



Self-Objectification, Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction in Young Adult Females

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ABSTRACT

In a patriarchal society, women acquire lower status and less power. They tend to be seen more in terms of the function they fulfil in society than as human beings in and of themselves. In other words, they tend to be objectified. Objectification takes place in the media as well as in interpersonal interactions. When women internalise this third person perspective of themselves, they experience self-objectification, a phenomenon that has been found to have an adverse effect on various aspects of life. The present research aims to study self-objectification, self-esteem and life satisfaction in young adult women. Standardised scales were used to measure self-objectification, self-esteem and life satisfaction. 45 women in the age group 18-25 participated in the study. A significant negative correlation was found between self-objectification and self-esteem, as well as between self-objectification and life satisfaction. The study has important implications such as the need for more research on this topic in non-Western cultures, and the need to consciously adopt a healthy way of looking at one's own body.

Keywords: Self-objectification, self-esteem, life satisfaction, young women

Introduction

“And as a woman, even when you’re just looking in the mirror, you’re looking at yourself in the way that a man would see you. It’s not you looking at you, it’s you looking at your objectified self.” –Margaret Atwood

Objectification is when a person is treated like an object and not as a human being. The objectification of women is highly prevalent (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2014), and is much more common than the objectification of men (Gervais et al., 2012; Loughnan & Pacilli, 2014; Vaes et al., 2011), leading women to be disproportionately affected by this phenomenon. Self-objectification (also known as Objectified Body Consciousness), or seeing oneself as an object, is a result of objectification. It is associated with low self-esteem (Adams et al., 2017; Fox et al., 2021; Barzoki et al., 2016; Noser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014) and poor life satisfaction (Mercurio & Landry, 2008; Prusaczyk & Choma, 2018).

A study conducted by Barzoki et al. (2016) on 381 Iranian women in the age group 20 - 44 found that body surveillance, a component of objectified body consciousness, plays a significant role in the lowering of women's self-esteem and increase in their self-sexualization behaviour.

Noser and Zeigler-Hill (2014), in a study conducted on 465 female undergraduates in the U.S., found that women who base their self-worth on their physical appearance tend to have low levels of appearance self-esteem, and that body surveillance and body shame, components of objectified body consciousness, play a significant role in this relationship.

Self-esteem is an important variable that affects life satisfaction (Hong & Giannakopoulos, 1994; Kim et al., 2013; Mehmood & Shaukat, 2014).

Prusaczyk and Choma (2018), in a study conducted on 177 Indian women in the age group 19 - 30, found that skin tone surveillance, a manifestation of self-objectification that is specific to women of colour, is linked with higher depression. It is also linked with lower life satisfaction among women who acknowledge the existence of racism, but not among women who deny or minimise the same.

Self-objectification

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) defined self-objectification as a phenomenon wherein "individuals may be coaxed to internalise an observer's perspective on self." "Girls and women ... may to some degree come to view themselves as objects or "sights" to be appreciated by others."

Lindberg et al. (2006), who used the term Objectified body consciousness for this phenomenon, defined it as "the tendency to view oneself as an object to be looked at and evaluated by others."

Objectification theory proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts explores women's experience in a culture that objectifies them. It explains how self-objectification is a consequence of being objectified over time as women and girls are socialised to adopt an observer's perspective on their physical selves. The theory posits shame, anxiety, reduced awareness of internal bodily states, and reduced chances of peak motivational states as the consequences of self-objectification.

Tiggemann (2011) reviewed empirical evidence of the adverse consequences of self-objectification for women, which increase the risk of eating disorders, depression and sexual dysfunction among them, as proposed by the objectification theory. She found that these clinical conditions are disproportionately prevalent among women, and are also experienced by many women daily in less severe forms such as negative body image, disordered eating, depressed mood and low sexual satisfaction.

Gapinski et al. (2003), in a study conducted on 80 undergraduate women in the age group 17 - 21 in America, found self-objectification to be linked with increased negative feelings, decreased intrinsic motivation, lower self-efficacy and diminished cognitive functioning.

Fredrickson et al. (1998) conducted a study on male and female undergraduates in America and found that self-objectification causes body shame in women (but not in men), which in turn contributes to restrained eating. Self-objectification was also found to lead to poorer math performance for women but not for men.

Self-esteem

Rosenberg (1965) defined self-esteem as "a positive or negative attitude toward a particular object, namely, the self."

Coopersmith's classic definition of self-esteem states that "self-esteem is a personal judgment of the worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds towards himself." (Coopersmith, 1967).

Zeigler-Hill and Myers (2012) reviewed studies on gender differences in self-esteem. They found that males of all ages report slightly higher levels of self-esteem than females, and that women are more likely than men to base their self-worth on external contingencies, such as gaining others' approval.

