Brief research report

Sexualizing reality television: Associations with trait and state self-objectification

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ABSTRACT

Two studies combining cross-sectional and daily experience methods tested whether watching sexualizing reality television is associated with self-objectification in women. In Study 1, an online survey of 495 undergraduate women, we demonstrated that watching sexualizing reality television was associated with higher levels of *trait* self-objectification. In Study 2, an online daily experience study of 94 undergraduate women, we extended the results from Study 1 by focusing on *state* self-objectification and showed that changes in daily exposure to sexualizing reality television correspond to fluctuations in the importance participants attached to appearance, but were unrelated to the importance attached to body-competence. The results of these two studies with multiple methods provide support for the influence of exposure to sexualizing reality television to the development of an objectified self-concept but also underline differences in how exposure to sexualizing reality television relates to trait and state self-objectification.

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Introduction

Reality television programs, such as *Jersey Shore* and *The Kardashians*, are understudied in media literature, although important to investigate because of their high popularity among young audiences (Bond & Drogos, 2014). Moreover, they also hold high potential to influence viewers because of the suggested "reality nature" of the programming (Beck, Hellmueller, & Aeschbacher, 2012), and their strong emphasis on sexualized messages (Vandenbosch, Vervloessem, & Eggermont, 2013). The American Psychological Association (APA) (2010) describes sexualization as: evaluating individuals based on their sexual appeal/behavior, equating standards of appearance to being sexually attractive, sexual objectification, and/or inappropriately imposing sexuality on individuals. Two out of ten scenes in reality shows contain sexualizing messages (Vandenbosch et al., 2013). The most frequent types are the messages which equate sexual attractiveness (for women) with having a slim, well-shaped body

while disregarding the character's personality (Vandenbosch et al., 2013).

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) argues that treating individuals as sexual bodies while ignoring their personality (described as sexual objectification in the original theory, but more recently also as sexualization; see Ward, Reed, Trinh, & Foust, 2014) triggers an objectified self-perspective, in which individuals apply an observer's perspective to their own body. This *self-objectification* creates a variety of health risks for young women, including an increased likelihood of depression, eating disorders, and sexual dysfunction (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Although there is empirical support for many aspects of objectification theory (Moradi & Huang, 2008), no study has yet explored the link between sexualizing reality television and self-objectification. By applying a unique design that combines cross-sectional and daily experience methods, the current research investigates the role of reality television in the development of *trait self-objectification* (Study 1) and *state self-objectification* (Study 2).

Trait self-objectification refers to individual differences in self-objectification that are rather stable across situations (Aubrey, 2006a, 2006b; Moradi & Huang, 2008). State self-objectification refers to within-person, context-dependent differences in applying an objectifying self-perspective (Moradi & Huang, 2008). For instance, on days when a woman watches sexualizing reality

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television, her state-self objectification is expected to be higher than on days when she is not exposed. Priming literature explains that exposure to (sexualizing) messages temporarily activates particular perceptions (e.g., to perceive oneself from an observer's perspective focusing on appearance; Berkowitz, 1986). In addition, the more frequently these perceptions are activated (e.g., on days that one watches sexualizing reality television and thus has an increased level of state self-objectification), the higher the likelihood that these perceptions become permanently accessible (i.e., trait self-objectification) (Hansen & Hansen, 1988).

Measurement of Trait Self-Objectification

Studies have found that sexualizing media use relates to trait self-objectification (e.g., Aubrey, 2006a). Trait self-objectification is typically measured with Noll and Fredrickson's (1998) Self-Objectification Questionnaire (SOQ), in which participants rank order 12 appearance-based and competence-based body attributes according to personal importance. Self-objectification occurs when participants consider appearance-based attributes as *more important* than competence-based attributes. However, because of misinterpretations of the ranking task (Calogero, 2011), Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2012) suggested evaluating the importance of body attributes on a Likert scale which allows researchers to assess the importance of appearance and competence separately.

