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FlashReport

Objectifying Sarah Palin: Evidence that objectification causes women to be perceived as less competent and less fully human

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ABSTRACT

Although a great deal of research has examined the effects of objectification on women's self-perceptions and behavior, empirical research has yet to address how objectifying a woman affects the way she is perceived by others. We hypothesize that focusing on a woman's appearance will promote reduced perceptions of competence, and also, by virtue of construing the women as an "object", perceptions of the woman as less human. We found initial experimental evidence for these hypotheses as a function of objectifying two targets – Sarah Palin and Angelina Jolie. In addition, focusing on Palin's appearance reduced intentions to vote for the McCain–Palin ticket (prior to the 2008 US Presidential election). We discuss these findings in the context of the election and the objectification of women.

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"There is a gigantic difference between...me and my Vice-Presidential opponent. She's good-looking".

Joe Biden, Vice President of the United States

The Republican National Committee reportedly spent upwards of \$150,000 improving US Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin's wardrobe and appearance (Isikoff & Smalley, 2008). And, despite facing criticism for this, in a sense, it "worked". A clip of her wearing a swimsuit on the internet site YouTube received well over a million views, and Time magazine declared her a "sex symbol", reporting that "photos" and "beauty pageant" were the second and third most popular internet search words in conjunction with Palin's name (Tancer, September, 2, 2008). In addition to the focus on her appearance, exit polls indicated that 60% of American voters thought that Palin was unqualified for the job (Barnes, 2008). But, is there a link between the focus on Palin's appearance and negative views of her?

In this study, we examined three questions. One, does focusing on a woman's appearance reduce perceptions of her competence? Second, does it promote perceptions of the woman as an object – and consequently, as less fully human? Third, although there are undoubtedly a number of reasons for the McCain–Palin defeat, could the focus on Sarah Palin's appearance have contributed to reduced willingness to vote for their ticket in the 2008 US Presidential election?

Objectification

Building on the work of feminist scholars (e.g., Bartky, 1990), Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argued that women are objectified

when they are viewed as if their body is capable of representing them. Research on objectification has provided an in depth analysis of the psychological consequences for objectified women (see Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997); but, researchers have yet to address how focusing on a woman's appearance affects perceptions of her.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1999) speculated about several possible ways that objectification influences perceptions of objectified persons, including females valued solely for appearance. Some of these are directly related to minimizing their competence: denying self-determination, agentic qualities and uniqueness of talents (i.e., they can easily be replaced). Others likely minimize the perception of the individual as fully human, such as denying that their feelings and experiences matter and having less concern when they are physically or emotionally harmed.

Perceptions of competence

Women who self-evaluate based on appearance (i.e., self-objectify) perceived themselves as less competent (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003), and perform less competently when objectifying themselves (e.g., Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Quinn, Kallen, Twenge, & Fredrickson, 2006). But, as far as we know, no empirical research has directly tested if focusing on women's appearance versus their personhood reduces other's perceptions of their competence.

There is, however, a large body of research on female attractiveness and perceptions of competence. While "what is beautiful is good (and competent)" is generally supported (e.g., Jackson, Hunter, & Hodge, 1995), when women are evaluated for high status jobs, attractiveness reduces perceptions of women's, but not men's, competence (e.g., Heilman & Stopeck, 1985). Similarly, a recent

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study utilizing a mock US Presidential election methodology found that competence was rated as important for male and female candidates. But only for female candidates did appearance matter; and they were viewed as less competent overall (Chiao, Bowman, & Gill, 2008). We are not aware of any studies that have manipulated the degree to which individuals focus on a women's appearance. Rudman and Borgida (1995) did, however, find that males rated a woman as less competent following exposure to sexualized images of other women. Also, Glick, Larsen, Johnson, and Branstiter (2005) manipulated a woman's attire so that she was dressed provocatively (and thus, likely to draw attention to her appearance) or not. When she was dressed provocatively, both men and women perceived her as less competent, but only when she was purportedly in a high status occupation (which of course, Vice President of the United States would be). Thus, although research has not directly tested if focusing just on a woman's appearance diminishes her perceived competence, the extant literature suggests it could.

