-objectification is unlikely to be related to personality in a meaningful way. However, as a type of individual difference, trait self-objectification is likely to be significantly associated with enduring personality traits.¹ Personality traits have been associated with a number of clinical outcomes, with the majority of research focusing on the Five Factor Model (FFM; Costa & McCrae, 2008). For example, neuroticism has been linked with increased vulnerability for the development of mental disorders, including anxiety, depression, psychosis, and substance abuse (Jeronimus, Kotov, Riese, & Ormel, 2016; Kotov, Gamez, Schmidt, & Watson, 2010; Ormel et al., 2013). Individuals high in neuroticism tend to be more reactive to stress and social cues, and more prone to anxiety (Costa & McCrae, 2008). Meta-analytic evidence also supports the link between lower levels of extraversion and the diagnoses of depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders (Kotov et al., 2010). Personality traits from outside the FFM have also been linked to clinical outcomes. For example, perfectionism has been linked with depression, anxiety disorders, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Limburg, Watson, Hagger, & Egan, 2016), and narcissism has been associated with impulsivity, interpersonal conflict, and perfectionistic expectations (Swami, Cass, Waseem, & Furham, 2015; Vazire & Funder, 2006).

Of particular significance to this paper, personality traits have been associated with negative body image – a clinically relevant correlate of self-objectification. A recent systematic review found that negative

body image is correlated with lower levels of extraversion and higher levels of neuroticism (Allen & Walter, 2016). Mixed findings were observed for the other FFM traits, which generally appear to be negatively associated with, or unrelated to, body image (also see Allen, Vella, Swann, & Laborde, 2016; Sutin & Terracciano, 2016). Personality traits have also been associated with the development of eating disorders, a critical clinical outcome of negative body image. Research has identified links between eating disorder symptomology and a range of traits including impulsivity (Schag, Schönleber, Teufel, Zipfel, & Giel, 2013; Waxman, 2009), narcissism (Cassin & von Ranson, 2005), and perfectionism (Franco-Paredes, Mancilla-Díaz, Vázquez-Arévalo, López-Aguilar, & Álvarez-Rayón, 2005; Limburg et al., 2016).

It is likely that several personality traits influence the development and maintenance of self-objectification. It is also possible that self-objectification influences the development of personality. No studies have systematically reviewed this relationship. Thus, the objective of this paper is to systematically review and synthesise the literature which has quantitatively explored the relationship between trait self-objectification and key personality traits.

2. Methods

This review was conducted using Cochrane methodologies as guidelines (Higgins & Green, 2011). The methods and results are presented in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement where appropriate, with sections excluded if irrelevant (Moher et al., 2015). A protocol was developed prior to study commencement by both authors to guide the search and data extraction. Information from this unpublished protocol is incorporated below.

2.1. Eligibility criteria

Studies included in the systematic literature review were required to: (a) quantitatively examine the relationship between self-objectification and at least one personality trait using standard and valid measures (see below); (b) be published before March 2018, inclusive; (c) be published in a peer-reviewed academic journal; and (d) be available in English. Studies involving participants with personality disorders were considered ineligible for the review in order to focus the review on ‘sub-clinical’ personality traits (i.e., personality traits that are not considered severe enough to cause significant impairment), and thus increase the generalisability of findings. Personality ‘types’ were also excluded as these have a different theoretical basis to trait theories, and trait theories offer a more flexible approach to understanding personality (Quenk, 1993).

Studies were required to include at least one standardised, validated measure of self-objectification. Eligibility for inclusion was based on a review of trait self-objectification instruments by Calogero (2011). Studies included in this review were the Self-Objectification Questionnaire (SOQ; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998), the Body Surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS; McKinley & Hyde, 1996), and the Appearance Orientation subscale of the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ; Cash, 2015). Although these scales have been developed to assess the same theoretical construct, there is evidence to suggest that these scales measure overlapping but somewhat distinct concepts of self-objectification, body surveillance and appearance orientation (Calogero, 2011). This issue of construct validity limits the interpretability of findings, but allows this small body of literature to be synthesised.

Studies were also required to include at least one measure of a personality trait with published psychometric properties. A list of the 28 personality traits considered in the systematic review, and their definitions, can be found with the online supplements.² Personality traits considered for the review were understood as fitting within the following trait theories of personality: FFM, Eysenck's Personality

¹ Note that, unless specified, from this point ‘self-objectification’ refers to trait self-objectification (as opposed to state self-objectification).

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