Objectification

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Definition

The term objectification refers to the practice of seeing, treating, and/or valuing a person primarily as an object (i.e., a thing). Objectification manifests itself in various forms, including the attribution of object-like characteristics to persons, visual and neural markers of object versus person perception, and people themselves behaving in more object-like ways relative to human-like manners. Objectification has been applied across various disciplines and scholarly domains. For instance, scholars from philosophy, psychology, education, sociology, media studies, and communication research have studied various forms, antecedents, and outcomes of objectification. Acknowledging the interdisciplinarity of the concept, a full consideration of all theoretical perspectives is beyond the scope of this entry. However, the following will present the key concepts and the central research areas of objectification within the field of media psychology.

Key concepts

Objectification

Martha Nussbaum (1995) has been widely acknowledged for laying the theoretical groundwork in objectification research by describing how a person can be objectified. According to Nussbaum (1995), objectification describes the act of "treating as an object what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being" (p. 257). Her theoretical assumptions are grounded in the subject/object dichotomy wherein a subject acts actively, and the object is passive and becomes the object of the subject. However, many researchers agree that objectification is a nonbinary, multilayered concept wherein the perception of a person, including one's own person, lies somewhere along a continuum from human to nonhuman.

Nussbaum specifies seven ways in which treating a human being as an object might potentially lead to objectification: (i) instrumentality (i.e., a person is instrumentalized and treated like an object or tool), (ii) denial of autonomy (i.e., a person is treated as if he or she has no self-determination), (iii) inertness (i.e., a person is treated as if he or she has no power to act), (iv) fungibility (i.e., a person is treated as if he or she were interchangeable/replaceable), (v) violability (i.e., a person is treated with no

respect for boundary-integrity, which thus becomes something permissible to break), (vi) ownership (i.e., a person is treated as something that is owned by another and can be bought or sold), and (vii) denial of subjectivity (i.e., a person is treated as if he or she had no agency or feelings that need to be taken into account). All of these conditions are indications of objectification. If they are applied simultaneously, the severity of the objectification might increase. However, not all forms of objectification are equally problematic. Treating or seeing someone primarily or merely as an instrument (i.e., instrumentalization) is considered to be a particularly problematic form of objectification from a moral standpoint because it involves partial dehumanization. The author acknowledges that some forms of objectification may be consensual and under specific circumstances—that is, mutual respect and social equality—(sexual) objectification can be benign, such as two intimate partners enjoying the surrender of autonomy or agency during a sexual encounter. Nussbaum argues that a careful evaluation of the context is necessary to assess the different means and severity of objectification. Similarly, Heflick and Goldenberg (2014) argue that objectification does not automatically indicate a negative view of the self or others. Given that the characteristics that distinguish humans from objects can be perceived as both positive and negative, objectification can be assessed as being either positive or negative. As explained above, not all forms of objectification are inherently negative; however, most research focuses on the negative aspects of objectification—in particular with regards to sexual objectification.

Sexual objectification and self-objectification

Sexual objectification is defined as the practice of viewing, using, and/or valuing a person as an object (i.e., thing) whose worth is based primarily on his or her physical and sexual attractiveness. In other words, sexual objectification refers to the act of regarding a person's body parts or sexual functions as being capable of representing a person's personality. Additionally, the act of turning a person into an object serves the sexual desire and fantasies of the subject. The majority of studies on sexual objectification referred exclusively to the experiences of women and girls. In particular, feminist scholars have argued that sexual objectification represents a central component of sexism in our society and that pornography reflects the quintessence of the sexual objectification of women. Some researchers argue that women in pornography are depicted as readily available, interchangeable objects of desire that lack agency and emotions and therefore fulfill several criteria of sexual objectification.

   Objectification theory by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) represents an influential theoretical framework that fostered a great deal of research on objectification. The authors relied on feminist principles and psychological processes to explain women's experiences of sexualization and its negative consequences on women's well-being. The theory postulates that from an early age, women learn that their bodies and appearances are looked at, commented on, and evaluated by others. From this pervasive experience of sexual objectification, girls and women internalize that (sexual) attractiveness is a central aspect of the feminine gender role, and therefore a goal which they must strive for, maintain, or present. Findings from daily diary or experience

sampling surveys confirm that sexual harassment and objectifying experiences are part of women's everyday lives. Originally objectification theory referred exclusively to the experiences of women and girls, but gradually the theoretical scope has expanded and now includes the sexual objectification of more diverse populations, such as men, sexual minorities, and ethnic minorities.