Perceptions of humanness

Literally, objectification refers to construing an individual as an object; by virtue of this, targets of objectification are likely to be perceived as less fully human. This idea has been presented before (Goldenberg & Roberts, 2004; Haslam, Loughnan, Reynolds, & Wilson, 2007; Nussbaum, 1999), but recent work by Haslam and colleagues (e.g., Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005) offers a paradigm for examining this hypothesis empirically. Building on a framework of psychological essentialism, these researchers proposed that people construe certain characteristics as more essential or fundamentally human; and that dehumanization can take the form of perceiving individuals as lacking this human essence. Independent of self-enhancement, people assign more human essence to themselves than others, and this partially reflects a tendency for people to see themselves with more depth and complexity (Haslam et al., 2005). Viewing another individual as low in human essence, in contrast, reflects a superficial, more surface level evaluation in which people are even likened to robots and automata (Loughnan & Haslam, 2007). It follows that focusing more on a person's appearance than who they are should lead to evaluations of the individual as less human, but to date this has not been directly tested.

Current study

We offer two primary predictions for how women are perceived when they are objectified: that is, less competent and, by virtue of becoming an object, less fully human. To test this, objectification will be induced by prompting respondents to focus on a woman's appearance or her as a person. To examine generalizability, participants will be asked to evaluate Sarah Palin, or the (also frequently objectified) actress, Angelina Jolie. We also explore the possibility that intentions to vote for John McCain (prior to the election) will be reduced as a function of objectification reducing perceptions that Palin is competent and fully human.

Method

Participants

Participants were 133 undergraduates (37 male) at the University of South Florida. The (self-identified) political composition was: 60 Democrats, 33 Republicans and 40 Independents.

Materials and procedure

Data was collected in a classroom setting approximately four weeks prior to the election (and prior to the newsbreak of Palin's

\$150,000 make-over). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions crossed between target (Sarah Palin or Angelina Jolie) and focus (appearance or person).

Appearance–focus manipulation

Participants were instructed to write about Sarah Palin or Angelina Jolie. No limit was placed on how much they could write. In the appearance–focus condition they were told, "Please take some time to write your thoughts and feelings about this person's appearance. Please focus on both positive and negative traits". In the control condition they were given identical instructions except "person's appearance" was replaced with "person".

Perceived human essence

Participants then rated the degree that 25 traits (e.g., helpful, impulsive; from Haslam et al., 2005) described Sarah Palin or Angelina Jolie. Subsequent to descriptiveness ratings, participants rated how much "each of the following traits are essential to human nature (what most characterizes being human)". Both ratings were made on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all; 7 = entirely). We conducted within participant correlations between how descriptive each trait was of the target and participants' human essence ratings for each trait (e.g., Paladino & Vaes, in press) and standardized this correlation using a Fisher Z transformation (Michela, 1991).¹

Perceived competence

We also included three traits to tap perceptions of competence (competent, intelligent, capable). How descriptive each trait was of the target was measured on the same 7-point scale and averaged together to form a reliable perceived competence score ($\alpha = .88$).

Voting

Participants were then asked, "Who will you vote for in the upcoming Presidential election?" They circled one of four choices: won't vote, undecided, John McCain or Barack Obama. We dichotomized responses into two categories (voting for McCain, not voting for McCain).

Coding

Two coders blind to experimental conditions coded participants' responses for positivity and appearance–focus using a 4-point scale. The former allowed us to control for valence of participants' responses, and the latter to test the effectiveness of the appearance–focus manipulation as well as to examine appearance–focus as a continuous variable. Inter-rater reliability for both was high ($r = .82$ for positivity; $.91$ for appearance); the mean for each was used in the analyses.

Results

We conducted a 2 (target: Sarah Palin, Angelina Jolie) \times 2 (focus: appearance, person) ANOVA on competence rating while

¹ Although Haslam uses normative data for determining (high vs. low) human essence ratings, the words have not been normed for a US sample. Using the within-participant correlation to examine perceptions of humanness takes into consideration individual differences in how much a given trait is perceived as capturing the human essence.

treating positivity of statement as a covariate.^{2,3} Results indicated a main effect for target, $F(1, 128) = 15.2, p < .01, \eta^2 = .15$, and for focus, $F(1, 128) = 4.9, p = .03, \eta^2 = .09$, but no hint of an interaction ($p > .8$). People rated Sarah Palin ($M = 4.3, SD = 1.7$) as less competent than Angelina Jolie ($M = 5.2, SD = .09$). Participants also rated the targets as less competent when focusing on appearance ($M = 4.4, SD = 1.4$) rather than the person ($M = 4.9, SD = 1.3$).

