The sources and consequences of sexual objectification

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ABSTRACT

Sexual objectification (treating a person as a body or collection of body parts) involves a cultural prioritizing of women's sexual appearance and appeal over other attributes. Sexual objectification is prevalent, permeates many aspects of women's lives, shapes general assumptions about women, and exacts many consequences on women and society. In this Review, we synthesize empirical evidence about the sources and consequences of seeing women as sexual objects, and of women's objectification of themselves (self-objectification). In general, sexually objectified women are perceived more negatively, and as less competent and less fully human than non-sexually objectified women. Exposure to this cultural messaging has broad consequences and fuels sexist attitudes and violence toward women. A central consequence for women is self-objectification, which is associated with a more negative body image; diminished mental, physical, and sexual health; and impaired cognitive performance. Sociocontextual factors influence women's experiences with sexual objectification, and here we explore the role of race and ethnicity, in particular. We conclude with suggested directions for future research.

[H1] Introduction

Sexual objectification occurs when a person is treated as a body (or collection of body parts), valued predominantly for their sexual appeal and the ways they can fulfill other people's sexual needs[1,2]. Sexual objectification occurs mainly for women and adolescent girls, and takes multiple forms, occurring at the interpersonal level (for example, verbal and nonverbal evaluations of a woman's body, unwanted sexual advances), at the cultural level (for example, exposure to objectified representations of women in traditional and social media), and as an immersive interpersonal or cultural experience (such as in modeling and beauty pageants)[3]. These behaviors are not benign but are a form of sexism that strips women of the qualities that make them human (including their competencies, emotions, and cognitions) and restricts focus to their sexual body parts and functions. Sexual objectification is prevalent[4,5] and linked to viewing women, as a group, as primarily sexual objects and to women's valuing themselves mainly for their sexual appeal to others. Both perspectives are problematic, and are associated with women's diminished mental, physical, and sexual health[6,7], reduced cognitive performance[8], and vulnerability to violence[2,9].

Most research on sexual objectification has relied on two theories that were proposed independently yet contemporaneously – objectified body consciousness[10] and objectification theory[2]. Objectified body consciousness[10] was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprised of three inter-related components: body surveillance (chronically monitoring the body), body shame (feeling bad because one perceives that one's body does not meet cultural beauty standards), and appearance control beliefs (believing that with enough effort one can control what one's body looks like). By contrast, self-objectification, which is conceptually similar to body surveillance and entails scrutinizing and monitoring the body for compliance with cultural beauty standards, was put forward as a unidimensional construct[2]. Both theories were developed in response to a Western cultural milieu that overvalues women's physical and sexual attractiveness and undervalues their personhood, such as their capacities, thoughts, and feelings. In such environments, women experience

interpersonal treatment based on their attractiveness (for example, objectifying comments or gazes

from others), and mass media commonly depict women as sexual objects. In response to these

conditions, women might internalize external perspectives as primary means to view their bodies,

thereby considering themselves as an object for others' evaluation. Such self-objectification disrupts

embodiment, that is, experiencing the world through one's body (for example, through movement[11])

because of pressure to meet external standards.

In this Review, we summarize research on sexual objectification, with particular attention to

studies published in the past decade. First, we discuss the sources of sexual objectification. Next, we

review the consequences of seeing women as sexual objects, and in women's objectification of

themselves. Finally, we explore how the sexual objectification experiences of women of color align

with and diverge from those of white women and propose directions for future research. Given the

breadth of research on sexual objectification, we focus on studies of adult women or studies

addressing men's treatment of adult women (for a review concerning youth, see[12]; for a review of

impacts for boys and men, see[13]). Building on existing reviews[6,7], we seek to provide a synthesis of

findings rather than critiques of individual studies.

Concerning specific terminology, many scholars have expanded the original theorizing

underlying most research on sexual objectification to include the construct of sexualization[4]. Sexual

objectification and sexualization are related constructs but are not synonymous (Box 1). Here we use

the terms sexually objectifying or objectifying unless authors used sexualized or sexualizing when

describing their experimental stimuli or findings.

[H1] Sources of sexual objectification

The sexual objectification of women is ubiquitous in patriarchal societies and is conveyed by

many sources. One prominent source of women's sexual objectification is experienced via the

models of beauty ideals and normative assumptions observed in traditional mainstream media,

namely television programs and commercials, music videos, movies, magazines, and video games

(for a review, see[5]). In these venues, sexually objectifying content takes multiple forms, including the

overrepresentation of women wearing clothes that expose a lot of skin, verbal comments about

women's bodies and appearance, camera angles that target sexual body parts, and the explicit and

implicit valuing and rewarding of women's appearance over other attributes. Such treatment has been

documented across media. In scripted television programs, high value is placed on women's physical

attractiveness and sexual appeal[14,15], with one analysis reporting 24 sexualizing instances per TV

episode[16]. This emphasis on women's physical attractiveness also extends to television programs

aimed at 8-to-12-year-olds[17] and unscripted ('reality') programming[18]. In one analysis of the highest

degree of body exposure observed for each of 622 reality TV characters, only 4% of female cast

members exhibited no body exposure, versus 32% of male cast members[19]. Sexually objectifying

depictions of women are especially prevalent and explicit in music videos. In one analysis, 65% of

popular music videos contained sexual objectification, and 91% of female artists wore provocative

clothing (compared to 36% of male artists[20]). Indeed, in music videos women are consistently more

provocatively dressed than men, reveal more body parts, and dance in more sexually suggestive

ways[21-25].

Similar patterns of greater sexual objectification of women relative to men have been found

in magazines[26], print advertisements[27], music lyrics[28,29], video games[30,31], and fictional films[32].

Furthermore, advertisements in teen magazines are more appearance-focused (71%) than

nonappearance-focused (30%[33]. Although the findings above are specific to US media, these patterns

have been documented globally, and have been reported for scripted Spanish TV programs[34], TV

programs popular with Flemish youth[35], TV ads from the Philippines[36], and trailers and posters for

Hindi films[37]. Although differences in the levels of sexual objectification for female and male

characters are not always observed (for example, see [ref15]), overall findings indicate that sexually

objectified portrayals of women are highly prevalent across mainstream media.

Sexually objectifying content is also present on social media, especially image-based social networking sites such as Instagram and Facebook[38-40]. The affordances of social media, including interactivity, comparison with similar others, opportunities for public validation (for example, 'likes'), and the ability to compose, edit, and control self-presentation, might enhance the appeal and power of these platforms[41]. In one study, 54% of images of women posted with the hashtag 'fitspiration' contained at least one aspect of objectification (such as an alluring or sultry gaze), and almost 26% of objectified images of women involved sexy posing[42]. Other similar analyses have found that 'fitspiration' posts of women are substantially more sexualized than posts of men[43,44]. However, more general content analyses of social media profiles (typically of college women) are less consistent in terms of the prevalence of sexual objectification: Some studies have found fairly high levels[45,46], whereas others have found low[47-50] or modest levels of sexual objectification[51]. For example, one analysis of undergraduate women's Facebook profiles reported a mean sexualization score of 19.0 (on a scale from 0 to 25)[45], whereas another analysis of U.S. undergraduate women's Instagram and Facebook profiles reported mean sexualization scores of 4.9 and 4.2 (on a scale from 0 to 23), respectively[50]. Together, these findings indicate that exposure to sexual objectification on social media might vary depending on platform and hashtag usage.

