

# Men and women facing objectification: The effects of media models on well-being, self-esteem and ambivalent sexism

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## Abstract

*Literature on objectification has largely shown the relationship between viewing objectified media models and women's body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness. The purpose of the present study was to extend past research by examining the effects of objectified media images –considering both male and female models– on psychological well-being, self-esteem, and endorsement of sexist attitudes. 166 undergraduates (51.8% males) participated in the study. Results showed that objectification of men decreases men's well-being, whereas objectification of women not only decreases women's well-being, but also their attractiveness and social self-esteem. Furthermore, objectification of women affects men's endorsement of sexist attitudes, increasing hostility toward women and decreasing hostility toward men. Implications are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Ambivalent sexism, media, objectification, well-being, state self-esteem.

## Hombres y mujeres frente a la cosificación: los efectos de los modelos mediáticos sobre el bienestar, la autoestima y el sexismo ambivalente

### Resumen

*La literatura sobre la cosificación ha demostrado la relación entre la visualización de los modelos cosificados en los medios de comunicación y la insatisfacción corporal de las mujeres. El objetivo del presente estudio fue examinar los efectos de las imágenes cosificadas en los medios –considerando tanto los modelos masculinos como femeninos– sobre el bienestar psicológico, la autoestima, y la aprobación de las actitudes sexistas. 166 estudiantes (51,8% hombres) participaron en el estudio. Los resultados mostraron que la cosificación de los hombres disminuye el bienestar masculino, mientras la cosificación femenina disminuye el bienestar, el atractivo y la autoestima social de las mujeres. Por otra parte, la cosificación de las mujeres afecta la aprobación de las actitudes sexistas en los hombres, aumentando la hostilidad hacia las mujeres y disminuyendo la hostilidad hacia los hombres. Se discuten algunas implicaciones.*

**Palabras clave:** Sexismo ambivalente, media, cosificación, bienestar, autoestima.

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## Media as conveyors of ideals

Among the possible mechanisms for transmission of ideals, e.g. through family and peers, the mass media are probably one of the most powerful conveyors of sociocultural ideals and play an important causal role in the development of negative outcomes, such as body dissatisfaction and eating pathology (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Tiggemann, 2003). Many theorists have addressed the question concerning the mechanism by which the media influence an array of subsequent psychological outcomes. On the one hand, communications researchers employ cultivation theory to argue that individuals use the consistent messages portrayed in the media, regardless of how narrow, to construct an image of reality (Gerbner, Gross, & Morgan, 2002). Therefore, following chronic exposure, individuals will come to adopt a perspective that is consistent with the models seen in the media.

On the other hand, psychologists drive their attention to explaining why media consumption produces negative psychological consequences. Social comparison theory, derived from the original paradigm developed by Festinger (1954), is one of the primary positions brought forth to explain such effects (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). The great majority of women, when viewing images of models, are comparing their own appearance to that of someone who is "better" (Wertheim, Paxton, & Blaney, 2004), social comparisons related to appearance engender dissatisfaction due to the upward comparison process.

One more recent approach, focused on how women are culturally depicted, has enlarged this perspective. According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), there is a great deal of evidence suggesting that women are largely objectified in contemporary Western countries. When objectified, women are reduced to the status of mere instruments available for visual inspection, evaluation, and the pleasure of others (Bartky, 1990). The body is seen as a sexualized object, separate from nonphysical characteristics (McKee, 2005). Thus, individuals exposed to high levels of sexually objectifying media will learn that women's bodies are able to represent them (Grabe & Hyde, 2009). This leads to the association between women's worth and their physical appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Heflick, Goldenberg, Cooper, & Puvia, 2011).

## Effects of exposure to objectified media models: empirical evidence

Literature has provided convincing empirical evidence for the relationship between viewing objectified media models and women's body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness (e.g. Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz et al., 2002; Lopez-Guimerà, Levine, Sanchez-Carracedo, & Fauquet, 2010; Tiggemann, 2003). The implications of these findings for women's well-being and physical health have been well documented, in terms of depression (Grabe & Hyde, 2009), body shame and anxiety (Grabe & Hyde, 2009; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008), and disordered eating (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). As Grabe and colleagues (2008) show in their meta-analysis, these effects of media exposure are demonstrated in both the experimental and the correlational literature, regardless of assessment technique, individual difference variables, media type, or other study characteristics.

However, research on the potential consequences of objectified media models need to be extended to include other outcomes (Grabe et al., 2008). As example, although it is well established that exposure to such models decrease women's self-esteem concerning appearance, research has not directly tested if it has an impact on self-esteem concerning performance and social domains, as extant literature suggests it could (see meta-analysis by Grabe et al., 2008).

