

Gender Differences in Experiences with Sexual Objectification

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Abstract

Sexual objectification is a prevalent societal issue that can lead to internalizing an objectified perspective of the body (Engeln-Maddox, Miller, & Doyle, 2011). Contrary to popular belief, objectification is applicable to both men and women (Aubrey, 2006). College students are believed to have many encounters involving sexual objectification, but few researchers have investigated sexual objectification in men, creating a need to expand research in this area. I explored gender differences in experiences of sexual objectification in male and female college students. General psychology students completed the Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale (Kozee, Tylka, Augustus-Horvath, & Denchik, 2007). I report a statistically significant difference in sexual objectification based on gender, indicating that women experience sexual objectification more often than do men. Keywords: sexual objectification, gender, college students

Gender Differences in Experiences with Sexual Objectification

Sexual objectification is commonly experienced by women in the United States (Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011), and it strongly influences self-perception. However, little is known about sexual objectification in men. I examine whether there are gender differences in the experience of sexual objectification. My goal is to provide insight into how often college students are subjected to sexual objectification. Within this study, I strive to advance the understanding of gender differences in sexual objectification using the Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale (ISOS; Kozee et al., 2007).

Sexual objectification occurs when a woman's body and her sexual body parts, along with their functions, are viewed separately from her as an entire person (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gervais, Vescio, & Forster, 2012). Fredrickson and Roberts explained that when women are objectified, they are treated as objects, with their primary purpose being for the use and pleasure of others. Sexual comments, objectifying gazes, body evaluation, and unwanted sexual advances are all examples of sexual objectification in addition to viewed media images (Kozee et al., 2007).

Exposure to sexually objectifying images of men and women is becoming increasingly common in the United States, as denuded bodies often serve as an instrument to sell products and attract the attention of viewers (Vaes, Paladino, & Puvia, 2011). When objectification occurs, the individual being objectified becomes a tool for another's own purpose and the usefulness of the objectified is judged (Vaes et al., 2011). It is assumed that sexual objectivity can lead to denial of subjectivity, which removes an individual's experience and feelings. Sexual objectification can lead to internalizing an objectified perspective of the body (Engeln-Maddox et al., 2011). This internalization can become damaging to one's self.

As being sexually objectified is out of one's control, it is almost impossible to avoid the negative outcomes. According to Watson, Marszalek, Dispenza, and Davids (2015), when women experience sexual objectification, they perceive being at risk of physical and sexual harm. Sexual objectification can also directly influence mental health based on one's internalization of this occurrence (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Sexual objectification can lead to self-objectification and internalizing cultural standards that in turn lead to poorer mental health (Szymanski & Feltman, 2014). Szymanski and Feltman (2014) found that more sexual objectification exposure was related to higher levels of psychological distress.

Although much is known about the negative impact of sexual objectification on women, few researchers have examined the impact of sexual objectification on men. Aubrey (2006) indicated that objectification is applicable to both men and women. Given the explicit focus on women in objectification theory, researcher opinions remain mixed regarding the roles that gender and sexual orientation play in sexual objectification (Engeln-Maddox

et al., 2011). Most researchers focus on women and body image. This relatively narrow focus creates a large gap with little to no empirical evidence to help researchers evaluate the difference between men and women and how they might both experience sexual objectification.

The purpose of this study is to explore sexual objectification in male and female college students. The present study used the Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale (ISOS) introduced by Kozee et al. (2007) to measure the personal experience one has with having been sexually objectified. Interpersonal sexual objectification is an essential variable in objectification theory, and sexual objectification commonly leads to psychological distress in women (Kozee et al., 2007). However, sexual objectification is occurring for and having a meaningful impact on men as well (Davidson, Gervais, Cavinez, & Cole, 2013). Unfortunately, as Davidson et al. noted, the ISOS was developed by women for women, creating limitations toward men and any objectification men may experience. In this study, I attempt to remove the gender bias by replacing gender-specific terms within the questions of the scale so that I can assess sexual objectification in both men and women.

