

Study Examines the Effect Sexually Objectifying Material Has on People Over Time

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Americans are bombarded by thousands of media images each day, from advertisements to television shows. Many of these images reinforce ideas of physical attractiveness by sexual objectification, which focuses on bodies and appearance rather than people's feelings and behaviors.

Now, a new study by a University of Missouri-Columbia researcher found that both men and women experience an increase in self-objectification after viewing sexually-objectifying material over time.

"The relationship between the body and sex is unambiguously portrayed in contemporary media," said Jennifer Aubrey, assistant communication professor in the College of Arts and Science. "Conforming to a thin body is crucial to sexual attractiveness. We see this message in a variety of ways and in a variety of media, especially in popular magazines and television programs."

Aubrey studied 226 college-aged participants. Respondents reported their habitual exposure to popular television shows and magazines. A panel of impartial judges rated each television show and magazine according to how sexually objectifying they perceived them, and researchers computed the degree to which the participants were exposed to sexually objectifying material. Participants also rated their body attributes in terms of physical appearance, such as height and weight, and in terms of competence, such as stamina and physical fitness.

Participants also were rated on how much they engaged in body surveillance, such as thinking and worrying about their appearance.

Overall, women reported more exposure to sexually objectifying material and reported more self-objectification and more body surveillance than men. One year later, Aubrey surveyed the group again and found that exposure to sexually objectifying television in the first year predicted an increase in self-objectification during the second year for both men and women and body surveillance for men only. Sexual objectification is the tendency to define the self by how the body appears to others instead of what the body can do or how it feels, Aubrey said.

"Exposure to sexually objectifying television shows was associated with an increase in viewers' definitions of their physical selves in terms of externally perceivable traits," Aubrey said. "One explanation for this process is that exposure to televised objectification cultivates a particular view of the self, a view that emphasizes the importance of physical appearance."

This study recently was published in the *Journal of Communication*.

Source: University of Missouri

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