Media exposure seems to have an impact also on attitudes concerning gender stereotypes. According to Ward (2003), the dominant trends across the

literature indicate that frequent exposure to certain television genres is linked to attitudes that elicit stereotypes about relationships between sexes. Lanis & Covell (1995) found that experimental exposure to advertisements featuring women as sexual objects produced a stronger acceptance of gender role stereotyping among male undergraduates. Extending their findings, McKay & Covell (1997) demonstrated that both males and females showed attitudes more supportive of sex-role stereotyping when primed with sex female image advertisements. It follows that exposure to objectified female models should increase sexist attitudes, but to date this has not been directly tested.

### **Objectification of men**

The strong difference in the degree to which women and men's bodies are objectified and sexualized is well established. Across many forms of media, a common finding is that women are depicted as sexual objects more often than men (Ward, 2003).

However, there is an increasing tendency to objectify men's physiques in various media (Johnson, McCreary, & Mills, 2007). These media images should have a detrimental effect on both men's body image perceptions and psychological well-being. Nevertheless, evidence regarding the connection between media exposure and negative psychological outcomes is more limited and has yielded inconclusive results (Hobza & Rochlen, 2009). Hobza and Rochlen (2009) found that men who viewed images of muscular men reported lower body esteem than men in the control condition, but the impact of media portrayals did not affect state self-esteem. Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004) demonstrated that men exposed to objectified male TV ads became more depressed and had higher levels of muscle dissatisfaction than men exposed to neutral TV ads.

Focusing on both male and female models, Johnson and colleagues (2007) examined the effects of viewing media-portrayed, objectified male and female images on the body image and well-being of undergraduate men. Although men exposed to female objectified images endorsed greater levels of anxiety and hostility, there was no significant effect of both objectified man and objectified woman on men's body image and well-being (Johnson et al., 2007).

### **Current study**

The purpose of the present study was to extend past research on the effects of viewing objectified media images. First, we explored the effects of viewing both objectified male and objectified female images (past research has tended to use visual stimuli of only men or women, not both, with few exceptions, i.e. Johnson et al., 2007; Morry & Staska, 2001). Second, we considered both male and female respondents (past research has tended to recruit only men or only women). This means that both genders were exposed to male and female models. Third, among the effects, we considered not only well-being and appearance self-esteem, but also performance and social self-esteem. Fourth, we tested if the exposure to objectified media models increases sexism.

Hypothesis testing for the current study used a 2 (Gender of participant) x 3 (Advertisement Type: objectified male, objectified female, control condition) factorial design. Based on previous findings, we expected that:

Hypothesis 1. Compared to other conditions, both men and women viewing respectively objectified male images and objectified female images would show lower levels of well-being (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Grabe et al., 2008).

Hypothesis 2. Women in the objectified female condition would report lower levels of self-esteem concerning appearance (Grabe et al., 2008),

performance and the social abilities, whereas no significant effect would be shown for male participants (Hobza & Rochlen, 2009; Johnson et al., 2007).

Hypothesis 3. Exposure to objectified female models would increase sexism, regardless of participants' gender (McKay & Covell, 1997; Ward, 2003).

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 166 Caucasian undergraduates (51.8% male, mean age = 24.5 years,  $SD = 2.36$ , range 19-29). Their mean body mass index was 21.91 ( $SD = 2.11$ , range 16.98 – 29.32). Each participant was randomly assigned to view one of three advertisements sets (objectified male condition, objectified female condition, and control condition). No significant differences were found among the groups with regard to age,  $F(2, 164) = 2.21$ , *n.s.*, and body mass index,  $F(2, 164) = 2.72$ , *n.s.*

### Materials and procedure

A 3-minutes video segment was created for each condition. The objectified male video contained 6 advertisements which featured male models. The objectified female video included 6 commercials which featured female models. In the control condition the video contained 6 advertisements featuring products without people (bottles, food, animals).

Participants were told that they were participating in a short study about television viewing.

### Measures

#### *Subjective well-being*

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule was administered (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1998). Twenty adjectives were rated from “not at all” (1) to “extremely” (5) in terms of the degree to which the participant felt that way. Mean scores were computed for the Positive Affect (PA) adjectives ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and the Negative Affect (NA) adjectives ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

#### *State self-esteem*

The State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) is a wide used 20-item inventory that measures momentary self-esteem. It can be divided into *Attractiveness*, *Social*, and *Performance* subscales. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). For the current study alphas were respectively .83 for Attractiveness, .75 for Social, and .74 for Performance subscales.

