

Objectification of women results in lack of empathy

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Sexualized representations, especially the emphasis of secondary sexual characteristics, can change the way we perceive an individual. Credit: Sandro Botticelli

Sexualized representations, especially the emphasis of secondary sexual characteristics, can change the way we perceive an individual. An international team of researchers led by Giorgia Silani from the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Vienna has shown that empathic feelings and brain responses are reduced when we observe the emotions of sexualized women. The results of the study were recently published in the renowned scientific journal *Cortex*.

The way we appear, the way we look, has always been a crucial element in every social interaction, romantic or not. The use of sexualized representations of the individual, with a consequent emphasis on sexual body parts, is, especially in western society, a common way to induce emotions (especially pleasure) with the goal to increase the hedonic value of the associated object (see everyday media advertising). But what are the consequences of such sexualized representation? Social psychology has extensively studied the phenomenon, and concluded that sexualization (or sexual objectification) affects the

way we perceive other people, in that it strips them of certain human attributes, such as a moral sense or the capacity to responsibly plan one's actions. Social psychology also suggests that we perceive differently the emotions expressed by objectified vs. non-objectified individuals.

A study recently published in *Cortex*, and led by Giorgia Silani from the University of Vienna, shows that observers have less empathy for sexually objectified women, meaning a diminished capacity to feel and recognize their emotions. This research was carried out in collaboration with Carlotta Cogoni, the first author, from the International School for Advanced Studies (SISSA-ISAS) in Trieste and the Department of Life Sciences of the University of Trento, and Andrea Carnaghi from the University of Trieste. "The results suggests that the underlying mechanism may be a reduced activation of the brain's empathy network," says Giorgia Silani.

The Study

While measuring the brain activity of male and female participants with [functional magnetic resonance](#) imaging, Cogoni and colleagues elicited negative and positive emotions using a computer controlled ball-tossing task involving situations of inclusion and exclusion from the game. During the game, empathic reactions (in terms of both subjective explicit reports and objective brain activation) were measured toward two different targets: sexually objectified women and non-objectified (personalized) women.

The scientists found that by simply modifying the type of clothes the actresses were wearing (i.e. with more or less visible body parts/skin), empathic feelings toward women portrayed in a sexually objectified fashion were significantly reduced compared to those shown in a personalized way. "This reduction in empathic feelings towards sexually objectified women was accompanied by

reduced activity in empathy related brain areas. This suggests that observers experienced a reduced capacity to share the sexualized [women's](#) emotions," explains Silani.

More information: Carlotta Cogoni et al. Reduced empathic responses for sexually objectified women: An fMRI investigation, *Cortex* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cortex.2017.11.020](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2017.11.020)

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