Effects of Body Shape on Literal Objectification: When Ideal May be Less Than Ideal

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Introduction

- Objectification, adopting an externalized view of oneself or another, is a ubiquitous process primarily affecting women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).
- Studies have extensively focused on self-objectification and what is emphasized (e.g., the body), with recent studies exploring objectification of others and what is absent (e.g., personhood; Loughnan & Vaes, 2017).
- Focusing on women’s physical appearance predicts literal objectification, including reduced perceptions of human traits such as warmth, competence (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009), and morality (Helfick et al., 2011).
- Whether these effects of other-objectification apply equally to all women is unclear. Holland and Haslam (2013) found that thin vs. overweight women were ascribed less mind, moral agency and competence, or (4) uncodable. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that fungibility and objectification may be related, but distinct facets of objectification, our data did not support this. This failure to replicate was likely due to methodological differences. Measuring gaze behavior while participants viewed 30 photos of women likely interfered with priming effects on both self and literal objectification. We are currently collecting data to explore the roles that delays and viewing images of women might have on priming of self and literal objectification.

Research Question: Does priming affect: (1) self-objectification, (2) literal objectification of others and does this vary as a function of body shape?

Method

Participants

- 71 undergraduate women (M_{age} = 19.23) from a small liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest.
- Primarily White (73.1%), Asian/Pacific Islander (9.9%), Hispanic (8.5%), Multiple Ethnicity (8.5%).
- In an effort to avoid demand effects, participants were told they were engaging in a multi-part study assessing verbal and visual processing, and impressions of self and others.

Experimental Manipulation

Scrambled Sentence Test (SST; Roberts & Gettman, 2004)

- Created 20 grammatically correct four-word sentences from five words presented in a scrambled order (e.g., were horses her ___ target word).
- Three priming conditions:
  1. Self-objectification (e.g., target word = slender).
  2. Body competence (e.g., strong).
  3. Control (e.g., crossed).

Ten Statements Test (TST; Kuhn & McPartland, 1964)

- Modified version of the Twenty Statements Test, in which participants completed 10 “I am...” statements.
- Independently coded (kappa = .90) by three naïve coders as either: (1) body shape/size, (2) other physical appearance, (3) physical competence, or (4) uncodable.
- Total number of objectifying (category 1 & 2) and physical competence (category 3) statements were used in priming analyses.

Measures

- Goal: To assess objectification in three domains, low ideal, average, high ideal.

Photos

- Participants completed the LOQ in reference to three women, whose photos were selected from 30 previously viewed images (Gervais et al., 2013).

Procedure

1. Completed the SST.
2. Viewed 30 photos of 10 college-aged women via eye-tracking software; images depicted low, average, and high-ideal body shapes (Gervais et al., 2013).
3. Completed the TST, LOQ and demographic survey.

Results

- There were no differences across priming conditions in either the number of self-objectifying, F(2,68) = 0.53, p = .59, or body competence, F(2,68) = 2.06, p = .14 statements.
- Two-way (priming x body type) interactions and priming main effects were not significant.
- Across all measures of literal objectification, the high-ideal woman was objectified to a greater extent than the average woman. The low-ideal image was rated similarly to the average body type on competence and higher than the high-ideal image on warmth and collaboration. Honesty ratings did not differ between the low-ideal and high-ideal images.

Conclusions

- Although investigators (Roberts & Gettman, 2004; Calogero & Pina, 2011) previously found that objectifying words can elicit self-objectification, our data did not support this. This failure to replicate was likely due to methodological differences. Measuring gaze behavior while participants viewed 30 photos of women likely interfered with priming effects on both self and literal objectification. We are currently collecting data to explore the roles that delays and viewing images of women might have on priming of self and literal objectification.
- Our results were consistent with prior research indicating that body shape (specifically thinness) influences levels of literal objectification (Holland & Haslam, 2013). However, our results were at odds with Gervais et al. (2012) who found that both average and ideal body types were perceived as equally fungible. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that fungibility and objectification may be related, but distinct facets of literal objectification.
- Future research should investigate potential behavioral manifestations of literal objectification and factors that may moderate these effects.

Poster Available Online

https://tinyurl.com/APS2018Objectification