



# The multidimensional self-objectification process from adolescence to emerging adulthood

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## ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study (N=400, 54.5% female) explores the relationships between three components of self-objectification: the internalization of the media's appearance ideals, the valuing of appearance over competence, and body surveillance. The study adds to the self-objectification literature by taking a long-term, developmental approach. The relationships are examined over 6-month intervals during adolescence and a 5-year interval from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Furthermore, this study is the first to examine relationships between different components of self-objectification at the within-person level and, thus, study personal changes over time. Most notably, an increase in internalization during adolescence predicted subsequent increases in valuing appearance over competence and body surveillance five years later, when the respondents had reached emerging adulthood. No evidence for gender differences was found. Implications for the development of self-objectification from adolescence to emerging adulthood and the difference between within- and between-person effects are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The development of self-objectification among young people has been a topic of much scholarly concern for the past two decades (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Ward, 2016). Individuals who self-objectify treat their bodies as objects and award more importance to their physical appearance and less importance to other aspects of themselves, such as their emotions and personality (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Self-objectification can be a response to sociocultural pressures that promote appearance as a defining aspect of a person's worth, whereas the importance of other aspects of the self is downplayed (APA, 2007; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). Instances in which such pressures are encountered can be described as sexualizing experiences (APA, 2007).

Following suggestions by previous objectification scholars Moradi and Huang (2008), Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2012), Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2016) have developed a multidimensional self-objectification model. In this perspective, self-objectification is viewed as a multidimensional process includ-

ing internalization of appearance ideals portrayed in the media, valuing physical appearance above competence, and body surveillance. This multidimensional model presupposes a well-defined order, indicating how the different components affect each other. The first step in this self-objectification model is the internalization of appearance ideals. As a next step, internalization is theorized to affect the valuing of appearance over competence and the repeated monitoring of one's appearance (i.e., body surveillance) (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). We argue that this model is too simplistic and does not capture the full complexity of the development of self-objectification during adolescence. As such, the current study proposes a new temporal order to structure the relationships between the three components of self-objectification.

Second, scholars have called for objectification research that incorporates different developmental phases (McKinley, 2011). Adolescence is characterized as a crucial time for identity development and a risk period for the development of self-objectification (Erikson, 1950; McKinley, 2011). Consequently, the self-objectification process during adolescence may have a lasting impact on individuals' self-image. The current study examines whether changes in internalization, valuing appearance over competence, and body surveillance predict further changes in these aspects of self-objectification when the respondents have reached emerging adulthood. This question will be examined using

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a long-term longitudinal design that encompasses a period of approximately six years. As such, the current study will reveal whether and which components of self-objectification in adolescence have a long-lasting and potentially harmful impact on people's self-image.

Third, the current study aims to contribute to the objectification literature by focusing for the first time on cross-lagged effects at the within-person level. Within-person effects indicate whether changes in a component of self-objectification will lead to further changes in the components of self-objectification in the same person. For instance, an increase in internalization may lead to an increase in body surveillance in the same person at a later time. Previous self-objectification studies were unable to distinguish such within-person effects from between-person effects (Hamaker, Kuiper, & Grasman, 2015). As a result, these previous studies have informed us on which individuals develop self-objectification (e.g., those with higher levels of internalization also have higher levels of body surveillance), but cannot explain when self-objectification will occur and develop (e.g., a change in internalization results in a subsequent change in body surveillance). To avoid this problem, the current study employs a random-intercept cross-lagged panel model, which specifically tests the within-subject effects (Hamaker et al., 2015; Keijsers, 2016). In sum, the current study will examine within-person relationships between three aspects of self-objectification over two short-term intervals during adolescence and a long-term interval from adolescence to emerging adulthood.