#### *Ambivalent Sexism Inventory* (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996)

It is a wide used 22-item self-report measure of sexist attitudes toward women composed of Benevolent Sexism (BS) and Hostile Sexism (HS) subscales. Respondents indicated their agreement or disagreement with each statement on a 0 (= strongly disagree) to 5 (= strongly agree) scale. Alphas for BS and HS were .84 and .91 respectively.

#### *Attitudes toward Men Inventory* (AMI; Glick & Fiske, 1999)

It is a 20-item self-report measure of attitudes toward men composed of two subscales: Benevolence toward Men (BM) and Hostility toward Men (HM).

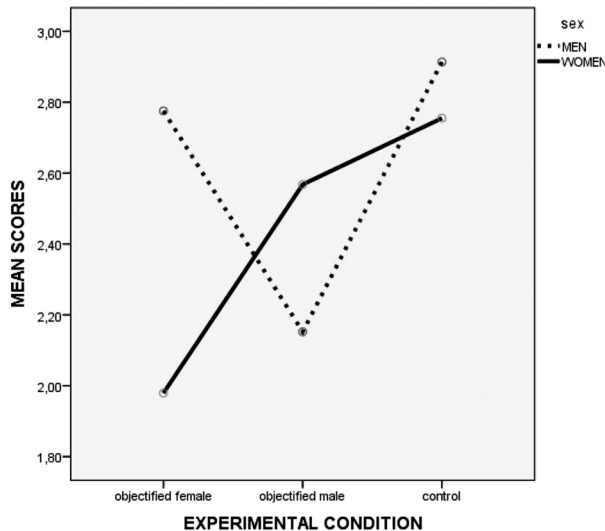
Participants indicated their agreement or disagreement with each statement on a 0 (= strongly disagree) to 5 (= strongly agree) scale. Alphas for BM and HM were .85 and .86 respectively.

## RESULTS

One 2 (Gender of participant) x 3 (Advertisement Type: objectified male, objectified female, control condition) between-participants multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed for each hypothesis.

The first MANOVA (Hypothesis 1) revealed a significant multivariate main effect of Type of Advertisement,  $F(4,165) = 4.50, p < .01$ , as well as a significant interaction between Type of Advertisement and Gender of participant,  $F(4, 165) = 7.49, p < .001$ . At the univariate level, the main effect of Type of Advertisement was significant for positive affect,  $F(2, 165) = 7.41, p < .01$ . Participants in the control condition showed higher levels of PA ( $M = 2.82, SD = .68$ ) than participants in both the objectified female condition ( $M = 2.40, SD = .73$ ) and in the objectified male condition ( $M = 2.34, SD = .65$ ). Similarly, the interaction between Type of Advertisement and Gender of participant was significant for PA,  $F(2, 165) = 14.94, p < .001$  (Figure 1). Women in the objectified female condition showed lower levels of PA than women in the other conditions,  $F(2, 79) = 10.23, p < .001$ . Concerning males, men in the objectified male condition scored lower on PA than men in the other conditions,  $F(2, 85) = 12.61, p < .001$ .

FIGURE 1  
Positive mood: mean scores of male and female participants across the experimental conditions



The following MANOVA was performed to test the effect of the independent variables on the three subscales of self-esteem (Hypothesis 2). This analysis showed a significant multivariate main effect of Gender of participant,  $F(3, 165) = 4.02, p < .01$ , and of the interaction between Type of Advertisement and Gender of participant,  $F(4, 165) = 3.12, p < .01$ . At the univariate level, Gender played a significant role on Attractiveness,  $F(1, 165) = 11.52, p < .01$ , as men ( $M = 3.65, SD = .70$ ) scored higher than women ( $M = 3.20, SD = .74$ ). The interaction between Type of Advertisement and Gender was significant for both Attractiveness,  $F(2, 165) = 3.33, p < .05$  (Figure 2), and Social self-esteem,  $F(2,$

165) = 5.01,  $p < .01$  (Figure 3). Women in the control condition showed higher Attractiveness,  $F(2, 79) = 6.63$ ,  $p < .01$ , and higher Social self-esteem,  $F(2, 79) = 4.77$ ,  $p < .05$ , than women in both the experimental conditions. Men did not show any significant difference across conditions on both Attractiveness,  $F(2, 85) = .06$ , n.s., and Social Self-esteem,  $F(2, 85) = 1.40$ , n.s. No significant effect of the independent variables was found concerning Performance Self-esteem.