Interactions at the personal level also convey messages that promote sexual objectification. These interpersonal interactions include verbal and nonverbal evaluations of the female body (such as leering and making sexual comments) and unwanted sexual advances (including unwanted touching and sexual harassment). Women regularly and frequently experience these phenomena. Interpersonal sexual objectification was reported an average of 2.7 times over five days in one multi-nation sample of women aged 18 to 46[ref 52] and 3.7 times per week in a sample of Australian women aged 18 to 46[ref 53]. The most frequently reported events include being a target of an objectifying gaze, catcalls, whistles, or stares[54]. The Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale[55] (Table 1) is the most widely used measure for assessing the general frequency of interpersonal sexual objectification and

examines the occurrence of fifteen specific behaviors. Findings across 21 samples reveal average

frequencies of experiences of interpersonal sexual objectification between 'rarely' and 'occasionally'

(between 2 and 3 on a 5-point scale)[3, 55-72].

Although all women are vulnerable to sexual objectification, sexism, racism, and

heteronormativity intertwine to influence the nature of sexually objectifying experiences[73]. Queer,

transgender, and racialized women experience severe forms of sexual objectification, such as sexual

harassment, physical attacks, and sexual assault, at higher rates than heterosexual and white cis-

women[73-75]. In addition to experiencing body comments and sexualized gazes, queer women and

women of color also report being fetishized and must navigate stereotypes of hypersexuality and

sexual availability to men[73-76]. Overall, interpersonal sexual objectification is a regular occurrence for

most women, and some women are more vulnerable to its more extreme forms.

Finally, sexual objectification is communicated via cultural products marketed to girls and

women, including sexualized clothing and toys (for example, Barbie dolls), appearance-enhancing

products, and Halloween costumes[77]. Cultural sexual objectification is also evident in gender

ideologies that value appearance and beauty for women but not men[78]; in the prevalence of beauty

pageants for girls and women; in the abundance of careers that exploit women's but not men's bodies

and sexual appeal (for example, exotic dancing, cocktail waitressing, cheerleading; Box 2); and in the

sexualizing of normal female body functions, such as breastfeeding[79], and everyday social activities,

such as drinking alcohol[80,81].

[H1] Consequences of seeing women as sexual objects

Sexually objectifying cultural messages communicated through media, cultural norms and

activities, or interpersonal interactions, generate significant consequences. These messages shape

explicit and implicit attributions about women and fuel sexist attitudes and violence toward women.

[H2] Explicit and implicit attributions

One set of consequences reflects explicit assumptions about sexually objectified women. Experimental studies have found that sexually objectified or sexualized women are perceived more negatively than non-sexually objectified or non-sexualized women on multiple dimensions, including being seen as less capable[82], intelligent[82,83], competent[47,82-87], determined[82], agentic[87], fully human[88], moral[82,86], worthy of moral consideration[83,89], warm[86], socially appealing[47,84], and as having less self-respect[82] (for a review, see ref[5]). Similar patterns have been found in studies comparing sexualized and non-sexualized female student government candidates[90], female businesswomen[91,92], and female athletes[93,94]. Moreover, participants evaluate other professionally-dressed women more negatively after being exposed to images of sexualized women[95,96].

Most research on sexual objectification has used white targets as stimuli. However, some studies have included Black targets[97,98] or have matched the race or ethnicity of the target and participant[99]. In one such study female participants (66% white, 22% Black), rated Black sexualized targets as more popular than Black non-sexualized targets, whereas white sexualized targets were rated as less popular than white non-sexualized targets[97]. In that study sexualization was operationalized as seductive body language, cleavage and skin exposure, and sheer clothing. By contrast, in another study where sexual objectification was operationalized as self-touch and cleavage, participants (53% white, 46% Black) did not rate Black versus white targets differently in terms of perceptions of their morality, warmth, or competence[98]. Collectively, the existing evidence indicates that sexually objectified or sexualized women are perceived less positively than their non-objectified or non-sexualized counterparts.

Because people's explicit responses can be subject to social desirability biases such as the need to appear moral, ethical, or intelligent[100,101], psychologists have also used implicit measurement techniques to investigate whether sexual objectification causes people to be perceived or categorized as objects. Many of these studies draw on a large literature demonstrating that person recognition involves different mental processes than object recognition. Specifically, people are processed

configurally, as a holistic Gestalt, whereas objects are processed analytically, in a more piecemeal

fashion[102,103]. This processing difference can be measured via the body inversion effect[103] in which

participants are slower to process upside-down images of people compared to properly oriented

(upright) images, whereas images of objects are generally processed equally well in either

orientation. An initial study found an inversion effect indicative of configural processing for

sexualized men but not for sexualized women, suggesting that sexualized women (but not men) are

perceived as objects rather than humans[104]. Although critics have argued that these processing

differences could be due to confounding factors such as greater asymmetry in the images of women

compared to the images of men[105] or idiosyncratic differences in stimuli[106,107], the key finding that

sexualization leads women to be processed as objects has been replicated in multiple studies drawing

on both behavioral and neuroscience methods[108-110]. This effect is found more consistently for female

targets, but it has also been observed for male targets[111].

Other studies have used the Implicit Association Test[112] to probe unconscious associations

with sexually objectified women. In one such study, objectified women were more readily associated

with animal words than were non-objectified women, non-objectified men, or objectified men[113]; in

another study, women high in self-objectification showed stronger associations between objectified

women and animal words than did women low in self-objectification[114]. Studies such as these that

probe implicit or unconscious dehumanizing biases hold promise in elucidating the far-reaching

effects of sexualization.

[H2] Gender beliefs and sexism

Sexual objectification is related to individuals' support for sexism, traditional gender roles,

and objectifying beliefs about women. Frequent everyday exposure to media that are typically high in

sexually objectifying content, such as music videos, women's magazines, and reality TV, is

associated with stronger support of sexist or objectifying beliefs about women[18, 115-121]. Findings from

experimental studies support these associations. Undergraduates exposed to specific media featuring

sexually objectified women endorsed sexist statements or traditional gender stereotypes more strongly than participants without this exposure[120, 122-125] (but see ref[126] for null effects). In one study, women shown clips from superhero movies that included portrayals of sexualized female victims (for example, shown as weak and in need of rescue) expressed stronger support for traditional gender role beliefs than those who were shown no media content[124].

