



Situational cuing of materialism triggers self-objectification among women (but not men): The moderating role of self-concept clarity



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ABSTRACT

The present research examined the influence of materialism on self-objectification among women. The results provided converging support to the prediction that experimentally priming materialistic belief would increase women's (but not men's) self-objectification tendency (Studies 1, 2 and 3). Moreover, Study 3 revealed that women's self-concept clarity moderated the effect of materialism on self-objectification tendency, such that only women with low self-concept clarity reported higher self-objectification tendencies following a materialism reminder. These findings contribute to the literature by highlighting the role played by societal ideology in women's development of self-objectification and also identifying a protective factor against such an effect. Implications for research on objectification, materialism as well as women's well-being were discussed.

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1. Introduction

A Fiat 500 Abarth car commercial portrayed a passionate story that a man encountered a seductive Italian woman, who turned into the new Fiat car at the end of the commercial; a group of blonde and big-breasted female models promoted Old Milwaukee beer in the famous Swedish Bikini Team campaign; an Abercrombie & Fitch women's slogan t-shirt said blatantly on the chest position, "Who needs a brain when you have these?"

Seemingly unrelated, these advertisements promote material products in a way that subtly conveys the notion that women are valued on the basis of their bodies in a consumer society, unanimously suggesting a potential connection between materialism and a sexualized view of women. Although such a connection is implicated in advertisements, media portrayals and daily occurrences, it has never been empirically tested.

The present research thus had two aims. First, it aimed to investigate this connection by examining whether materialism would increase women's adoption of a sexualized view upon themselves; and second,

it aimed to identify a potential protective factor for such a negative effect, namely, whether self-concept clarity can weaken the effect of materialism on women's self-objectification tendency.

1.1. Self-objectification and its antecedents

Sexual objectification refers to the process of separating a woman's body with her person and reducing the woman to the status of a "mere instrument" for satisfying others' (usually men's) needs and desires (Bartky, 1990). It occurs frequently on a daily basis through mass media portrayals (Calogero, Davis, & Thompson, 2005; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008) and interpersonal encounters (Chen, Teng, & Zhang, 2013; Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008; Teng, Chen, Poon, & Zhang, 2015). According to the objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), frequent encounters with sexual objectification will coax women into internalizing a third-party self-perspective and coming to see themselves through sexually objectifying lens. This process is termed as self-objectification by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). Women who objectify themselves attach great importance to their appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and often habitually monitor their outward appearance from an observational perspective (i.e., body surveillance; Lindberg, Hyde, & McKinley, 2006).

Previous studies have accumulated evidence on the deleterious effect of self-objectification of women. For example, women's self-objectification is associated with impaired cognitive performance (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Quinn, Kallen,

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Twenge, & Fredrickson, 2006), higher levels of eating disorder (Calogero et al., 2005; Jung & Forbes, 2007) and sexual dysfunction (Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007; Steer & Tiggemann, 2008), and decreased intrinsic motivation (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003). Generally, self-objectified women report lower levels of life satisfaction and well-being (Mercurio & Landry, 2008).

Given the negative impacts of self-objectification on women's well-being, it is important and necessary to identify factors that can predispose women to self-objectification. According to the objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), various situational factors can trigger self-objectification in women. For example, women are more likely to sexually objectify themselves when putting on a revealing swimming suit while standing in front of a full-length mirror (Fredrickson et al., 1998), reading contemporary women's magazines (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004), overhearing weight or appearance commentaries (Calogero, Herbozo, & Thompson, 2009), and detecting or anticipating a male gaze (Calogero, 2004). These studies consistently demonstrated that situational cues that make physical appearance salient will lead to self-objectification.

However, a more recent study conducted by Calogero and Jost (2011) found that incidental exposure to benevolent or complementary sexism can cause women to objectify themselves, suggesting that certain cultural ideology, in which physical appearance is not the main focus, can also trigger self-objectification. This research, therefore, highlights the need for situating self-objectification in a broader context of societal ideology. In the present research, we focused on a peculiar and socially prevalent ideology, namely, materialism, and we proposed that materialism can increase women's self-objectification tendency.

