

'Smile pretty and watch your back': The real impact of sexual objectification

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Whether it's an inappropriate comment in the workplace or a catcall from a passing car, sexual objectification of women can cause anxiety about personal safety, hypervigilance toward appearance and severe

threats to overall well-being.

As part of an effort to quell the rise of this global phenomenon, an international study led by Western University is providing the tools necessary to properly explore and understand these mental—and potentially physical—harms to women.

For the study, Rachel Calogero, a Western professor who specializes in social and personality psychology, and her collaborators developed a new research tool that confirmed the proposed links between experiences of [sexual objectification](#) and feeling anxious about [personal safety](#).

"These experiences accumulate over time and create worry and concern about being harmed. Sexual [objectification](#) not only carries with it the threat of physical harm but also the violation of personal boundaries," said Calogero, who collaborated with researchers at Western, University of Kent, The Ohio State University and Colorado College.

The researchers developed a tool consisting of eight questions about feelings of personal safety in an individual's everyday environment. It helps researchers, like Calogero, identify the degree of personal safety anxiety experiences across different groups of people and in what contexts it is magnified or muted.

"This tool gives us a better understanding of the extent to which sociocultural factors like sexual objectification end up shaping and limiting how women can safely live their lives," says Psychology professor Rachel Calogero.

The study is based in large part on objectification theory, which was developed in the 1990s, to explain how routine and unwanted sexual objectification affects women's psychological, emotional, and physical well-being. According to Calogero, this theory proposes recurrent sexual

objectification of women through interpersonal (sexualized appearance commentary, groping, ogling) and media (objectified portrayals of women in film, TV and literature) encounters can lead women to view themselves more as sexual objects..

"Women become hypervigilant about their appearance and expect to be judged based on how they look, which can have a number of negative consequences over time. More than two decades of research supports the connection between recurrent sexual objectification and poorer mental health in women," said Calogero, citing eating disorders and depression as examples of potential impacts on well-being.

In addition to making women more worried and concerned about their appearance, the theory proposes that being sexually objectified also increases women's worry and concern about their safety, because sexual objectification in all its forms carries the potential for physical harm with the extreme end of the sexual objectification continuum being assault and rape.

For the study, Calogero and her colleagues surveyed women and men based in North America using a variety of measures that have been validated to assess experiences of sexual objectification, subjective well-being, and mental health. Across multiple independent studies, more frequent experiences of sexual objectification predicted more personal safety anxiety in women, which was linked to more engagement in precautionary behaviors and restricting their movement to stay safe.

Calogero says the findings suggest that men experience personal safety anxiety as well but not to the same degree or in the same way as women.

"The statistical modeling suggests that men's personal safety anxiety may actually look different than women's when they do experience it," said Calogero. "It would be important to examine what sociocultural contexts

and forces may be operating uniquely for men in relation to their personal safety anxiety. It is also important to note our samples were predominantly white, cisgender, heterosexual [women](#) and men, which means the findings are limited to these populations at the moment."

Calogero expects future studies will include more diverse samples in order to understand whether or not these findings map onto the [safety anxiety](#) experiences of other groups and how it manifests.

The findings, not previously directly proven, were recently published by *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in a study titled "Smile Pretty and Watch Your Back: Personal Safety Anxiety and Vigilance in Objectification Theory."

More information: Rachel M. Calogero et al. Smile pretty and watch your back: Personal safety anxiety and vigilance in objectification theory., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/pspi0000344](#)

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