Balcetis et al. (2013), in a study on 53 undergraduate women in America, found that being aware of ideal beauty standards predicts lower baseline self-esteem.

Zeigler-Hill and Noser (2015), in a study conducted on 877 female undergraduates in America, found that in women, having low global self-esteem and basing one's self-worth on appearance is associated with a higher risk of experiencing discrepancies between actual and ideal body image, which in turn increases the risk of disordered eating.

Life satisfaction

Beutell (2006) defined life satisfaction as "an overall assessment of feelings and attitudes about one's life at a particular point in time ranging from negative to positive."

Shin and Johnson (1978) defined life satisfaction as "a global assessment of a person's quality of life according to his own chosen criteria."

Alah-gholilo et al. (2013), in a study conducted on 200 Iranian women in the age group of 20 - 25 years, found that body image is positively correlated with life satisfaction.

Chaudhary and Naz (2014) conducted a study on 104 Pakistani women in the age group 18 - 24. They found that a high body mass index is associated with low life satisfaction.

Purpose

This research aims to study self-objectification, self-esteem and life satisfaction in young adult females.

Hypothesis

There will be a negative correlation of self-objectification with self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Method

Sample

The study was conducted on 45 women from Bangalore, aged between 18 to 25 years.

Measures

The following standardised scales were used for the study:

Objectified Body Consciousness Scale: The Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinley & Hyde, 1996), consisting of 24 items that are to be rated on a 7-point scale, was used to assess self-objectification. The scale comprises three subscales – surveillance scale, body shame scale and control scale. Higher scores indicate a greater degree of objectified body consciousness or self-objectification.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), consisting of 10 items that are to be rated on a 4-point scale, was used to assess self-esteem. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem.

Satisfaction With Life Scale: The Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), consisting of 5 items that are to be rated on a 7-point scale, was used to assess life satisfaction. Higher scores indicate greater life satisfaction.

Procedure

Standardised psychological tests were administered using Google forms. The participants were encouraged to respond honestly and were assured of confidentiality. They were thanked for their time and cooperation.

Analysis of Data

Results

Table 1 shows N, Mean and Standard deviation. Table 2 shows the correlation between Objectified Body Consciousness, Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction.

Table 1: shows N, Mean and Standard Deviation

	Objectified Body Consciousness	Self-esteem	Life Satisfaction
N	45	45	45
Mean	91.3	28.3	24.6
Standard deviation	15.0	6.24	6.23

Table 2: Correlation of all variables

	Objectified Body Consciousness	Self-esteem	Life Satisfaction
Objectified Body Consciousness	—		
Self-esteem	-0.561	***	—
Life Satisfaction	-0.441	**	0.559 ***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion of results

A significant negative correlation was found between Objectified body consciousness and Self-esteem ($r = -0.561$, $p < .001$). Objectified body consciousness and Life satisfaction were also found to have a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.441$, $p < .01$). Hence, the hypothesis that self-objectification has a significant negative correlation with self-esteem and life satisfaction is accepted. A significant positive correlation was found between Self-esteem and Life satisfaction ($r = 0.559$, $p < .001$).

Calogero (2013) reviewed empirical evidence of self-objectification being a factor in women's support for the gender status quo. She found that self-objectification in women increases in response to benevolent sexism, and acts as a factor that justifies the gender role hierarchy, hence hindering women's collective action for gender equality.

Guo and Wu (2021), in a study conducted on 262 high school girls in the age group 14-17 in southern China, found that girls high on self-objectification are more likely to engage in social avoidance since they have a greater tendency to compare their appearance with others, which is linked with lower self-esteem, which in turn is linked with avoidance of social contact.

Conclusion

Numerous studies have shown the negative effects of self-objectification. This research aims to study self-objectification, self-esteem and life satisfaction in young adult women. It was found that self-objectification has a significant negative correlation with self-esteem and life satisfaction. Hence, women high on self-objectification tend to have lower self-esteem and poorer life satisfaction.

Self-objectification can hinder day-to-day functioning. The effect may be minor but can accumulate over time and cause stress. Self-objectification also changes the way we look at ourselves, making us prioritise appearance over comfort.

The present research underscores the need for research on self-objectification in non-Western cultures since the phenomenon has mostly been studied in Western cultures. Queer and disabled women are also underrepresented in studies on self-objectification.

Encouraging girls to value their bodies more in terms of ability than appearance from a young age can act as a protective factor against self-objectification. Educating girls about the unrealistic nature of beauty standards can help them be conscious of internalising them. Being mindful of the images of women that we consume through the media is important. Self-objectification is so commonplace that it often goes unnoticed, particularly among women. Hence, paying attention to small acts of self-objectification and making efforts to change them can help overcome this tendency.

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