1.2. Materialism and self-objectification

Materialism is a value system, which is defined as 'a set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life' (Richins & Dawson, 1992, p. 308). Such a value orientation encompasses the desire for a lifestyle associated with image, fame, and success, as well as on wealth and possessions. According to the consumer culture impact model (Dittmar, 2008), modern consumer society is featured by two interconnected ideals, which are "material good life" and "body perfect", both of which represent a culturally-prescribed "ideal self". Generally, these two sets of values are bounded together and perpetuated mainly by advertising. In fact, former content analyses of visual media (e.g., fashion magazines, television advertising, and programming) demonstrated the prevalence of images depicting products associated with young, tall, and extremely thin women who epitomize the current beauty ideal (Malkin, Wornian, & Chrisler, 1999; Fouts & Burggraf, 1999, 2000). Moreover, isolated body parts of women, such as a bare stomach, buttocks, cleavage, or a bare chest, are often depicted in commercial products (Kolbe & Albanese, 1996; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993), thereby communicating a sexualized view of women. According to Maio, Pakizeh, Cheung, and Rees (2009), when certain values are situationally activated, an ensemble of corresponding values are likely to be co-activated, while incompatible values are often inhibited (Maio et al., 2009). To the extent that "material abundance" and "body perfect" are compatible and are associated closely with each other, activating materialism should make women conform to beauty ideals.

Our prediction that materialism may trigger self-objectification in women is consistent with prior research findings showing that reminders of materialism led female participants to be more dissatisfied about their bodies after viewing idealized body figures (Ashikali & Dittmar, 2011). This effect was especially salient among those high in materialistic value (Ashikali & Dittmar, 2011). However, due to the correlational nature of their study, a causal relationship between materialism and women's self-objectification cannot be established. Therefore, in the present research, we directly tested the impact of situational materialism on women's self-objectification and proposed that materialism would make women self-objectify themselves.

1.3. The moderating role of self-concept clarity

People internalize culturally prevalent values to a different degree. Some people are more strongly influenced by cultural values, whereas others are more resilient to this kind of influence. Of particular interest in the present research are factors that could protect women from being influenced by the socially prevalent ideology, and we proposed that self-concept clarity is one such factor.

Self-concept clarity is the structural aspect of self-concept which represents the extent to which knowledge components or specific self-beliefs are organized (Campbell, 1990). Generally, high self-concept clarity reflects a state that the content of self-concept (perceived self-attribute) is clearly organized, confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable (Campbell, 1990; Campbell & Lavalley, 1993). Self-concept clarity is critical to people's daily functioning and health as research has found that a relative lack of clarity in self-concept correlates with global indicators of compromised functioning such as neuroticism, anxiety, and depression (Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001; Campbell, 1990; Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003; Campbell et al., 1996) as well as aggressive reactions to failure (Stucke & Spore, 2002).

More importantly, Campbell (1990) posited that individuals with different levels of self-concept clarity should respond differently towards external forces, such that people with low self-concept clarity "should be more dependent on, susceptible to, and influenced by external" forces (p. 539). Building upon Campbell's (1990) theory, people low in self-concept clarity should be more vulnerable to the influences of culturally-prescribed values. This proposition is sustained by a recent research conducted by Vartanian (2009), revealing a negative association between self-concept clarity and the internalization of cultural ideals of attractiveness among women. Furthermore, a more recent study demonstrated that self-concept clarity is negatively associated with both thin-ideal internalization and appearance-related social comparison tendencies, suggesting that self-concept clarity contributes to the vulnerability towards women's body image problems (Vartanian & Dey, 2013). Therefore, we predicted that self-concept clarity would moderate the effect of materialism on women's self-objectification inclination, such that materialism would trigger self-objectification among women low in self-concept clarity but not in women high in self-concept clarity.

2. Overview of the current study

In the present research, we aimed to investigate the impact of materialism, as a situationally induced factor, on women's self-objectification. Following prior research (e.g., Calogero & Jost, 2011; Morris, Goldenberg, & Heflick, 2014; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008), self-objectification was assessed with the Self-objectification Scale by Noll and Fredrickson (1998) and the body-surveillance subscale of McKinley and Hyde's (1996) Objectified Body Consciousness Scale. The former scale reflects the importance people assign to appearance attributes (e.g., weight) as compared to competence attributes (e.g., health) in defining their physical self-concept, and the latter captures the extent to which people habitually monitor their outward appearance. We predicted that incidental exposure to materialism will increase women's self-objectification tendency (Studies 1 to 3). Moreover, we expected that self-concept clarity would moderate the relation between materialism and self-objectification tendency, such that the predicted effects would only emerge among women with low self-concept clarity, but not in women with high self-concept clarity (Study 3).

3. Study 1

In Study 1, we directly tested the casual relationship between materialism and self-objectification variables in a sample of Chinese women. China has witnessed a great growth in its economic status as well as its participation in the global market. Rapid increases in the consumption of luxury goods imply that materialistic values are gaining power in its

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