Objectification theory conceptualized sexual objectifying experiences rather broadly. That is, objectifying experiences are not exclusively sexual in nature (e.g., stares, whistles, or sexual comments) but also include the societal pressure to create, present, maintain, and always improve an attractive appearance. Thus, depending on its intention (hostile or benevolent) or expression (blatant or subtle), sexual objectification may occur in many ways, ranging from depictions of an ideal body type in the media to (unwanted) evaluations of one's body or sexual harassment. For example, complimenting a women's appearance in a social interaction can represent a form of benevolent and subtle sexual objectification. Prizing and valuing women for their physical attractiveness perpetuates existing gender-role norms in which women are valued for their appearance while men are typically valued for their performance. Openly reducing women to their body or treating them as an object can be categorized as hostile in its intent and blatant in its expression. Moreover, sexual objectification can be experienced in interpersonal contexts or via mass media (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Loughnan & Pacilli, 2014). For this entry, the role of media is of major interest since visual media focus particularly on appearance and the body.

It is further theorized that observed and directly experienced sexual objectification leads women to internalize that their value is primarily defined by their external characteristics and that internal values, such as their personality, play a subordinate role in creating their value. This process is called *self-objectification*. Self-objectification refers to a distorted self-perception that involves the internalization of an observer's perspective wherein one's own body is valued from a third-person perspective along current standards of sexual desirability. Besides Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), other objectification theorists have discussed concepts that are closely related to self-objectification, such as objectified body consciousness, disembodiment, or an objectified relationship with one's own body (see Calogero, 2011, for an overview). Researchers have stressed the importance of distinguishing between trait and state terminology when discussing self-objectification. On the one hand, self-objectification is conceptualized as a learned trait. Given that women (and men) in Western societies grow up in a sociocultural environment that fosters an emphasis on physical beauty, sexual appearance, and sexual appeal to others, they value their own body merely in terms of how it complies with these idealized physical standards. On the other hand, self-objectification can also be elicited momentarily, such as through media use, which can lead to a state of self-objectification (Calogero, 2011). Researchers understand self-objectification as a multifaceted concept that comprises cognitive components, such as valuing appearance over competence, and behavioral components, such as engaging in chronic body monitoring. There is a consensus in the literature that self-objectification represents a negative form of self-perception as it has been directly or indirectly associated with several negative outcomes, such as body shaming, body dissatisfaction, and decreased self-confidence. Additionally, self-objectification is

regarded as a predictor of objectifying other people and/or interpersonal objectification. In other words, individuals who engage in self-objectification are also more likely to objectify others.

In objectification research, the terms sexual objectification and sexualization have often been used interchangeably. However, sexualization is typically considered to be a broader concept than sexual objectification. In a specifically established task force on the "Sexualization of Girls," the American Psychological Association provided a definition of sexualization. According to the definition, sexualization occurs when (i) the person's value is defined exclusively by her or his sexual attractiveness or behavior, (ii) attractiveness is narrowly defined as sexual attractiveness, (iii) a person is sexually objectified, or (iv) a person—often a minor—is inappropriately confronted with sexuality (American Psychological Association, 2007, p. 1). This definition makes it clear that sexualization is characterized by different aspects and both sexes can be sexualized regardless of age.

Dehumanization

Dehumanization is a theoretical concept that is strongly related to objectification research. Whereas objectification refers to the perception and treatment of others as objects, dehumanization refers to the denial of the humanity of others. Haslam (2006) differentiates two types of dehumanization based on two types of human characteristics. On the one hand, *uniquely human characteristics* separate humans from animals. They reflect characteristics related to socialization and culture, including civility, refinement, moral sensibility, rationality, and maturity. Uniquely human characteristics are seen as acquired rather than inborn, and thus it is expected that they vary across populations and cultures. *Human nature characteristics*, on the other hand, represent fundamental characteristics that are typical of humans, independent of any context of culture. Such characteristics stand for the core identification (i.e., are species typical) of humans and involve emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth, cognitive openness, agency/individuality, and depth. Human nature characteristics are defined as universal and therefore are expected to be prevalent within all populations and across cultures.

Haslam (2006) argues that two corresponding forms of dehumanization originate from the denial of the perception of humanness (i.e., human uniqueness vs. human nature). When denying someone's human uniqueness, the person is seen as being animal-like rather than human-like. This perception involves seeing someone as lacking in civility, refinement, moral sensibility, and higher cognition. Thus, the person is perceived as being uncultured, coarse, amoral, irrational, and driven by instincts. When denying someone's human nature, the person is seen as a machine or object rather than a human. This form of dehumanization involves denying someone's emotional responsiveness, warmth, cognitive openness, and agency. In other words, the person is perceived or treated as lacking emotion, as being a cold, rigid, and fungible object. Following these definitions, it becomes evident that both concepts, objectification and dehumanization, share considerable conceptual overlap.

