

# Researchers study sexual objectification in brain processes

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What happens in the human brain when a woman is put on a par with an object? A study addressing this question was conducted at the Department of Psychology and Cognitive Science and the Center for Mind/Brain Sciences (CiMEC) of the University of Trento and was

published today in *Scientific Reports*. The results could provide new insights into the study of gender and racial violence

The most basic definition of sexual objectification, a risk that mostly targets [women](#), is the reduction of a person's body or body parts to objects, a view that represents a powerful and potentially damaging way of seeing and treating women. The theme has been analyzed experimentally in a study conducted at the University of Trento, Italy. The results are published today in *Scientific Reports*, and represent an important contribution to the literature on sexual objectification.

The discussion of why women are more exposed than men to the risk of objectification involves both evolutionary and socio-cultural theories and interests various scientific disciplines. The research team of the Department of Psychology and Cognitive Science and the Center for Mind/Brain Sciences (CiMEC) analyzed what happens in the [human brain](#) when an object appears in two different contexts: among a group of women or a group of men. The [brain activity](#), measured with an electroencephalogram (EEG), shows that an object is noticed less when it appears among a group of scarcely dressed women.

Jeroen Vaes, professor of the Department of Psychology and Cognitive Science and first author of the current article, says: "Studies conducted in recent decades on the impact of [sexual objectification](#) have revealed that growing up in a society in which women are mainly judged on their looks makes women doubt their physical appearance. In the long run, this might even lead to eating disorders and sexual dysfunction. Little, however, is known about the way our perception changes when a woman is objectified. We have shown that a woman in bikini or underwear is perceived more similarly to an object than a man is, in the brains of both male and female participants. For the first time, we managed to show that the perception of women, when objectified, changes in essence beyond the metaphor, becoming more similar to a real object."

How was this result obtained? In the experiments, both male and female participants were exposed to images of scarcely or fully dressed male and female models, together with doll-like avatars that were created on the basis of the same models. Brain activity was measured with an electroencephalogram (EEG).

On a scale from fully human to object, Vaes explains that the brains of both men and women tend to perceive a lower degree of humanity or a stronger resemblance with an object in women rather than in men when they are dressed in a swimsuit or underwear.

The implications of the result that the human [brain](#) associates "women" and "objects" are numerous. First of all, such perceptions might trigger treatments that are typically observed in our interactions with objects (like ownership and violation) and result in gender violence.

Secondly, the recurrent sexualization of women in the media and in video games might have stronger effects in real life given that female doll-like avatars are less clearly differentiated from real women. Finally, the current paradigm might be adopted in other contexts. Vaes says, "Adopting a paradigm that measures whether human and non-human entities are perceived similarly allows us to show processes of dehumanization beyond the metaphor in racial contexts, as well." The current results could, therefore, provide new instruments to gauge racial prejudice and stereotypes, and increase the understanding of gender and racial violence.

**More information:** Jeroen Vaes et al, Assessing neural responses towards objectified human targets and objects to identify processes of sexual objectification that go beyond the metaphor, *Scientific Reports* (2019). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-019-42928-x](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-42928-x)

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