Similar results have emerged with more interactive media. For example, playing a video game as or among sexualized female avatars predicts stronger endorsement of hostile sexism[127], greater acceptance of rape myths[128,129], greater tolerance of sexual harassment[128,130], greater self-objectification[131,129], and an underestimation of women's cognitive abilities[132]. These effects are sometimes moderated by circumstances of the gameplay, such as level of immersion[127], visual similarity to the avatar[131], and level of cognitive load involved[133]. Failures to find effects of sexualized avatars on sexist attitudes and beliefs[134,135] have been attributed to poor external validity of the laboratory gaming experience[127], or the power and agency of sexualized female avatars, which might override perceptions that they are passive sexual objects[127,134,135].

The consequences of sexual objectification extend beyond sexist beliefs and perceptions to actual behaviors. Exposure to sexually objectifying media has been associated with increases in looking at female bodies with an objectifying gaze[136,] asking more sexist questions during mock job interviews[137], and stronger intention to engage in sexual coercion, share sexist jokes through digital media, or harass female communication partners[138,139]. More broadly, holding objectifying attitudes towards women in general has been linked to heavier use of a sexualizing gaze towards women[140] and greater support of hostile sexism among women and men[141,142]. Indeed, greater support for objectifying beliefs about women is correlated with greater support of hostile sexism and the Madonna-Whore dichotomy—the contradictory, binary belief that women are either 'good' (for example, chaste and pure) or 'bad' (for example, seductive and promiscuous)— among heterosexual men in Israel, Germany, and the U.S., and greater support for sexual double standards among

heterosexual men in Israel and the U.S.[143,144]. Together, these findings indicate that consuming

sexually objectifying media and internalizing objectifying beliefs about women can trigger limiting

and sexist perspectives toward women.

[H2] Dehumanization and interpersonal violence

Sexual objectification is a risk factor for violence, harassment, and rape-supportive attitudes,

partly because the sexually objectified person is perceived as less human (a phenomenon known as

dehumanization) and elicits less empathy[145]. As noted above, participants rate sexualized women as

having less competence, warmth, and morality (markers of humanization) than non-sexualized

women[146,147]. Moreover, in experimental studies participants were less likely to say they would help a

sexualized versus non-sexualized victim of intimate partner violence[148], were more approving of

bullying when it was directed toward a "sexually available" girl versus a girl whose description did

not suggest promiscuity[149], were slower or less willing to help a sexualized versus non-sexualized

victim of sexual harassment[150], and engaged in more actual aggression toward an objectified versus

non-objectified woman by choosing to have her hold her hand in ice water for a longer amount of

time[151] or choosing to give her a louder burst of white noise[152].

Dehumanization mediates the association between objectification and aggression (ref [88], but

see ref [133]). For example, in one study with Italian college students, the reduced willingness to help a

sexualized victim of intimate partner violence was mediated by 'moral patiency' (a measure of

perceived humanity)[148]. Empathy for the victim or target is also influenced by sexualization. One

study found that Fijian women who viewed a music video that featured sexualized women later

displayed less empathy for a hypothetical female victim of intimate partner violence[153]. According to

one proposed model reduced empathy mediates the association between viewing sexually

objectifying media and accepting sexual harassment[145].

Correlational studies provide additional support for these associations. More frequent

exposure to objectifying media is associated with men's greater endorsement of women as sexual

263   objects and, in turn, greater support of rape myths and violence against women[119,121] and more

264   frequent use of deceptive courtship practices[119]. A meta-analysis of 166 studies and 321 independent

265   effects sizes reported that sexualized media (compared to neutral media) were positively associated

266   with aggressive behavior (r=.19), thoughts (r=.14), and attitudes (r=.13)[9]. Moreover, men who report

267   that they sexually objectify women are more likely to justify violence against women, perpetrate

268   physical and psychological abuse against partners[63], and commit acts of sexual aggression[154-156];

269   however, one study found this latter association in college students in the U.S. but not in the

270   Philippines[156]. Again, this association might be mediated by dehumanization[63].

271

272   **[H1] Consequences of seeing oneself as a sexual object**

273   In addition to shaping how individuals perceive women in general, sexually objectifying

274   experiences and messages influence how women perceive themselves, most notably by spurring self-

275   objectification or objectified body consciousness. With self-objectification, women value themselves

276   predominantly for their body's sexual appeal and less for their competencies, personality, or other

277   traits. This narrow self-perception has extensive consequences for women's cognitive performance

278   and mental, physical, and sexual health (Figure 1). Despite these adverse consequences, women

279   sometimes engage in self-objectification and even report enjoying the sexualized gaze (Box 3), partly

280   because the costs of sexual objectification are often hidden while the potential benefits are promoted.

281   Indeed, the culture's extreme focus on monitoring and policing women's appearance behooves

282   women to self-objectify in an effort to control how others will perceive and engage with them.

283   Self-objectification can arise from multiple actions, including experiencing a sexualized gaze

284   or commentary from others, engaging in appearance-focused activities (for example, exotic dancing

285   or trying on swimwear), or viewing or engaging with sexually objectifying media[2]. Indeed, a meta-

286   analysis of 50 studies and 261 effect sizes found a positive effect of sexualizing media on self-

287   objectification (r=.19) that was independent of participant characteristics (age, gender, race, and

288   student status), study design, publication year, and measure of objectification[157]. Similarly, social

289   media use and specific social media behaviors (such as posting selfies or receiving comments about

290   one's appearance) are related to greater self-objectification in undergraduate women[158-160]. In this

291   section we synthesize findings across the individual actions that might produce self-objectification to

292   focus on its consequences for women.

293   **[H2] Mental health and well-being**

294   According to objectification theory, self-objectification is likely to lead to mental health

295   consequences such as shame, anxiety, and depression[2]. There is indeed robust evidence that self-

296   objectification is associated with greater depressive symptoms (for review, see ref[161]). Although most

297   studies on self-objectification and depression have been conducted using predominantly white U.S.

298   college samples, this association has also been found among Belgian[162], Australian[163], Taiwanese[164],

299   Canadian[165], and Indian[166] women. In addition, a correlation between self-objectification and

300   depressive symptoms in women has been observed in U.S. samples where the majority of

301   participants are Latina and/or Black[59,167,168] (but see ref [69]). These findings are supported by

302   experimental studies in which self-objectification is primed or manipulated[125,169]. Associations

303   between self-objectification and depressive symptoms have been found to be partially or fully

304   mediated by body shame and appearance anxiety (for reviews see refs[161,170]), and by dissociation[171],

305   fear of men and taking of precautions to protect oneself from rape[3], and use of internalizing coping

306   strategies[59].

307   Self-objectification is also correlated with lower self-esteem in North American female

308   college students[172], older women in Canada (mean age 66[173]), male and female college students in the

309   U.S.[174], and mid-life women and men in the U.S. (mean age 36[ref 175]). As with depression,

310   associations between self-objectification and self-esteem are often mediated by factors such as body

311   shame[175-177] or appearance anxiety[172,177]. Self-objectification is also associated with higher levels of

312   loneliness[175], deliberate self-harm[178], and narcissism[179], and lower levels of life satisfaction[180],

subjective well-being[165], and positive affect, vitality, and 'flow' (a pleasurable state of energized

focus in which one loses track of time)[181].

