

Sexually objectifying women leads women to objectify themselves

July 24 2019, by Peter Koval, Elise Holland And Michelle Stratemeyer



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How does a woman feel when a man wolf-whistles at her from across the street? Or when a male coworker gives her body a fleeting once-over before looking her in the eye?

These examples may seem relatively innocent to some, but [our research](#) has found they can have [negative consequences](#) for [women's](#) emotional well-being.

We asked women to record any incidents of sexual objectification on a [smartphone app](#), alongside rating their feelings several times each day for a week.

When women experienced sexual objectification, in many cases it led them to scrutinise their [physical appearance](#), which negatively impacted their emotional well-being.

A cycle of objectification

The process by which sexual objectification is psychologically harmful to women was [first described by psychologists Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts](#) in the mid-1990s.

According to this theory, when women are treated as objects, they momentarily view their own bodies from the perspective of the person objectifying them. In turn, they become preoccupied with their physical appearance and sexual value to others.

This process of "self-objectification" leads women to experience unpleasant feelings such as shame and anxiety. If repeated, it can eventually lead to long-term psychological harm.

Despite [hundreds of studies](#) on the psychology of sexual objectification, convincing evidence of the process described by Fredrickson and Roberts has been lacking until now.

We believe [our research](#), conducted with colleagues in the United States, is the first to demonstrate that when women are exposed to sexually

objectifying events in their [everyday lives](#), they become more preoccupied with their physical appearance.

This, in turn, leads to increased negative emotions like anxiety, anger, embarrassment and shame.