The purpose of this study is to explore sexual objectification in male and female college students. I hypothesize that women will experience more sexual objectification than men. I also hypothesize that men will report experiencing little to no sexual objectification as characterized by the ISOS (Kozee et al., 2007).

Method

Participants

A total of 85 participants completed this study. Of those who responded to gender, 28 reported being male and 56 female. The average age was 20.18 ($SD = 3.07$). When asked about racial identity, 73.8% of respondents classified themselves as White/Caucasian, 11.0% Hispanic or Latino, 8.3% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 6.0% Black/African American. The youngest reported age was 18 and the oldest reported age was 35. As for students' year in school, there were 47 first-years, 25 sophomores, 8 juniors, and 4 seniors. The participants in this study were self-selected, general psychology students who completed a survey via Qualtrics. Participants received course credit for completing the survey.

Materials

Participants answered 26 questions. The first question confirmed participant consent. Four questions asked about the participant's background (e.g., gender, race, age, and year in school). The remaining 21 questions comprised the Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale (ISOS; Kozee et al., 2007), and were measured on a Likert scale where 1 = *Never*, 2 = *Rarely*, 3 = *Occasionally/Sometimes*, 4 = *Frequently*, and 5 = *Almost Always*.

Procedure

Participants signed up to take the survey online through Sona Systems, and completed the survey individually via Qualtrics. They were allowed 30 min to complete the survey. At the end of the survey they were thanked for their participation and were provided with information about their course credit.

Results

My first hypothesis predicted that women would report having experienced more sexual objectification than men. My second hypothesis was that men would report little to no experience with sexual objectification as characterized by the ISOS (Kozee et al., 2007).

To assess my hypotheses, an independent samples t-test was performed on all 21 ISOS items using gender as the independent variable. As predicted, there was a significant difference between men and women on their experience with sexual objectification as indicated in Table 1. Nineteen out of the 21 questions resulted in statistically significant outcomes. The two items that were not significant were "How often have you been called a name that is sexist, like whore, bitch, dick, etc.?" and "How often have you been encouraged to change your body shape (e.g., lose weight, build muscle)?"

Overall, males in the study consistently reported lower means to each question while women reported higher means. This indicates that women experience sexual objectification, as indicated by ISOS (Kozee et al., 2007) more frequently than do men.

Discussion

Based on my analysis, there is a clear gender difference in experience with sexual objectification. Due to the findings of this research, I predict that sexual objectification is a common occurrence among female college students. It is evident that women experience sexual objectification more frequently than do males within this study.

I originally hypothesized that women would have experienced more sexual objectification than men. I also hypothesized that men would report experiencing little to no sexual objectification as characterized by the ISOS (Kozee et al., 2007). Based on the findings of my research, both of my hypotheses were confirmed. Nineteen out of the 21 ISOS items tested to be statistically significant gender differences in regards to experience with sexual objectification. Women consistently reported having more frequently experienced sexual objectification, and men consistently reported little to no experience.

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) introduced Objectification Theory, which defined sexual objectification pertaining to women. My research aligns with Fredrickson and Roberts as I found that women are more likely to report sexual objectification. Previous researchers believed sexual objectification to have a meaningful impact on men as well (Davidson, et al., 2013). However, my results are not aligned with this previous claim. Only two out of the 21 ISOS (Kozee et al., 2007) items tested lead me to indicate no significant gender difference in regards to sexual objectification. Arguably, men do also experience sexual objectification, although more likely on a much smaller scale than women, or possibly on a different scale. However, as indicated by Davidson et al. (2013), the ISOS (Kozee et al., 2007) was created by women for women. While conducting my research I attempted to relieve the gender bias with the scale by altering or adding terms to become gender neutral or to also appeal to men. Two of the items I altered indicated no significant difference in regards to gender differences with sexual objectification. It is possible that if more of the items were altered or changed to better relieve bias that we would see fewer gender differences.

The results of my study can be used to show the evident issue of sexual objectification existing on college campuses. I also conclude from my study that women more frequently are exposed to sexual objectification, reporting more frequent encounters.