Researchers deal with the question: Under what conditions is a person perceived to be and treated as an object or denied humanness? Thus, on the surface, research on objectification and research on dehumanization represent two closely related but separate concepts. Objectification may occur without dehumanization and vice versa (Gervais, Bernard, Klein, Allen, & Fiske, 2013). For example, in a sexual encounter, the intimate partner might be reduced to his or her sexual functions (i.e., objectified) but still be perceived as a human being. Dehumanization often occurs in relation to ethnicity and race. In a racist description, when equating a human with an animal (e.g., pig, ape, parasite), the person is not automatically objectified but is denied uniquely human characteristics. However, when it comes to sexual objectification and dehumanization, particularly that of women, the distinction between the two concepts becomes less clear. For example, reducing a woman to her sexual body parts and treating her as a fungible object can be defined as both sexual objectification and dehumanization (i.e., a denial of her human nature). Drawing on the different theoretical relations between the two concepts, Gervais et al. (2013) present a unifying theory of objectification and dehumanization. Although they undertake the challenging and important endeavor to theoretically systematize these two concepts, their framework has also its limitations. It certainly provides a useful theory to account for the psychological processes of person perception; however, it does not provide further theoretical clarity with regards to objectification as an outcome, attitude, or behavior.

Research on objectification in media psychology

Stimulated by the work of objectification theorists, in many empirical studies, scholars have investigated sexually objectifying media content as well as its inter- and intraindividual consequences among viewers. In particular, objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997)—although not conceptualized as a media effects theory—has served well as a theoretical framework and has received considerable attention in media psychology throughout the years, which is partly due to the prominent role that mass media play in providing exposure to sexualizing experiences. The authors argue that visual media present the male gaze, which is defined as the sexual staring or "checking out" of the female body or female body parts from a male heterosexual perspective. On the one hand, there are media programs that depict this objectifying gaze in interpersonal situations—that is, an individual (usually a woman) is gazed at. On the other hand, the objectifying gaze can be presented to the viewer indirectly via the camera lens. For example, by focusing on the body or sexualized body parts, media programming presents individuals as mere objects that provide pleasure to the viewer. In addition to objectification theory, researchers have relied on other theoretical frameworks, such as cultivation theory, media priming, or social-cognitive theory, to explain the effects resulting from exposure to sexually objectifying media content. In what follows, research investigating the types and extent of objectification in mass media as well as its consequences for media users will be summarized.

Objectification and sexual objectification in mass media

When speaking of objectification in mass media (e.g., print media, television, online content), usually sexual objectification or sexualization is intended. However, content analyses on sexual objectification and sexualization are characterized by a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. As a result, sexual objectification has been inconsistently operationalized in the past, which makes it difficult to compare existing content analyses within and between media genres. For example, Klaassen and Peter (2015) used the subdimensions instrumentality and dehumanization to analyze sexual objectification in pornographic content. Instrumentality was defined as depictions wherein the body served another person's sexual gratification. Dehumanizing scenes were defined as the absence of initiation of sex or the absence of pleasure for one of the parties involved. Other researchers differentiated between indirect and direct forms of sexual objectification. Whereas indirect objectification was conceptualized as the idea of the male gaze, direct objectification referred to various means of sexual aggression. Moreover, in many cases, stereotypical content or sexual content has been equated with sexualized media content. These studies are often based on the common misconception that depictions of nudity or sexuality are automatically deemed to be sexual objectification. More recently, researchers have also tried to advance content analyses in this field by establishing a comprehensive conceptualization of the relevant terms by differentiating sexual objectification, objectification, sexuality, and ambiguous depictions of sexual expression in media types outside pornography such as in television programing, music videos, and so forth (e.g., Rousseau, Eggermont, Bels, & Van den Bulck, 2018). However, coding visual content remains challenging due to the nuances and layers of interpretation that are inherent to this type of media content.

Notwithstanding these conceptual inconsistencies, findings from several content analyses suggest that sexual objectification and sexualization are omnipresent in a wide range of media types and genres. For example, print advertisement and video games were shown to advertise using depictions of sexually objectified women. Also, music videos, music lyrics, music television programs, pornography, print magazines, or specific online content (i.e., fitspiration websites, sport blogs, social networking site profiles, etc.) contained sexually objectifying elements. In the past, the sexual objectification of women has been studied more extensively than sexual objectification of men. The few studies that also included men in the analysis revealed a profound gender bias in that women are sexualized much more often than men. Thus, the probability of encountering sexualizing and sexually objectifying media content in everyday life is relatively high.