To date, little is known about how appearance and competence relate to sexualizing media use. Using sexualizing media has been related to valuing appearance over competence (e.g., Aubrey, 2006b), but no study has explored associations with the separate components. We aim to advance this line of inquiry by testing whether the popular, but sexualizing genre of reality television is related to valuing appearance over competence at a trait-level and also by exploring whether this exposure is related to a decrease in valuing of competence or an increase of valuing of appearance. We address this first objective in a cross-sectional study (Study 1) that has the advantage of addressing stable differences between individuals in a large sample.

Measurement of State Self-Objectification

Three experimental studies have documented an association between exposure to sexualizing media and state self-objectification. Two experiments showed that (White) women completed the phrase "I am" more often with appearance-focused words (i.e., Twenty Statements Test) after exposure to sexualizing media, compared to a control group (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Harrison & Frederickson, 2003). One of these experiments (Harrison & Frederickson, 2003) also showed that exposure to sexualizing media did not influence describing oneself less frequently with competence-focused words. A third experiment applied a similar measure of state self-objectification as the adapted SOQ and reported that exposure to sexualizing video clips increased valuing of appearance over competence (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2012). However, associations between media use and the separate components of appearance and competence were not examined.

Furthermore, all three experiments were conducted in a laboratory setting. No study to date has investigated the association between media use and state-self-objectification in a more naturalistic context. Our second objective is to investigate the link between sexualizing reality television and state self-objectification in a daily experience study (Study 2). Because experiments (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Harrison & Frederickson, 2003) suggest that valuing of appearance increases after exposure to sexualizing media, we predict that exposure to sexualizing reality television relates to an increase in valuing appearance. Moreover, we explore whether

exposure to sexualizing reality television also relates to valuing appearance over competence and a decrease in valuing competence.

Study 1

Method

Participants and procedure. An online survey on "The everyday life of female college students" was posted on several student fora and social networking sites in Belgium. Ethics approval was received. As payment, participants were entered into a lottery to win a reward card (50€). A total of 495 women ages 18–26 completed the survey.

Exposure to sexualizing reality television. Participants indicated how often they had watched each of 12 reality television programs during the last year (on television, DVD, or online) on a 6-point scale (1 = (almost) *never* to 6 = (almost) *always*). These programs were pre-selected to be sexualizing in nature by three researchers (i.e., the first and third author and a graduate student who received in-depth training). Sexualization was described according to all four indicators of APA (2010). Because the mean score of the 12 programs was rather low, we only included the three most popular programs, i.e., "Geordie shore", "Astrid in wonderland" and "Zo man, zo vrouw" [So husband, so wife] in the total sum variable of sexualizing reality television.

Trait self-objectification. Using the adapted SOQ (see Vandenbosch and Eggermont, 2012 for more information), respondents evaluated the importance of 12 body attributes on a 10-point scale (1 = *not at all important* to 10 = *very important*). To estimate levels of *valuing of appearance*, and *valuing of competence*, mean scores on the five appearance-based body attributes and the seven competence-based body attributes were calculated. The difference between the mean scores represented the estimated level of *valuing appearance over competence* (range −9 to 9) with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-objectification.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are shown in Table 1. Linear regression analyses in which sexualizing reality television is entered as an independent variable were conducted for each objectification outcome; the *F*-statistic of each model and regression coefficients are reported in Table 2. The results showed that watching sexualizing reality television was significantly associated with valuing appearance over competence. The results remained significant after controlling for age, ethnicity (Caucasian or other), and BMI. The results support our prediction that watching sexualizing reality television is associated with trait self-objectification, and in particular, higher levels of valuing appearance but a lower valuing of competence.

Study 2

Method

Participants and procedure. First-year female college students (*N* = 261) were invited to participate in an online daily experience study on "The everyday life of college students" when attending a course at KU Leuven; 135 women agreed to participate. Participants completed a brief online survey ("diary") every evening before they went to bed for 14 consecutive days. To motivate participants, their