Several studies support objectification theory's prediction that self-objectification should be

associated with anxiety (for a review, see[ref 182]). For example, self-objectification is correlated with

generalized anxiety in American female and male college students[174] and in white and Black

American female college students[183]. Specific anxiety about risk and harm to the body is also

associated with self-objectification. Women who self-objectify provide higher estimates of their risk

of being a victim of rape or intimate partner violence compared to those who do not self-

objectify[54,184]. Not surprisingly, self-objectification in women is correlated with fear of being

raped[184], fear of men[3], and anxiety about personal safety[185]. Women who score higher on self-

objectification report taking more precautions to protect themselves from rape[3] and having a

restricted sense of their freedom of movement[185.] In sum, self-objectification interferes with positive

mental health.

[H2] Body satisfaction and eating disorders

Objectification theory posits that habitual body monitoring in response to objectifying

appearance pressures predicts body shame[2]. Specifically, shame results when a woman feels that her

body does not live up to cultural beauty expectations and that others judge her body as undesirable.

Thus, eating disorders might be one consequence of self-objectification, as women might engage in

maladaptive eating practices in an attempt to achieve culturally-determined ideal body sizes. Indeed,

a meta-analysis[186] of 53 studies found that self-objectification is associated with disordered eating (r

= .39) (see also [ref 187]). The effect was stronger in women (r = .41) than men (r = .20). In addition, the

association was stronger among Caucasian (r = .42) and Asian American women (r = .42) compared

to African American or Black women (r = .34), was strongest among heterosexual women (r = .39),

and was weakest among heterosexual men (r = .23)[186]. There is also evidence that body surveillance

is correlated with other appearance beliefs among undergraduate women, including weight and/or

shape concerns[183] and body dissatisfaction[62]. Together, these findings indicate that self-objectification is associated with a range of maladaptive body attitudes and eating behaviors.

Furthermore, self-objectification has implications for women's attitudes toward cosmetic surgery. Greater self-objectification, body surveillance, and body shame are related to greater consideration of cosmetic surgery in English[188], Australian[189], Chinese[190], German[191], and American[192] women. In addition, talking about bodies and posting and editing selfies more frequently on social media are associated with increased body surveillance and shame, and consequently greater consideration of cosmetic surgery, among female Chinese college students[193-195]. These findings indicate that the extent to which women are interested in elective cosmetic surgery is related to their tendency to self-objectify.

[H2] Physical health

Self-objectification is linked to women's physical health and greater participation in health-compromising behaviors, possibly because women who self-objectify might pay less attention to their internal states and personal health. Several findings support this explanation. First, among young women, higher levels of self-objectification are associated directly or indirectly via body shame with a greater motivation to drink to cope[196,197], heavier consumption of alcohol and other drugs[58], and greater likelihood of being a smoker[198,199]. Second, because white yet tanned skin is a core part of the feminine beauty ideal, greater body and skin-tone surveillance are linked to heavier skin tanning behaviors and inclinations among white women[200-202] and to skin-bleaching behaviors among Indian and Black women[203,204], despite the health risks of these behaviors. Third, greater self-objectification is associated with less sensitivity to internal states, including less accurate detection of one's heartbeat[205]. Indeed, one study found that greater self-objectification predicted both greater skin exposure and reports of feeling less cold when wearing little clothing outside a nightclub on a cold night, suggesting that self-objectification is linked with denial or diminished awareness of bodily sensations[206]. Fourth, greater self-objectification is associated with lower levels and less

363 enjoyment of physical activity[207,208] (but see [ref 209], for null results), and stronger endorsement of

364 appearance-related reasons to exercise and fewer health and/or fitness reasons[210,211]. Overall, these

365 findings illustrate that greater self-objectification is linked to less attention to internal states and

366 greater willingness to engage in health-risk behaviors.

367 **[H2] Cognitive performance**

368 Self-objectification is theorized to impair cognitive performance by consuming attentional

369 resources[2]. In the first empirical test of this proposition, state self-objectification (a temporary state

370 of high self-objectification) was manipulated by assigning participants to wear either a swimsuit

371 (objectifying condition) or sweater (non-objectifying condition) while completing a math test[212].

372 Women assigned to wear a swimsuit performed worse (marginal effect, $p = .056$) on the math test

373 compared to women assigned to wear a sweater, whereas men's performance was not influenced by

374 dress. A subsequent study used the same paradigm but had male participants wear a speedo rather

375 than swim trunks; in this case, all participants in the swimsuit condition performed worse than

376 participants in the sweater condition[213] (but see [ref 214] for null effects). Similar research using this

377 paradigm found that women in the swimsuit condition exhibited slower reaction times on a measure

378 of cognitive flexibility (Stroop test) compared to women in the sweater condition[215].

379 Other manipulations have also been used to create a state of self-objectification[216]. For

380 example, one study found that American female college students who received an objectifying gaze

381 performed worse on a math test than those who did not, whereas men's performance did not differ

382 between conditions[217] (see also refs [218,219]). Other studies that experimentally manipulated

383 objectification by placing mirrors and scales in testing rooms report null or conditional effects[220-222].

384 Researchers speculate that these manipulations likely produced null findings because they were too

385 subtle[222] or were overpowered by another aspect of the experimental design[221], and therefore did not

386 induce self-objectification. Importantly, a systematic review of findings across nine studies

387 concluded that self-objectification does impair cognitive functioning[8] (see also [ref 182]). Taken

together, the literature indicates that self-objectification might influence women's cognitive

performance and perhaps men's to a lesser extent, but the effects likely vary based on the

manipulation used to induce self-objectification.

[H2] Sexual health and sexual agency

A core theorized outcome of women's self-objectification is diminished sexual well-being[2].

When greater attention is given to how the body looks than to how it feels, women's ability to derive

sexual pleasure and their inclination to advocate for their needs might be jeopardized. Moreover,

greater attention to body appearance might lead to more body shame and appearance anxiety, which,

in turn, might diminish sexual confidence. Empirical findings support these contentions, especially

when self-objectification is measured by body surveillance. Women who report a greater tendency to

monitor their appearance also report lower levels of sexual satisfaction[224, 225; see 223 for null results], sexual

esteem[224-226], and sexual assertiveness[225,227], and greater sexual appearance anxiety[228], sexual

monitoring[227], sexual risk behaviors[229], and body self-consciousness during sexually intimate

moments[230,231]. Some studies do not report direct contributions of body surveillance to sexual well-

being but instead report mediated connections, whereby body surveillance predicts women's sexual

well-being through other factors such as self-consciousness during intimacy[232,233], body shame[232,234-236], or appearance anxiety[163,228].

However, these effects of self-objectification on sexual well-being vary based on the

measurement of self-objectification. Connections between self-objectification and women's sexual

well-being are relatively weak when measured via the Self-Objectification Questionnaire alone[163, 233,237,238], but are more robust with a combined assessment of objectified body consciousness, which

predicts lower condom negotiation efficacy, lower relationship satisfaction, and greater body self-

consciousness during intimacy[239,240].