There are a few limitations within my study. Due to the size of my sample, it might not accurately depict what is happening on other campuses in regards to sexual objectification. My data also consisted of primarily White/Caucasian female students. I would suggest to future researchers to survey a larger data sample, and to aim for more equal numbers in regards to male and female respondents. Another limitation of this study is the use of ISOS (Kozee et al., 2007). I would recommend future researchers to spend more time relieving the gender bias of this scale, or to create a scale better fitting for both male and female participants.

In conclusion, there is an evident gender difference in experience with sexual objectification. I conclude based on the results from my research that women experience more frequent encounters with sexual objectification than do men. Within my research I attempted to relieve the gap regarding the little research done on men and sexual objectification. Though my research included both males and females, I believe further research needs to be done in regards to men and sexual objectification using a more gender-appropriate scale. I predict men and women do experience sexual objectification; however, I believe these experiences to be different. While women are primarily viewed limiting their use to being sexual objects in terms of objectification, I believe men are objectified to encourage sexual behavior.

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Table 1. ISOS Items and Gender Differences.

Item	Male		Female		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
1. How often have you been whistled at walking down the street?	1.29	0.54	2.64	0.88	-7.47	.000
2. How often have you noticed someone staring at your chest when you are talking to them?	1.11	0.42	2.77	0.91	-9.13	.000
3. How often have you felt like or known that someone was evaluating your physical appearance?	2.71	0.98	3.70	0.76	-5.07	.000
4. How often have you been called a name that is sexist, like, whore, bitch, dick, etc.?	2.57	1.03	2.63	1.12	-0.21	.833
5. How often have you felt that someone was staring at your body?	2.32	1.02	3.38	0.89	-4.88	.000
6. How often have you heard someone make negative comments about your body or a body part?	1.79	0.83	2.39	1.02	-2.72	.008
7. How often have you had a romantic partner that seemed to be more interested in your body than you as a person?	1.71	0.90	2.32	1.05	-2.62	.010
8. How often have you noticed someone leering at your body?	1.68	0.72	2.63	0.89	-4.89	.000
9. How often have you heard a rude, sexual remark about your body?	1.46	0.69	2.50	1.03	-4.81	.000
10. How often have you been praised (in a sexual way) for having a nice body or body part?	2.43	0.96	3.45	0.95	-4.61	.000
11. How often have you been touch or fondled against your will?	1.29	0.60	1.68	0.79	-2.32	.023
12. How often have you been the victim of sexual harassment (on the job, in school, etc.)?	1.22	0.70	1.68	0.90	-2.32	.023
13. How often have you been honked at when you were walking down the street?	1.36	0.62	2.55	0.91	-6.24	.000
14. How often have you seen someone stare at one or more of your body parts?	1.61	0.83	2.82	0.83	-6.30	.000
15. How often have you overheard inappropriate sexual comments made about your body?	1.32	0.67	2.39	0.89	-5.63	.000
16. How often have you been encouraged to change your body shape (e.g. lose weight, build muscle)?	2.57	1.03	2.98	1.29	-1.47	.146
17. How often have you been criticized for not looking like another person?	1.57	0.79	2.09	1.15	-2.14	.035
18. How often have you noticed that someone was not listening to what you were saying, but instead gazing at your body or a body part?	1.43	0.74	2.38	0.87	-4.95	.000
19. How often have you heard someone make sexual comments or innuendos when noticing your body?	1.43	0.63	2.55	0.87	-6.06	.000
20. How often has someone grabbed or pinched one of your private body areas against your will?	1.50	0.64	2.02	0.90	-2.70	.008
21. How often has someone made a degrading sexual gesture towards you?	1.43	0.63	2.2	0.88	-4.10	.000

Notes. *df* for all items = 82. The frequency scale used ranges from 1 = *Never*, 2 = *Rarely*, 3 = *Occasionally/Sometimes*, 4 = *Frequently*, and 5 = *Almost Always*.