

Sexual objectification influences visual perception

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By recording eye movements, Silani and her colleagues confirm that the sexualized body inversion hypothesis is quite likely correct. Credit: Anatolich1 [CC BY-SA 3.0], from Wikimedia Commons

It has been suggested that sexually objectified women or men are visually processed in the same fashion as objects. Far from being unanimously accepted, this claim has been criticized by a lack of scientific rigor. A team led by Giorgia Silani, in collaboration with

Helmut Leder, of the University of Vienna, and scientists of the University of Trieste and SISSA have explored the conditions under which this phenomenon persists. The results of the study were recently published in the renowned scientific journal *PLOS One*.

A controversial hypothesis called the sexualized body inversion hypothesis (SBIH) claims similar visual processing of sexually objectified women or men (i.e., with a focus on the sexual body parts) and inanimate objects, suggesting a possible cognitive mechanism behind human sexual objectification. Far from being unanimously accepted, this hypothesis has been criticized by a lack of scientific rigor. A team led by Giorgia Silani, in collaboration with Helmut Leder, of the Faculty of Psychology, University of Vienna, and scientists of the University of Trieste and SISSA have explored, in a series of four experiments, show that low-level perceptual features and visual exploration strategies can facilitate the occurrence of this phenomenon.

The study

The study used a well-known visual matching task in order to detect the occurrence of the inversion [effect](#) (i.e., lower performance when stimuli are presented in the unusual upside-down orientation, usually observed when processing faces or human bodies vs. objects) in different stimulus categories: sexualized targets, non-sexualized targets and real objects. By varying the low-level visual properties of the stimuli, Cogoni and colleagues explored whether this effect is driven by differences in stimulus asymmetry.

The authors observed that symmetry plays a moderating role in shaping the inversion effect, in that presentation of more asymmetrical stimuli (i.e., with a pronounced difference between the left and right side of the image regarding the position of body parts such as arms, legs, ankles) led to lower inversion effect (due to ease in recognizing the stimuli both in

the upward and inverted position) independently from the level of sexualization of the [target](#).

Notably, a difference in the occurrence of the inversion effect between sexualized and non-sexualized targets emerged when the stimuli were equally difficult to recognize (i.e., when the images were very symmetrical in their position), suggesting the tendency to visually process sexualized individuals similarly to objects, as indicated by an absence of inversion effect for only sexualized targets. By using eye tracker devices, the authors could further link this difference to a specific pattern of visual exploration of the images. Indeed, lower a number of fixations in the face region of sexualized targets compared to the non-sexualized targets was detected, suggesting a deviation from the face to other [body parts](#) as a possible mechanism for the sexualized [body](#) inversion hypothesis.

More information: Carlotta Cogoni et al. Understanding the mechanisms behind the sexualized-body inversion hypothesis: The role of asymmetry and attention biases, *PLOS ONE* (2018). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0193944](#)

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