FIGURE 2

*Attractiveness: mean scores of male and female participants across the experimental conditions*

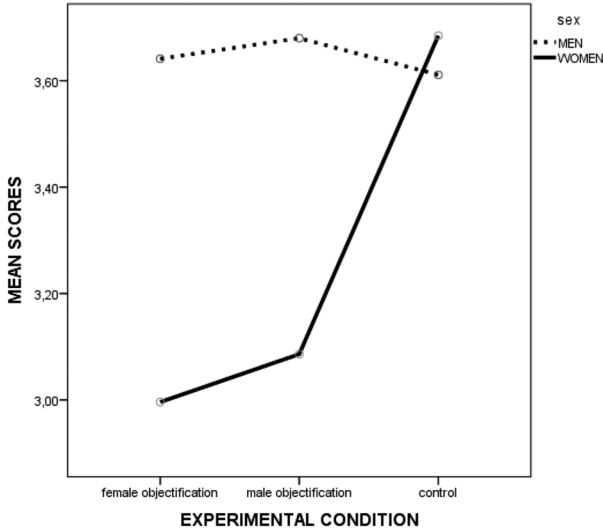
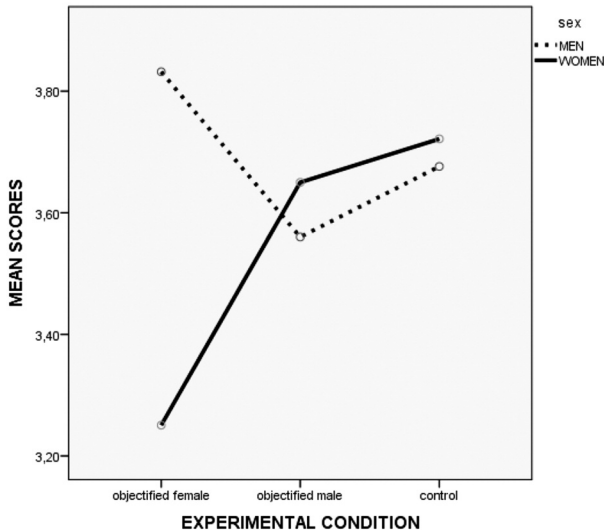


FIGURE 3

*Social self-esteem: mean scores of male and female participants across the experimental conditions*



Finally, we tested the effect of experimental conditions and Gender of participant on BS, HS, BM, and HM (Hypothesis 3). The MANOVA revealed a multivariate main effect of Gender  $F(4, 162) = 5.54$ ,  $p < .001$ , and of the

interaction between Type of Advertisement and Gender of participant,  $F(8, 162) = 3.79, p < .01$ . At the univariate level, Gender of participant significantly affected BS,  $F(1, 162) = 10.01, p < .01$ , HS,  $F(1, 162) = 10.61, p < .01$ , and BM,  $F(1, 160) = 11.88, p < .01$ . Men scored higher than women on all these dimensions (BS: males  $M = 2.18, SD = .93$ ; females  $M = 1.73, SD = .83$ . HS: males  $M = 2.53, SD = 1.26$ ; females  $M = 1.86, SD = 1.09$ . BM: males  $M = 1.89, SD = 1.08$ ; females  $M = 1.43, SD = .47$ ). The interaction between Type of Advertisement and Gender was significant for HS,  $F(2, 162) = 3.09, p < .05$  (Figure 4), and HM,  $F(2, 162) = 4.11, p < .01$  (Figure 5). Men in the objectified female condition expressed higher levels of Hostile Sexism toward women,  $F(2,$

FIGURE 4  
Hostile sexism toward women: mean scores of male and female participants across the experimental conditions