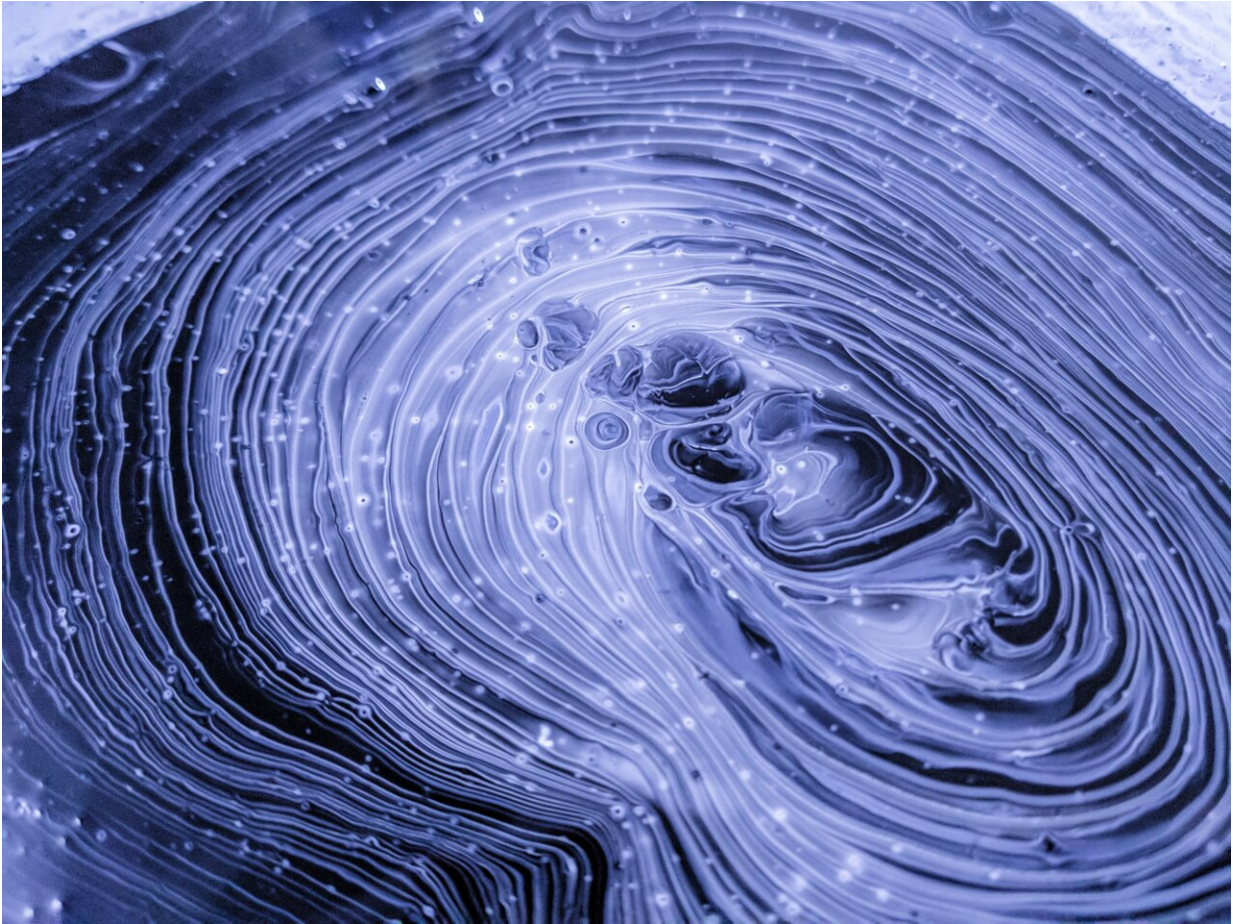
Our research

We asked 268 women aged 18 to 46 in Melbourne and St Louis (in the US) to install an app on their smartphones.

Several times each day, the app prompted them to rate their emotions, how preoccupied they were with their physical appearance (a measure of self-objectification), and whether they had recently been targeted by sexually objectifying behaviour—or had witnessed such treatment of other women.

Using smartphones to track women's everyday experiences of sexual objectification has several advantages over other approaches used in most previous objectification research.

First, we can be sure we captured "real world" examples of sexual objectification rather than [artificial scenarios that may not represent life outside the lab](#).



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Second, instead of relying on [potentially unreliable memories of past events and feelings](#) recorded in surveys or journals, by using frequent smartphone surveys we could gather more accurate "real time" reports of sexual objectification.

Finally, repeatedly sampling women's daily experiences enabled us to observe the psychological processes triggered by sexual objectification.

What we found

More than 65% of women in our study were personally targeted by sexually objectifying behaviour at least once during the monitoring period. This might have included being ogled, catcalled or whistled at.

Our findings were consistent with Fredrickson and Roberts's theory: women reported being preoccupied with their physical appearance roughly 40% more when they had recently been targeted by sexually objectifying behaviours, compared to when they had not.

Importantly, these momentary spikes in self-objectification predicted subsequent increases in women's negative emotions, particularly feelings of shame and embarrassment.

Although these increases were small, they were reliable, and appear to be indirectly caused by exposure to sexually objectifying behaviours.

Women may think about their appearance independent of experiencing sexual objectification. Interestingly, we found when women self-objectified, they sometimes reported feeling slightly happier and more confident.

So when women think about themselves in an objectified manner, they can feel both positive and negative emotions. But self-objectification that arises as a result of being objectified by someone else appears to have an exclusively negative impact on emotions.

It's important to note that in our results, experiencing sexual objectification on its own didn't directly lead to increases in women's negative feelings. Rather, the harmful effects of sexual objectification occurred when it resulted in women objectifying themselves.

Seeing other women objectified

Our participants reported witnessing the objectification of other women on average four times during the week-long study period.

Witnessing the objectification of other women was also followed by reliable (albeit weaker) increases in self-objectification, with similar negative downstream consequences for emotional well-being.

Just as [passive smoking is harmful to non-smokers](#), second-hand exposure to sexual [objectification](#) may reduce the emotional well-being of women, even if they are rarely or never objectified themselves.

Overall, our study [confirms previous research](#) showing [sexual objectification](#) of women remains relatively common.

But importantly, we've shown these everyday objectifying experiences are not as innocuous as they may seem. Though subtle, the indirect emotional effects of objectifying treatment may accumulate over time into more serious psychological harm for women.

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