Finally, there are downstream consequences of objectification from a romantic partner,

specifically. Objectifying a partner might represent an inability to see her as a whole, complete

person, which could interfere with the ability to connect emotionally and build a fully satisfying

relationship[241]. Indeed, empirical evidence indicates that for heterosexual women, perceiving

objectification from a partner is linked to greater self-objectification which, in turn, is associated with

lower sexual satisfaction[242], lower perceived relationship quality[243], decreased interest/desire in

sex[244], and decreased ability to refuse sex from a partner[244]. Together, these findings illustrate that

engaging in self-objectification, either in general or spurred by perceived partner objectification,

might diminish women's sexual comfort, agency, and satisfaction.

[H1] Sexual objectification and women of color

The tenets of objectification theory were not assumed to apply uniformly across all women

but were instead proposed to vary by sociocontextual factors such as culture, class, race, and

ethnicity[2]. Concerning race, in particular, there is evidence that the sexual objectification experiences

of women of color align with and diverge from those of white women in meaningful ways. Black

women typically report lower levels of body surveillance and self-objectification compared to white

women[213,230,245-247], but Asian and Latina women sometimes report lower[230,248,249], higher[213], or

comparable levels[247,250] of body surveillance and self-objectification compared to white women.

Consistent with objectification theory, among Asian American women, greater body surveillance

predicts greater body dissatisfaction, greater body shame, lower body esteem, greater consideration

of cosmetic surgery, and higher eating disorder symptomatology[248,250-253]. Similar associations are

reported among Asian national women in China, Korea, and Pakistan[193,194,254,255]. Analyses testing

pathways between body surveillance, body shame, and disordered eating among Latina women also

support objectification theory's core model[69,247,248,256]. By contrast, among Black women, although

greater body surveillance is linked to greater body shame, which in turn predicts more symptoms of

disordered eating or reduced sexual agency[70,229,247,257], these paths are sometimes weaker for Black

women than for white women[230,247,258].

Despite evidence that some associations emerge as expected among women of color,
concerns have been raised about the meaning of these findings because the theories and measures
were developed to reflect the experiences of white, Western women. Importantly, women of color
face distinct beauty standards from their cultures of origin that are not reflected in typical
assessments of self-objectification. Western beauty ideals prioritize thinness, pale skin, blond hair,
and traditional European American facial features[259]. Norms for other cultural groups differ from this
standard. For example, whereas many Asian cultures do value thinness and light skin, facial features
and facial shape are often more central to judgments of women's attractiveness than are bodily
features[252,260]. To address these differences, scholars working with women of color have begun to
incorporate culture-specific aspects into their assessments, including eye shape and size
surveillance[261], facial surveillance[260], and skin-tone surveillance[166,203,262], which are often more
predictive of women's well-being than the original body surveillance and self-objectification scales.

Objectification processes among women of color might also reflect the psychological impact
of dueling appearance expectations. Women of color in majority white nations are exposed to two
standards of beauty, rendering their social comparison processes more complex[259]. They might be
surveilling their bodies and comparing themselves to both standards, must contend with appearance
critiques and pressures from both cultures, and might feel highly conflicted in seeking to conform to
two ideals[252,259,263,264]. Moreover, internalizing ideals that are not only unattainable but that
specifically devalue racially-relevant features might be especially harmful. As such, internalizing
each ideal might produce unique consequences that might vary based on proximity to the white ideal.
According to theories of stigmatized groups[265], Black women (who might be farther from the white
ideal than Latina or Asian women) might feel more able to engage in adaptive disidentification from
the historically oppressive white ideal, drawing instead on alternative in-group values[266].

For women of color, the impact of these dueling appearance norms might also vary based on
the strength of one's ethnic or racial identity. Specifically, scholars have examined whether having

463 an affirming ethnic or racial identify enables women of color to distance themselves from appearance

464 expectations of the dominant culture[60,70]. Among Black women, holding positive feelings about one's

465 racial group is indeed associated with less body dissatisfaction[267,268], lower internalization of

466 mainstream beauty ideals[268,269], fewer eating, shape, and weight concerns[269], fewer maladaptive

467 eating behaviors[270], and greater body appreciation[269]. By contrast, among Asian American women, a

468 strong ethnic or racial identity exacerbates body image concerns and is linked with a greater drive for

469 thinness[271], higher levels of body dissatisfaction[259,272] (but see [ref 273], for null results), and higher

470 levels of disordered eating attitudes[272]. Moreover, for Asian American women, a strong ethnic or

471 racial identity strengthens associations between pressure for thinness and body preoccupation[274] and

472 between appearance bias and body shame[60]. Because Asian and Eurocentric appearance standards

473 overlap considerably, Asian women with a high ethnic or racial identity might experience added

474 pressure to attain both standards[60]. Another possibility is that because many Asian cultures are

475 collectivistic, such that personal goals are sublimated in favor of group goals, Asian American

476 women with a strong ethnic or racial identity might experience additional pressures to conform to all

477 cultural ideals, including appearance ideals[248,274], and might perceive nonconformity as a failure that

478 reflects badly on close others.

479   Furthermore, women of color are subjected to racialized forms of sexism and sexual

480 objectification that are not experienced by white women[275]. Such racism includes stereotypes about

481 group members (for example, sexually exotic 'China Dolls' or sexually insatiable Jezebels), teasing

482 about phenotypic attributes (such as nose width or eye shape), racial fetishism and exotification,

483 assumptions of a universal appearance ("they all look alike"), and other gendered racial

484 microaggressions that often include inappropriate comments about the bodies, sexuality, and

485 attractiveness of women of color[97,253,261,264,276,277]. These experiences are objectifying in that they treat

486 women of color as caricatures instead of distinct individuals, fragment them and focus on specific

487 body parts, judge them as less than human or not human, discount personal feelings or thoughts, and

treat individual members as interchangeable[251,277]. These racialized objectification experiences might become internalized to create self-denigrating views of race-related features, promote greater adherence to white beauty standards, and possibly motivate unhealthy attempts to change one's appearance[261,278]. Facing sexual objectification based on multiple social identities might make women of color more vulnerable to chronic self-objectification and to the violence that comes from dehumanization[253,278].

To address this concern, scholars have begun to jointly examine objectification and racism[251,252]. For example, one study examined contributions of objectification variables and ethnic discrimination experiences to mental health among Latina women[69]. Both body surveillance and racial discrimination yielded significant, positive indirect associations with eating disorder and depressive symptomatology, mediated by body shame. New scales have also been developed to incorporate both phenomena. For example, assessments of gendered racial microaggressions include subscales addressing assumptions of beauty and sexual objectification (with items such as "objectified based on physical features"[279]). Among Black women, experiencing sexually objectifying gendered racial microaggressions more frequently and perceiving them as more stressful have each been associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms, greater psychological distress, lower body appreciation, and greater appearance-contingent self-worth[168,277,279].