We then conducted the same 2×2 ANOVA on the standardized correlation between ratings of each traits' descriptiveness and humanness. Results revealed no main effect for target ($p > .8$) and no interaction ($p > .9$), but there was the predicted main effect for focus, $F(1, 128) = 6.3, p = .01, \eta^2 = .05$. Traits deemed descriptive of each woman correlated less highly with human essence ratings of each trait when participants were primed to focus on appearance ($M = .25, SD = .05$) than the person ($M = .43, SD = .05$).⁴

People assigned to the appearance condition did focus more on appearance than the control condition, $F(1, 128) = 191.2, p < .01, \eta^2 = .59$; but not surprisingly, people also wrote about Palin's and Jolie's appearance in the person condition. We therefore conducted regression analysis on competence and human essence ratings treating appearance–focus as a continuous variable, again controlling for positivity of responses. Results yielded the same significant effects as the manipulated variable: appearance–focus predicted both competence, $\beta = -.21, SE = .14, p = .01$, and human essence ratings, $\beta = -.25, SE = .02, p < .01$.

We also examined whether perceptions of competence and humanness affected voting intentions for participants assigned to rate Palin. Logistic regression analyses revealed that lower perceived competence, $\beta = .28, SE = .09, W = 8.7, p < .01$, and humanness, $\beta = .24, SE = .95, W = 6.5, p = .01$, were associated with a decreased likelihood of voting for McCain–Palin. Suggesting that these evaluations mediated the relationship between appearance–focus and voting intentions (Baron & Kenny, 1986), increased appearance–focus⁵ predicted a decreased likelihood of voting for McCain, $\beta = -.58, SE = .63, W = 4.3, p = .04$, and entering either perceived competence or human essence ratings reduced this effect to marginal ($p = .08$, for competence) or non-significant ($p = .16$, for human essence), while each remained a significant predictor. As expected, there was no effect of focusing on Jolie's appearance on voting intentions ($p > .4$).

General discussion

Although a great deal of research has examined the effects of objectification on women's self-perceptions and behavior (see Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), this is the first work that we are aware of to examine how focusing on a woman's appearance affects other's perceptions of her. The findings are consistent with Nussbaum's (1999) philosophical treatise – objectifying women led others to perceive them as less competent and less fully human. These effects occurred with appearance–focus measured as a dichotomous, manipulated variable, and as a continuous variable. These effects occurred for both Palin and Jolie, who occupy very different roles in society. However, both these women are in high

² Positivity was a reliable positive covariate in every analysis ($ps < .03, \eta^2 = .09-.15$). Results of a 2 (person) \times 2 (focus) ANOVA on positivity revealed one marginally significant effect. People wrote more positively about the target women in the appearance condition, $F(1, 128) = 2.65, p = .08$.

³ Although there were too few males to meaningfully examine interactions by gender, prior research has found no gender differences (e.g., Chiao et al., 2008; Glick et al., 2005). Further, controlling for participants' gender did not change the results.

⁴ We also examined the amount of humanness attributed to each trait as a function of the objectification manipulation. There were no significant differences ($ps > .3$); thus, we can be confident that the manipulation affected perceptions of women, and not what traits are most human.

⁵ The effects of manipulated appearance focus were marginal ($p = .07$), in the same direction as the continuous variable.

status positions and both are physically attractive; thus, more research is needed to explore if these results generalize to low status and/or less physically attractive females.

We also found evidence that focusing on Palin's appearance led to reduced intentions to vote for the McCain–Palin ticket in the 2008 US Presidential election. Further, perceptions of competence and humanness played a mediating role, such that appearance–focus lowered perceived human essence and competence, which in turn reduced intentions to vote for John McCain. It is not possible to know whether such effects contributed to people's actual voting behavior the day of the election, as there clearly are other factors that likely swayed voters in favor of Obama–Biden (in this study, all Democrats intended to vote for that ticket). However, given the media's focus on Palin's appearance prior to the election, it is possible that people came to see her as less fully human (more robotic) and competent than they would have without this focus, and in turn, that they became even less likely to vote for her as a result (a more robotic, less competent candidate is certainly less desirable).

In considering the consequences of objectification, these findings suggest that being objectified affects women at not only an intrapersonal level, but also interpersonally, in ways that affect their real world chances of success. Research documenting that stripping people of their humanity plays a role in legitimizing aggression (e.g., Bandura, 2002; Bar-Tal, 2000) further suggests that objectification may have consequences for women beyond those we have discussed. Further, although the findings in our research are a consequence of objectification, and not a consequence of being a woman per se, men are clearly not objectified to the same degree as women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The 2008 US Presidential race was no exception. And thus, these findings shed light on both the conceptual phenomena of objectification and its practical consequences for women.

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