Although research on sexual objectification and sexualization has provided important findings on the frequency and nature of sexualization, several research gaps remain. For instance, most content analyses represented cross-sectional designs documenting the characteristics and occurrence of sexual objectification at one point in time and very few studies described its development comprehensively over time. Given that it is commonly assumed that the presence of sexually objectifying media content increased over time, more longitudinal content analyses are needed to support

this claim. As explained above, the existing content analyses are only comparable to a limited extent within and across media genres. In the majority of content analyses sexual objectification has been inconstantly operationalized and only recently have researchers introduced a conceptual differentiation between objectification and sexual objectification. Moreover, the content on popular social networking sites, such as YouTube or Instagram, is largely unexamined.

Media effects on self-objectification

In many studies researchers have empirically investigated the relationship between the consumption of sexualizing media content and self-objectification over the past 20 years. In experiment-based research, participants were typically exposed to (sexually) objectifying media stimuli in the experimental condition (e.g., print advertisements or music videos depicting objectified women). Participants from the control condition typically saw media content with no or very few non-objectifying references (e.g., advertisements showing objects, music videos with low levels of sexual objectification). Following the media stimulus, state self-objectification has been measured. In many cases, media priming theory served as a theoretical explanation to explain state self-objectification. In survey research, researchers asked participants to indicate their use of sexually objectifying media, such as pornography, music videos, music television, reality television, print magazines (e.g., men's magazines, fashion, beauty, and lifestyle magazines, youth magazines, etc.). In some studies, the authors employed a procedure in order to attribute more weight to media that are considered to be more sexualizing than others. In correlational studies, researchers typically included measures to assess trait self-objectification. In order to explain the relationship between media use and trait self-objectification, many researchers relied on the social-cognitive theories of gender development and cultivation theory.

The findings from these experiments, cross-sectional surveys, and longitudinal survey designs largely confirm the theoretical assumptions of objectification theory. It is theorized—and largely confirmed by meta-analysis—that exposure to sexually objectifying media influences the viewer's self-perception (and leads to increased self-objectification). The meta-analysis showed that, across various types of mass media presenting varying degrees of sexually objectifying content, there is a positive effect of media use on self-objectification. These findings also suggest that the effect of media use on self-objectification equally affected men and women, older and younger participants, and the participants of several different ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, these findings suggested that the effect was more pronounced for participants using video games or online media (Karsay, Knoll, & Matthes, 2018).

Additional media effects beyond self-objectification

Empirical findings showed that objectifying mass media, which emphasize physical beauty, sexual appearance, and sexual appeal to others, can have many different cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects. Given that a detailed description of all these effects would go beyond the scope of this entry, what follows is a summary of the

research investigating the role of objectifying media on the effects of the perception of personhood and a summary of sexist attitudes. However, it should not go unmentioned that objectifying media content has been, among other things, positively related to self-sexualization, body dissatisfaction, body shame, eating disorder symptomatology, and anxiety (for an overview of this literature, see Ward, 2016).

With regards to perception of personhood and cognitive processing, findings from experimental studies confirm this assumption and indicate that objectified individuals are perceived to be less human, in the sense of being less warm, cordial, and moral. In order to verify this phenomenon, experimental studies typically manipulated clothing (revealing vs. not revealing) and image detail (face vs. whole body vs. body without face). In the control group, fully clothed persons or only the faces of the persons were typically shown. The findings indicate that women depicted as sexualized (i.e., scantily dressed and shown with a focus on the body) are perceived more as objects than as human beings. Furthermore, research shows that sexualized women are judged to be less human, regardless of a human–object comparison. This means that sexualized women are perceived to be less animated, in the sense of less warm and cordial, and attributed a lower moral status. Additionally, sexualized women are attributed fewer competencies, such as strength, determination, and intelligence, than nonsexualized women. Preliminary findings from research using eye-tracking methodology also suggest that the mediated objectifying gaze that viewers adopt when watching objectifying media content can subsequently prompt a real objectifying gaze in response to pictures of women. There is a wide consensus in the literature that objectifying representations of women in particular have a more negative effect than objectifying representations of men. Research focusing on sexist attitudes and sexual violence as outcome variables indicates that the use of sexualizing and/or sexually objectifying media content can lead to reinforced gender stereotypes and sexist attitudes, greater tolerance of sexual harassment, and the trivialization of sexual violence (e.g., rape myths acceptance). These relationships have been established via a wide variety and large number of media types and genres, such as video games, print magazines, music videos, television advertising, television programs, and pornographic content.

SEE ALSO: Effects of Media on Sexual Behaviors; Effects of Media Use on Development of Gender Role Beliefs; Media Use and the Development of Sexual Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors; Media Use, Body Image, and Disordered Eating Patterns; Rape Myth Acceptance

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