Finally, intersectionality theorists posit that individuals' multiple intersecting identities shape their experiences in contextually-dependent ways, thereby leading to different sexual objectification experiences[97,280]. Using this framework, scholars have begun to test how sexual objectification processes are shaped by intersections of race, gender, and body size[97], or how self-objectification varies within subgroups of Asian American women[261]. Future work should incorporate other social identities, such as class and sexual orientation.

To summarize, women of color face many of the pressures and consequences outlined by objectification theory and experienced by white women, but they also have distinct experiences

shaped by culture-specific beauty ideals, dueling expectations, and interlocking systems of gender

and racial oppression[264]. This multiplicity of experience demands awareness that current approaches

might not fully capture the dehumanization to which women of color are subjected[251].

[H1] Summary and future directions

Sexual objectification is a powerful force that permeates many aspects of women's lives,

including their consumption of traditional and social media and their everyday interpersonal

interactions. This cultural prioritizing of women's sexual appearance and appeal shapes assumptions

about women. At the most basic level, sexually objectified women are perceived more negatively

than non-objectified women and are seen as less competent and less fully human. Exposure to this

cultural messaging has broad consequences for women's well-being and violence toward women. A

central consequence for women is self-objectification, that is, valuing one's appearance and sexual

appeal above other attributes. This self-perspective is harmful and is associated with a more negative

body image; diminished mental, physical, and sexual health; and increased risk for eating disorders.

Much of the research on sexual objectification has focused on the deleterious effects of self-

objectification on women. However, researchers should consider more deeply how sexual

objectification is related to women's ability to be autonomous members of society. For example,

women in the U.S. recently lost federal protection of their bodily autonomy when the Supreme Court

overturned the landmark Roe v. Wade ruling that federally protected a woman's right to an abortion.

Thus, women's right to self-determination in the U.S. has been limited through a denial of their

autonomy to control their reproduction. This denial of autonomy will have material, social, and

psychological consequences for women forced to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term. In Iran,

adolescent girls and young women demonstrated publicly against their government's denial of their

autonomy and attempts to silence them in the wake of the death of a 22-year-old woman, Mahsa

Amini, who died in police custody for alleged non-compliance with a law mandating that women veil

in public[281]. Thus, the sexual objectification of women in societies around the world has direct

implications for women's human rights including living as autonomous agents in their society. The

issue of autonomy has been central to international law on human and women's rights since World

War II (for example in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), and women's economic

autonomy continues to be crucial to their ability to control their lives[282]. We encourage researchers to

consider how sexual objectification influences all aspects of women's humanity and their ability (or

inability) to function within environments that sexually objectify their social group as a dominant

practice.

Several other areas need further attention, as well. First, scholars should expand research on

the consequences of sexual objectification. Given concerns about policy changes affecting women's

rights, more research is needed on the link between self-objectification and political action. Research

has already shown that higher levels of self-objectification are associated with greater support for the

gender status quo[283,284] (but for null results, see [ref 237]), less intention to engage in gender-based social

activism[283,284], and lower levels of political interest, efficacy, and information-seeking[285]. Self-

objectification might contribute to sustaining the gender status quo by directing women's energies

toward managing their external appearance at the expense of other domains and social issues[286].

Research should continue to explore these connections, incorporate current social policies and newer

forms of activism, and investigate moderators of these associations. More research is also needed on

the impact of self-objectification on women's performance. Existing analyses have focused on

performance on academic tests, such as math tests. Real-world and long-lasting effects on other

performance domains should also be studied. For example, how do stronger tendencies to self-

objectify influence women's career choices or perseverance on challenging workplace tasks?

Second, as the media landscape expands and shifts, research approaches must evolve with it,

especially investigations of social media. Current analyses of the prevalence of sexually objectifying

images on social media have focused on specific hashtags such as 'thinspiration' and 'fitspo'. Future

research needs to look across content and platforms more broadly, including newer platforms such as

563 Tik Tok, because the affordances of specific platforms are not equivalent[287]. Moreover, experimental

564 studies that test the impact of sexually objectifying media on women's mental health should include

565 diverse types of sexually objectifying media, not just thin-ideal media.

566   Third, potential differences and changes in the nature or frequency of objectifying

567 interactions and women's reactions to them (including the tendency to self-objectify) across the

568 lifespan should be examined. In particular, research should investigate whether these experiences

569 vary with age or with particular life events such as pregnancy, breastfeeding, divorce, and

570 menopause. Longitudinal research is needed to better understand the trajectory of sexual

571 objectification across adulthood and to understand differential consequences for specific life stages.

572 Expanding the populations studied beyond white college women will also help identify who is most

573 vulnerable to the negative consequences of self-objectification.

574   Fourth, scholars need to continue theorizing about the nature and dynamics of the sexual

575 objectification construct. Standardizing the operationalization and measurement of sexual

576 objectification and sexualization would allow for better cross-study comparisons and identification of

577 overall trends. There is also a need to theorize and empirically assess whether self-objectification and

578 self-sexualization can be distinguished and, if so, if they yield different consequences.

579   Finally, more research is needed on potential protective factors and interventions (Box 4),

580 perhaps borrowing from work conducted with adolescents. For example, data suggest that

581 engagement in team sports is beneficial for enhancing feelings of embodiment among adolescent

582 girls[12]. It would be useful to test similar premises among adult women of various ages. Similarly, it

583 might be beneficial to examine the potential impact of empowering or counter-stereotypical media

584 content, building on effective media literacy programs among youth (see [ref 288] for meta-analytic

585 review). Indeed, exposure to educational or empowering media campaigns has shown benefits among

586 adult men[289] and women[290]. Together, these efforts will expand knowledge about the wide-reaching

587 consequences of sexual objectification and potential interventions to mitigate negative outcomes.

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Table 1.

Popular scales for measuring self-objectification, self-sexualization and interpersonal

objectification

Scale name	Assesses	Total # of items	Subscales	Sample item	Psychometric properties
Objectified Body Consciousness Scale[10]	Extent to which women internalize cultural beauty standards and consider their body as an object for evaluation by men	24	Body surveillance	"During the day, I think about how I look many times".	Cronbach's α = .79 undergraduate women; .76 middle-aged women (Study 2)
			Body shame	"When I am not the size I think I should be, I feel ashamed."	Cronbach's α = .84 undergraduate women; .70 middle-aged women (Study 2)
			Appearance control beliefs	"I can weigh what I'm supposed to when I try hard enough."	Cronbach's α = .68 undergraduate women; .76 middle-aged women (Study 2)
Self-objectification Questionnaire[212]	The extent to which individuals view their body in appearance-based vs. competence-based characteristics	12 (subsequently shortened to 10 items)	-	Participants rate the importance of 6 appearance-based characteristics (for example, weight), and 6 competence-based characteristic (for example, muscular strength) to their physical self-concept.	N/A
Self-Objectification Beliefs and Behaviors Scale[62]	Multi-dimensional measure of self-objectification in women	14	Internalizing an observer's perspective of the body	"I consider how my body will look to others in the clothing I am wearing."	Cronbach's α = .91 (Study 2)
			Equating the body to who one is as a person and valuing appearance above other attributes	"How I look is more important to me than how I think or feel."	Cronbach's α = .92 (Study 2)
Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale[55]	Frequency with which women experience sexual objectification	15	Body evaluation	"How often have you felt that someone was staring at your body?"	Cronbach's α = .92 and .94. (Study 3: T1 and T2, 3 weeks later)
			Unwanted explicit sexual advances	"How often has someone made a degrading sexual gesture towards you?"	Cronbach's α = .82 and .86. (Study 3: T1 and T2, 3 weeks later)
Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale—Perpetration Version[291]	Frequency with which men or women perpetuate sexual objectification	15	Body gazes	"How often have you leered at someone's body?"	Women: r_α = .87 Men: r_α = .86 (Study 1)
			Body comments	"How often have you made a rude, sexual remark about someone's body?"	Women: r_α = .80 Men: r_α = .84 (Study 1)