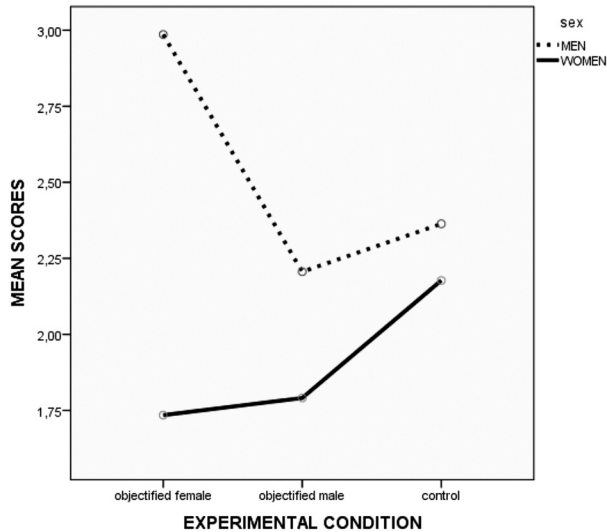
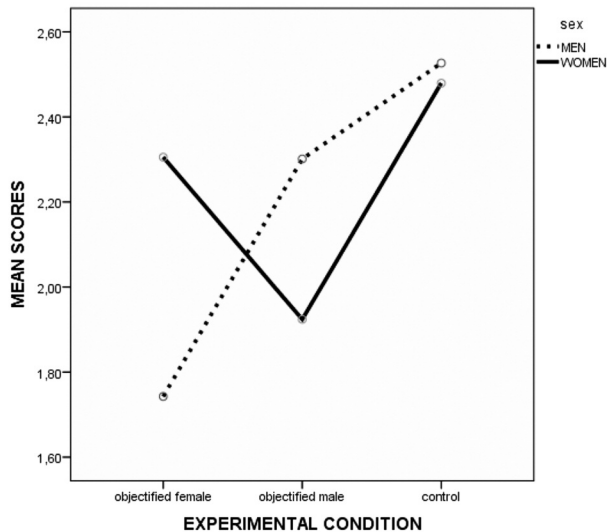


FIGURE 5  
Hostility toward men: mean scores of male and female participants across the experimental conditions



85) = 3.77,  $p < .05$ , and lower levels of Hostility toward Men  $F(2, 85) = 6.04$ ,  $p < .01$ , than men in the other conditions. Scores of women did not vary across conditions (HS:  $F(2, 77) = 1.09$ , *n.s.* HM  $F(2, 76) = 1.97$ , *n.s.*).

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to extend past research by examining the effects of viewing objectified media images on psychological well-being, self-esteem, and endorsement of sexist attitudes. To sum up, results show that objectification of men decreases men's positive affect, whereas objectification of women decreases women's positive affect, attractiveness and social self-esteem. Moreover, objectification of women affects men's endorsement of sexist attitudes, increasing hostility toward women and decreasing hostility toward men.

Concerning positive affect, following the social comparison theoretical framework, when viewing the same-sex model, both men and women seem to experience an upward comparison process, which reduces their well-being (Wertheim et al., 2004).

In the case of women, viewing images of models has also a pervasive impact on self-esteem. Despite the fact that in general men have higher self-esteem concerning the attractiveness dimension, exposure to same-sex models decreases women's self-esteem not only concerning physical appearance, as literature has largely demonstrated (Grabe et al., 2008), but it has a broader and more invasive impact, affecting also the perception of their social abilities. In the light of the objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), we can argue that driving the focus on a "perfect" body paves the way for the association between worth and physical appearance (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009). Nevertheless, since women are depicted as sexual objects more often than men (Ward, 2003), the effects of objectification are more pervasive for women than for men (see cultivation theory, Gerbner et al., 2002; Rollero & Tartaglia, 2013). This can explain why present findings show that objectification has no effect on men's self-esteem.

Concerning sexism, the objectification of women increases the endorsement of an explicit adversarial view of women, i.e. hostile sexism, but it reduces the expression of resentment toward gender power inequalities, i.e. hostility toward men. In other words, for men objectification of women contributes to justify the status quo, where social inequality between males and females are largely established. Contrary to our hypothesis, women's sexist attitudes are not influenced by objectification. We can suppose that this effect is line with the Ambivalent Sexism Theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996): objectified women emphasize their sexual allure, which can be seen as a way to control men. Indeed, HS is directed most strongly at women who are perceived as using their sexual attractiveness to gain power over men (Glick et al., 2000). Literature on gender stereotypes has largely showed many pernicious effects of sexism, which contribute to maintain gender inequalities (i.e. De Piccoli & Rollero, 2010; Exposito, Moya, & Glick, 1998; Gómez-Berrocal, Cuadrado, Navas, Quiles, & Morera, 2011; Lameiras & Rodríguez, 2002). Present study provides additional evidence to suggest that objectified media models may contribute to origin sexist attitudes.

The main limitation of the present study is that results are specific to a sample of undergraduates and may not replicate beyond the laboratory. For this reason, the investigation of the effects of media models should be deepened across different populations and through longitudinal studies. As Harrison and Bond



(2007) have demonstrated, the exposure to ideal-body media models can have long lasting effects, which can not be detected through an experimental design.

Moreover, future research should consider other outcomes of objectification, such as marketability. Recent studies have demonstrated that average-size media models do not reduce the marketing appeal of advertisements to consumers (Diedrichs & Lee, 2011). It should be interesting extending such and present findings in the light of the objectification perspective, investigating the impact of objectification on marketability.

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