



## FlashReport

# Objects become her: The role of mortality salience on men's attraction to literally objectified women



Kasey Lynn Morris<sup>\*</sup>, Jamie Goldenberg

University of South Florida, USA

## HIGHLIGHTS

- When mortality is salient, men's attraction to women's bodies poses a threat.
- Literal objectification (women-object merging) may neutralize this threat.
- MS decreased attractiveness ratings of a sexy woman unless she was objectified.
- Men primed with MS found the woman merged with the object more attractive.
- Literal objectification of women may provide a terror management function.

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 15 July 2014

Revised 10 September 2014

Available online 20 September 2014

## Keywords:

Objectification

Mortality salience

Terror management

Attraction

Gender

## ABSTRACT

From the perspective of terror management theory, men's attraction to women poses a threat in the context of salient mortality concerns. We hypothesized that literal objectification—associating women with (non-mortal) objects—reduces this threat. Reactions to advertisements featuring sexually provocative women merged with objects (e.g., a woman merged with a bottle of beer), or control ads in which the women were separated from the objects, were examined in conjunction with a mortality salience manipulation. Replicating previous research (Landau et al., 2006), men, but not women, reported lower attractiveness ratings for the (non-merged) woman in response to a mortality reminder. In contrast, men's attractiveness ratings for the merged (i.e., literally objectified) woman increased when mortality was salient. Further, men primed with mortality reported higher attractiveness ratings for the merged woman, compared to the same woman depicted as separate from an object. These findings help explain the prevalence and appeal of literal objectification, and provide evidence of its existential function.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

In 2007, Budweiser came out with a series of ads featuring sexy women in swimsuits merged with bottles of beer. In 2009, the men's shoe company Red Tape depicted women as the items for sale in a vending machine while a man contemplates his selection (presumably of shoes—though no shoes appear in the ad) under the caption, “Live your fantasy.” Similarly, a 2002 advertisement from the luxury car manufacturer BMW reveals a man in bed with a lingerie-clad woman whose face is replaced by a picture of the car in a magazine—the caption reads, “The ultimate attraction.” Although there has been a great deal of research, discussion and controversy surrounding such images (e.g., Jhally, 2009; Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008; Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008), most concern the many, and by no means trivial, consequences for women viewers (e.g., Aubrey, Henson, Hopper, & Smith, 2009; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). In contrast, little attention has been

allotted to the question of *why* such images are prominent, and appealing. Certainly “sex sells” (e.g., Thompson, 2000), but these examples do more than just depict women in a sexualized manner—they objectify women in a very literal sense, associating women with objects, and indeed actually merging women and objects into one.

Researchers in psychology have begun to examine this “literal objectification” of women, empirically demonstrating an association between women and objects (e.g., Bernard, Gervais, Allen, Campomizzi, & Klein, 2012; Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011). In our recent work we have argued, and provided preliminary evidence that, concerns associated with mortality and the physicality of women's bodies may underlie the literal objectification of women (Goldenberg, 2013) and women's literal objectification of themselves (Morris, Goldenberg, & Heflick, 2014). Terror management theory suggests that men's attraction to women's bodies may pose a specific threat (Goldenberg & Roberts, 2004, 2010; Landau et al., 2006), however, no research has examined whether the literal objectification of women can function to reduce the threat. Herein lies the aim of this short report.

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of South Florida, PCD 4118G, 4202 East Fowler Avenue, Tampa, FL 33620, USA.

E-mail address: [kaseymorris@mail.usf.edu](mailto:kaseymorris@mail.usf.edu) (K.L. Morris).

## Objectification of women

Philosophical considerations of objectification suggest that an objectified woman is regarded as “something, not someone” (Dworkin, 1997, p. 141) and treated as a tool for someone else’s use (Nussbaum, 1995). In psychology, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) objectification theory articulates the consequences of living in a cultural milieu where women are identified with the body and physical appearance. Recently, empirical research has examined objectification from the perspective of the perceiver and found that objectified women are seen less like human beings, and more like objects. Heflick, Goldenberg, Cooper, and Puvia (2011) demonstrated that when appearance is highlighted, women, but not men, are assumed to be less warm, competent and moral; and additionally, as having less “human nature” (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009) (the denial of which is associated with perceptions of being object-like, e.g., Loughnan, Haslam, & Kashima, 2009). Moreover, sexualized women are attributed less “mind” (Loughnan et al., 2010) and are cognitively perceived in a manner consistent with perceiving objects (Bernard et al., 2012). Further, Cikara et al. (2011) demonstrated that (for men high in hostile sexism) viewing images of sexualized women elicits patterns of brain activation more similar to viewing objects than people.

Thus, there is initial evidence to support a literal definition of objectification. But the impetus for this objectification is unclear. We have recently offered terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) as a framework to explain why, and under what conditions, women are literally objectified (Goldenberg, 2013; Morris et al., 2014), and when such depictions of women should be desirable.