			Unwanted explicit sexual advances	"How often have you touched or fondled someone against her/his will?"	Women: r_α = .88 Men: r_α = .85 (Study 1)
Women's Objectification of Women Scale[292]	Frequency with which women experience objectification by other women	9	-	"Has a woman given you unwelcome advice about your appearance?"	Cronbach's α = .88 (Study 4)
Men's Objectification of Women Scale[293]	Men's objectification of women	22 or 12 (short form)	Internalized sexual objectification	"I often imagine what women I meet on a daily basis would be like in bed."	22-item form: Cronbach's α = .92 12-item form: Cronbach's α = .92
			Disempathy and commenting about women's bodies	"You can tell a lot about a woman's sexual availability by how she looks."	22-item form: Cronbach's α = .84 12-item form: Cronbach's α = .72
			Insulting unattractive women	"I make jokes about ugly women."	22-item form: Cronbach's α = .84 12-item form: Cronbach's α = .84
Objectification Perpetration Scale[155]	Men's objectifying attitudes about women including cognitions, motivations, and behaviors	16	Sex-based objectification	"It is sometimes okay for me to manipulate women to have sex with them."	Cronbach's α = .97 (Study 2)
			Appearance-based objectification	"Whether a woman is attractive or not depends on what I think."	Cronbach's α = .88 (Study 2)
Scale for Pervasive Gaze and Gaze Provocation Behaviors in Heterosexual Women and Men[294]	Pervasive body gaze towards others and provocative behaviors that invite gaze from others toward the self	12	Pervasive body gaze	"No matter where I am, I typically find myself looking at the bodies of men/women."	Women: α = .86 Men: α = .88 (Study 1)
			Body gaze provocation	"I make an effort to behave in a manner which attracts attention to my body."	Women: α = .86 Men: α = .89 (Study 1)
Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale[295]	The extent to which a woman enjoys sexualized, appearance-based attention from men	8	-	"It is important to me that men are attracted to me."	Cronbach's α = .86 (Study 2)
Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale-Revised[296]	The extent to which one enjoys sexualized attention from individuals of a gender one is attracted to (the original scale measured male gaze specifically)	8	-	"I feel proud when people (of the gender I'm attracted to) compliment the way I look."	Cronbach's α = .83 (Study 2)
Self-Sexualization Behavior Questionnaire for Women[227]	The frequency with which college women engage in self-sexualizing behavior	10	-	"How often do you do the following things specifically in order to look sexy? Wear a low-cut blouse or	Cronbach's α = .84 (Study 3)

				dress? Remove or trim genital hair?"	
Sexualizing Behavior Scale[297]	College women's likelihood and/or acceptance of engaging in sexualizing behavior	10	Own likelihood of participating in sexualizing behaviors (Sexualizing Behavior)	How likely are you to take a pole dancing or strip aerobics class	Cronbach's α = .78
			General acceptance of sexualizing behaviors for women (Sexualizing Acceptance)	How appropriate is it for women to attend a female nude dance bar with male friends or boyfriend?	Cronbach's α = .89

4

5

Figure captions

Figure 1. Theorized objectification processes. Exposure to sexual objectification in society leads to

self-objectification. With self-objectification, women value themselves predominantly for their

body's sexual appeal and less for their body functions, competencies, personality, or other traits. This

narrow self-perception has extensive consequences for women's cognitive performance and mental,

physical, and sexual health. Adapted from refs[2,6,10,212].

Box 1: **Theory and terminology**

Research on sexual objectification often features several terms including objectification, sexual objectification, and sexualization and their derivatives (such as objectified, sexualized), which are related but distinct constructs[5]. Much of the research on sexual objectification relies on objectification theory[2] and theorizing on objectified body consciousness[10] and sexualization[4]. However, although not as frequently considered, theorizing on dehumanization[298] and its application to sexual objectification (animalistic vs. mechanistic dehumanization[299]) are also relevant. Furthermore, this research has been informed by important conceptual work outside of psychology.

For example, work in philosophy has outlined seven ways in which an individual can be objectified: instrumentality (treated as a tool for another's purposes); denial of autonomy (right to self-determination is denied); inertness (treated as not having agency); fungibility (treated as interchangeable with others); violability (person's bodily integrity is ignored); ownership (treated as another's property); and denial of subjectivity (person's experiences and feelings are ignored)[300]. According to this work, objectification can be—but is not necessarily—sexual. For example, parents might deny the autonomy of their young children. Denial of autonomy can also be sexual objectification, for example, when a woman is tied up with ropes in pornography. Later work added three additional forms of objectification: reduction to body (value another person for their body or body parts), reduction to appearance (value another person based on their aesthetics), and silencing (another person's capacity for speech is ignored)[301]. Objectification scholars in psychology have drawn on some of these ideas (such as reduction to body) more heavily than others (such as fungibility).

At present, the field does not have a shared understanding of how sexual objectification and sexualization are distinct constructs. For example, researchers agree that sexual objectification entails a denial of mind and personhood as one is treated as an object by another, whereas sexualization entails a focus on another's sexual appeal[85,148]. However, some researchers specify that sexualization

involves valuing a person for their sexual appeal[85] whereas others focus on visual aspects of

sexualization (for example, level of undress[148]). Others have proposed that sexualization is a form of

sexism[5].

More broadly, researchers' use of terminology to refer to sexual objectification and

sexualization is variable and overlapping. Sometimes these terms are used synonymously. In other

cases, researchers use a particular term (such as sexually objectified) over another term (sexualized),

for the same experimental stimuli (for example, a woman wearing a bikini). The literature would

benefit from more precise definitions of these constructs, consistent usage of terms and

operationalizations, as well as clarity pertaining to the associated underlying theoretical frameworks.