### 1.1. Self-Objectification in adolescence and emerging adulthood

The objectification framework posits that repeated sexualizing experiences will lead men and women to internalize the sexualized view they encounter and apply it to themselves (i.e., self-objectify) (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Ward, 2016). Self-objectification has received considerable research attention as it has been associated with various negative outcomes, such as lower sexual satisfaction and depressive symptoms (Calogero & Thompson, 2009; Hurt et al., 2007). Most studies on self-objectification have been conducted among adolescent or emerging adult samples (e.g., Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003; Tiggemann, 2011; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). The focus on these two developmental phases is the result of the expectation that these groups encounter more sexualizing experiences than other age groups, but also are the most likely to self-objectify because of developmental sensitivities (McKinley, 2011).

First, young adults and adolescents increasingly encounter sexualizing experiences, for instance, through interactions with peers who evaluate others based on their appearance (APA, 2007; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). Additionally, they are frequently exposed to sexualizing messages, such as the message that appearance is important, through their media use (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013; Northup & Liebler, 2010; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). Second, the growing romantic and sexual interests of adolescents and the increasing importance of a satisfying romantic relationship in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2013; Connolly & McIsaac, 2013) make these developmental groups more sensitive for their own appearance. As physical appearance plays an important role in romantic and sexual attraction, self-objectification may thus develop more easily in adolescence and emerging adulthood (McKinley, 2011).

Interestingly, the literature also assumes that self-objectification in emerging adulthood is partly dependent of self-objectification in adolescence. From childhood and early adolescence onward, individuals gradually increase in self-objectification due to recurring sexualizing experiences throughout the life course (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley,

2011). Moreover, the development of self-objectification during adolescence may have a substantial and lasting impact in later life since one of the central developmental tasks of this life stage is identity formation (Arnett, 2013; McKinley, 2011; Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). Although a person's identity can still change after the end of adolescence, the development of an identity during adolescence plays a guiding role in a person's future life (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). If a self-objectifying view becomes a part of adolescents' developing identity, this view might remain anchored in their self-concept when progressing toward adulthood. For this reason, McKinley (2011) has called for longitudinal research that encompasses different developmental stages. However, studies on self-objectification have been conducted among either adolescents or emerging adults using cross-sectional or longitudinal designs with time intervals of 6–12 months (e.g., Aubrey, 2006; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015). The current study aims to examine the development of self-objectification over 6-month intervals during adolescence, but also over a 5-year interval from adolescence to emerging adulthood. As such, the study will examine whether changes in self-objectification during adolescence predict further changes in a later developmental stage, several years later.

### 1.2. The multidimensional self-objectification process

In many studies, self-objectification has been approached as a single construct (Calogero, 2011). However, scholars have argued that self-objectification should best be seen as a multidimensional concept, consisting of several components that influence each other (Calogero, 2011; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). One of these components is the internalization of the appearance ideals that are presented in the media. When individuals internalize these ideals, they perceive them as norms that they should try to achieve (Thompson & Stice, 2001). The two other components that are part of the multidimensional view of self-objectification are the valuing of physical appearance as more important than the body's competences and body surveillance, which is a person's tendency toward body monitoring behavior (Calogero, 2011; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). These two components resonate with objectification theory's conceptualization of self-objectification as an exaggerated appearance-focus and as the adoption of an observer's perspective toward one's own body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Scholars have theorized that sexualizing experiences will first lead individuals to internalize societal appearance ideals (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Subsequently, this internalization can lead individuals to a stronger valuing of appearance as compared to competence and to more body surveillance (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Myers & Crowther, 2007; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012).

Although self-objectification is seen as a multidimensional process in which the three components are interrelated (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012), not all potential relationships between these components have been studied. Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2012) have developed a model in which only a part of the theoretically expected relationships between the three components were included (see Fig. 1a). Their studies on the multidimensional self-objectification process tested whether the internalization of appearance ideals predicts the valuing of appearance over competence and body surveillance, and whether the valuing of appearance over competence predicts body surveillance (e.g., Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015). Other research has not always adopted all components of self-objectification, but just as Vandenbosch and Eggermont, also assumed and tested whether internalization predicts body surveillance (Calogero & Thompson, 2009) or valuing appearance

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