### Terror management explanation

From the perspective of terror management theory, humans defend psychologically against the uniquely human awareness of mortality by adopting and clinging to a cultural worldview; in doing so, people symbolically transcend their mortal existence. However, the body, and its sheer physicality, stands to unravel this system of defense (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000). Though not unique in having bodies, women’s bodies possess certain reproductive responsibilities that underscore the corporeality of human existence. Accordingly, reactions to women are especially negative when their reproductive functions (e.g., menstruation, breastfeeding) have been made salient (Roberts, Goldenberg, Power, & Pyszczynski, 2002), and such reactions are exacerbated by mortality concerns (e.g., Cox, Goldenberg, Arndt, & Pyszczynski, 2007).

From this perspective, objectification provides a means to reduce the existential threat inherent in women’s bodies by symbolically transforming the natural (mortal) body into a cultural object (Goldenberg & Roberts, 2004, 2010). Prior research has demonstrated that expectations, and women’s own efforts, to conform to a cultural appearance ideal is enhanced by mortality reminders (e.g., Goldenberg, Arndt, Hart, & Brown, 2005). But, as theorizing (e.g., Nussbaum, 1995) and research (e.g., Bernard et al., 2012) depict, objectification refers not just to an expectation for women to be sexy or beautiful, but also a literal transformation from human being to object. By such means, Goldenberg (2013) recently hypothesized that objectification can serve a terror management function. For objects, despite lacking humankind’s more desirable qualities, also lack the most despicable: mortality. Morris et al. (2014) tested this position in the context of self-objectification, and demonstrated that priming female reproductive functions (i.e., menstruation, pregnancy, and breastfeeding) led women, but not men, to attribute less human nature (qualities which distinguish humans from objects, e.g., Loughnan et al., 2009) to themselves, and also to implicitly and explicitly associate themselves with objects, when mortality concerns were heightened.

It follows that, if men are attracted to these same bodies (and body parts), such attraction may pose a threat in the context of mortality

concerns. Supporting this, Landau et al. (2006) demonstrated that men report being less attracted to sexy women as a function of mortality salience, whereas women’s attraction to sexy men was unaffected. Further, this was specific to when a woman was portrayed as sexually seductive, but not when the same woman was dressed modestly. This evidence supports the position that men’s attraction to women poses a threat in the context of mortality concerns; but research has yet to examine objectification in this context.

### Current research

The aim of the current research was to examine whether literal objectification functions to reduce the threat associated with men’s attraction to women under conditions of mortality salience. To test our position, we utilized two different product advertisements that featured women merged with objects (e.g., the Budweiser ad), and created control conditions separating the women from the objects. We reasoned that, in the same way that perceiving more object-like qualities in the self reduces the threat associated with women’s own natural reproducing (e.g., menstruating) bodies (cf. Morris et al., 2014), depicting a woman as merged with an (immortal) object should reduce the threat associated with men’s attraction to women’s bodies.

We assessed reactions to the woman in the advertisement as a function of mortality salience, and hypothesized that, to the extent that the sexualized woman is threatening, men primed with mortality would report lower attractiveness ratings for the woman (separated from the object), compared to men in the control condition. However, if literal objectification reduces this threat, under conditions of mortality salience, we predicted that men would be especially attracted to the woman when she was merged, compared to not merged, with an object. Moreover, to the extent that men’s attraction to women’s bodies underlies the threat, we do not anticipate an effect of mortality salience on women’s attractiveness ratings, and therefore do not expect objectification to remove it.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited through Amazon mTurk and compensated \$0.35. We restricted the analysis to heterosexual participants who completed the questionnaire start to finish. The final sample consisted of 102 men and 116 women ( $M_{\text{age}} = 34.78$ ,  $SD = 12.46$ ).

### Materials and procedure

Participants completed all materials online and were randomly assigned to conditions. Mortality salience was manipulated using a 15-item true/false measure (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989) with statements aimed at activating thoughts of death, or pain in a control condition (e.g., “I am very much afraid to die/of pain”). This was followed by the 60-item PANAS-X (Watson & Clark, 1999) to serve as a delay (since mortality salience effects occur when thoughts about death are no longer in conscious awareness, e.g., Greenberg, Arndt, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2000) and to assess affect.

Following the mortality prime and delay, participants were presented with one of two different advertisements featuring a sexualized woman merged with an object, or a comparable image featuring the same woman and object as separate entities. One advertisement was for Budweiser beer and depicted a woman in a bathing suit merged with a bottle of beer. To create a control condition, the woman was cropped onto a plain background, next to the bottle of beer. A second advertisement featured a bikini-clad woman standing in the frame of a desk calendar (i.e., depicted as is she were part of the calendar); the control image showed the woman holding the calendar in her hand.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/947743>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/947743>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)