Box 2: Sexually objectifying environments

One understudied source of sexual objectification are women's experiences working in or moving through sexually objectifying environments, such as beauty pageants, strip clubs, or cheerleading competitions. In sexually objectifying environments attention is strongly oriented towards women's bodies, they have little power over their surroundings, and male gaze is both approved of and encouraged. These conditions create an intensely immersive and objectifying experience, above and beyond the traditionally objectifying environments women navigate in their daily lives. Quantitative studies of waitresses working in sexually objectifying environments underscore their experiences of body shame and dissatisfaction[302,303], anxiety, rumination, and disordered eating[303], depression and diminished job satisfaction[304], and burnout and intentions to leave the workplace[305]. These associations extend to related professions. For example, compared to college students, exotic dancers report higher levels of body surveillance and greater valuation of physical attractiveness over physical competence[306].

Qualitative studies confirm that women working in these environments are aware of both everyday experiences of sexual objectification such as the male gaze, and more extreme versions such as unwanted touching and sexual harassment. They report that they are always being judged based on their bodies and are often required to follow strict regulations about their appearance[307,308]. Although the women acknowledge some benefits of these environments, including financial support, popularity (for example, high school cheerleaders[309]), or learning to set boundaries with men[307], their working experiences are often fraught with negative emotions, a high degree of ambivalence, and appearance anxiety. Consequently, women in these environments report using a range of resistance strategies to cope with objectification and subsequent negative emotions, including setting personal rules about interactions with men, creating a separate work persona, detaching emotionally, and making light of unwanted attention[307,308].

Box 3: Sexual objectification versus sexual empowerment

Some scholars have been critical of research focused on the negative effects of sexual objectification and self-objectification and have argued that sexual objectification can be enjoyable and self-objectification empowering. One critique is that research on sexual objectification overwhelmingly focuses on the harms associated with sexuality (especially women's sexuality), thereby playing into cultural fears about the dangers of female sexual desire[310]. These critics argue that women's sexual desire needs to receive equal attention from researchers who should ask whether sexualization or objectification can arise from women's own agency and be empowering or lust-promoting[311]. These critiques appear to conflate sexual objectification with sexuality or sexual behaviors and desires more generally; however, these are distinct concepts which are generally not conflated by sexual objectification researchers[312].

A second critique assumes that objectification theory constructs women as passive vessels with no agency to resist the objectifying messages they encounter in the broader culture[313]. However, objectification theory does not advance a deterministic model of the effects of objectification. Furthermore, it has inspired a large body of work seeking to understand ways in which various identities, beliefs, and actions can interrupt the pathway from objectification to self-objectification to negative mental and physical health consequences[314].

In general, published work advancing the argument that sexual objectification can be empowering has been mainly theoretical. However, there is one relevant body of empirical work on the enjoyment of sexualization. Enjoyment of sexualization refers to the extent to which women find men's sexual attention enjoyable, positive, and rewarding. However, the root cause of this enjoyment is up for debate. For example, a woman's enjoyment of sexualization could be a sign that she is sexually agentic and empowered, and able to act on her own sexual desire. Alternatively, enjoyment of sexualization could be a sign of the brutal effectiveness of patriarchal oppression, in that the object of oppression is so well socialized that she comes to enjoy her own objectification. There is evidence

to support both the positive (e.g., ref 315) and negative (e.g., ref 241) interpretation. One study

sought to disentangle some of these mixed and conflicting results by testing how self-objectification

and enjoyment of sexualization predict sexual health and empowerment[225]. Although enjoyment of

sexualization was associated with greater entitlement to sexual pleasure, it was not linked with

greater sexual assertiveness or satisfaction. These findings suggest that whereas women might enjoy

the sexual attention they receive for their sexual appearance, they are not necessarily better

positioned to enact behaviors that lead to the satisfaction of their sexual desires, even if they do feel

more entitled to sexual pleasure.

BOX 4: Potential protective factors and intervention strategies

Given the negative consequences of sexual and self-objectification, effective strategies are needed to combat adverse outcomes. Although more research is required, there are promising initial results regarding potential protective factors and intervention strategies.

[H1] Feminist beliefs and identity

Several studies have found a mitigating role of feminist beliefs and feminist identity, such that these factors predict less body surveillance and shame[316] and minimize the effects of Instagram usage on body surveillance[317.] Furthermore, a meta-analysis of 26 studies[318] found a small but significant association ($r = .12$, $p < .001$) between feminist identity and positive body image. However, self-objectification was not explicitly assessed. Still, understanding the mechanisms behind this protective role requires further exploration. For example, feminist identity delivers greater protection against thin-ideal internalization (which is linked to self-objectification[319]), compared to feminist beliefs alone[320]. Additionally, there are inconsistencies regarding the protective nature of feminist beliefs in cases of upward appearance-focused social comparison and body image disturbance[321]. Whereas feminist beliefs protected against body image disturbance behaviors (such as body checking), they did not buffer against maladaptive cognitions (such as body dissatisfaction).

[H1] Mindful self-compassion

Mindful self-compassion typically includes self-kindness, mindfulness, and recognition of common humanity[322]. Correlational studies have established that mindful self-compassion protects against feelings of self-objectification, body shame, and body surveillance[323-326]. Mindful self-compassion interventions, including digital micro[327,328] and multi-week interventions[329], have also shown lasting effects in increasing body appreciation and reducing negative self-referential beliefs (body dissatisfaction, body shame, contingent appearance-based self-worth[330-332]) (for mixed and/or null results, see refs[333,334]).

[H1] Function over form

Functional awareness refers to a shift in one's focus from the body's appearance to how it functions and feels. Several interventions have attempted to promote functional awareness, including yoga programs[335-339] and structured body functionality writing programs[340,341]. These programs decrease self-objectification and increase body appreciation, connectedness, and satisfaction. These benefits might arise from the association between interoceptive awareness (that is, awareness of internal physical sensations) and self-objectification, although the association is still not fully understood[163,205,342,343]. Additionally, sports participation has been associated with lower levels of self-objectification, mainly among adolescent girls[344]. Additionally, sports participation has been shown to be negatively associated with self-objectification. For example, in a study conducted with female adolescents, researchers found a negative relation between time spent participating in sports and self-reported levels of self-objectification[344].

Although there is growing evidence to support the positive effects of function over form interventions, additional research is needed to understand the differential impacts of mode of delivery, dosage, functionality domain, and user identity[345].

[H1] Reducing beauty-based comparisons

Finally, reductions in beauty-based social comparisons and increases in body-positive content exposure might minimize self-objectification. Several studies have manipulated social media use to reduce maladaptive social comparisons, which contribute to increased body-image disturbance and self-objectification[346-348]. For example, adolescents experienced decreased body shame and surveillance and increased mental states following a three-day social media fast, and these effects were mediated by improvements in self-compassion and self-esteem[347]. Fitness apps have also been shown to improve body satisfaction[349], indicating that social media use focused on body function might buffer against self-objectification. Exposure to body-positive social media content (for example, content that celebrates body diversity and is not digitally manipulated) has also been shown to increase body satisfaction compared to thin-ideal content exposure, which increases self-

160   objectification[350,351]. However, body-positive captions did not influence body perceptions,

161   particularly when paired with thin-ideal images[352,353]. This discrepancy could indicate that the

162   protective benefits of body-positive messaging might be limited to visual content.

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