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The Sexualization–Objectification Link: Sexualization Affects the Way People See and Feel Toward Others

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Abstract

Recent research has examined the sexualization–objectification link (i.e., whether sexualized individuals are appraised as if they were objects rather than persons). This research has found that sexualized individuals are more likely to be processed and categorized as if they were objects and are also perceived as possessing fewer humanlike traits than nonsexualized individuals. In addition, sexualization prompts negative behaviors such as social exclusion. Altogether, these findings shed light on mechanisms that might underlie violence toward sexualized individuals.

Keywords

sexualization, objectification, configural processing, mentalization, empathy

Sexualization relates to an emphasis on sexual appearance, physical beauty, and sexual appeal to other people (American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007). Sexualization is widely present in mass media, and the frequency and intensity of the sexualization of both men and women in advertisements, on television, and on the Internet have increased over the decades (for a review, see Ward, 2016). For example, Hatton and Trautner (2011) examined *Rolling Stone* magazine covers over the past decades and found that sexualization of men and women (e.g., through nudity and sexual poses) increased over time. They also found that women are still more frequently portrayed in sexualized ways than men in advertisements.

Objectification theory proposes that sexualization in mass media is a main source of objectification of women, that is, that sexualization causes people to objectify them (i.e., to appraise them as bodies and sexual body parts and behave toward them as if they were objects; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Following the publication of this theory, most research throughout the next decade focused on the intrapersonal consequences of objectification (e.g., whether focusing on one's own physical appearance predicts physical and

mental health outcomes; e.g., body dissatisfaction; for a review, see Moradi & Huang, 2008). However, this line of research took for granted that sexualization is objectifying per se, that is, images of sexualized bodies are appraised as objects rather than as persons. At the beginning of the 2010s, researchers started examining this sexualization–objectification link. Here, we review findings stemming from the crossover of social-cognitive psychology and neuroscience that shed light on how sexualization affects the way people see, categorize, feel about, and behave toward others.

Sexualization Affects the Way People See Others

The first line of research we review in this article investigates the sexualization–objectification link through a process-focused lens (i.e., uncovering the cognitive

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processes underlying the perception and categorization of sexualized individuals as objects). Whether the human brain processes human faces and bodies differently from how it processes objects is one of the most vibrant topics in cognitive neuroscience. Using electroencephalography (EEG), a method that records brain activities evoked by stimuli with a temporal resolution on the order of milliseconds, studies have demonstrated that faces, bodies, and objects trigger the N170, a visual component occurring about 170 ms after stimulus onset in the occipitotemporal electrode sites (for a review, see de Gelder et al., 2010). However, human faces typically trigger larger N170s than human bodies, and human bodies typically trigger larger N170s than objects (de Gelder et al., 2010). Recent research has examined whether this component can be affected by the visibility of sexual body parts. Hietanen and Nummenmaa (2011) found that N170 amplitude increases linearly as a function of body nudity: Nude bodies triggered larger N170s than sexualized bodies (bodies wearing swimsuits), and sexualized bodies triggered larger N170s than nonsexualized bodies (fully clothed bodies). Sexualized (and naked) bodies are more arousing than nonsexualized bodies, and this difference is associated with larger N170s for the former than for the latter (for similar findings, see Alho, Salminen, Sams, Hietanen, & Nummenmaa, 2015; Feng, Wang, Wang, Gu, & Luo, 2012).

Moreover, there are well-known findings showing that human faces and bodies are typically processed configurally (as wholes), as if the focus is on the forest, whereas objects are typically processed analytically (as a set of features regardless of their configuration), as if the focus is on the trees (for a review, see de Gelder et al., 2010). On the basis of such findings, recent research has examined whether body sexualization affects configural body processing. The body-inversion paradigm, during which images of stimuli are presented in either upright positions or inverted positions, is often used to assess whether a given stimulus category is processed configurally or analytically. The premise here is that presenting a stimulus in an inverted position will impair the viewer's ability to rely on global, configural information (e.g., spatial relationships among the constituent features). So if picture inversion impairs the ability to visually process a given stimulus category, it is inferred that this stimulus category is processed configurally, whereas if picture inversion does not impair picture recognition, it is inferred that a stimulus category is processed less configurally and more analytically. Relatedly, EEG studies have found that disrupting configural body information through picture inversion is associated with larger N170s. For instance, inverted pictures of faces and bodies are typically associated with larger N170s than upright ones, which indicates

configural processing. This larger N170 reflects that more cognitive resources are needed to visually process these images, thereby indicating that these stimuli are processed configurally. In contrast, inverted and upright objects are associated with similar N170 amplitudes, which indicates analytic processing (for a review, see de Gelder et al., 2010).

Bernard, Rizzo, and colleagues (2018) used the body-inversion paradigm, during which participants viewed upright and inverted images of nonsexualized bodies, sexualized bodies, and objects. They found larger N170s for inverted nonsexualized bodies than for their upright counterparts, indicating that nonsexualized bodies were processed configurally. In contrast, for sexualized bodies and objects, similar N170 amplitudes were found for inverted and upright images. These results suggest that sexualized bodies were cognitively objectified: They were processed less configurally than nonsexualized bodies and more analytically in a way that resembles object processing (see Bernard, Content, Deltenre, & Colin, 2018, for consistent results using another EEG paradigm). Finally, a recent series of event-related-potential (ERP) studies examined the key drivers of cognitive objectification (Bernard et al., 2019). While recording the N170 in a body-inversion task, the researchers independently manipulated two core dimensions of sexualization: revealing clothing (whether a target is wearing revealing vs. less revealing clothing) and posture suggestiveness (whether a body posture is sexually connoted or not). The authors found that bodies with nonsuggestive postures were processed configurally, as indexed by larger N170s for inverted bodies than for upright bodies, regardless of clothing type or the degree of body asymmetry. In contrast, bodies in suggestive postures were processed less configurally and more analytically, as evidenced by similar N170s for inverted and upright bodies. These results thus suggest that the cognitive objectification of sexualized bodies is driven by posture suggestiveness and not by revealing clothing or body asymmetry.

Behavioral research using similar inversion paradigms has found converging results, with sexualized female bodies (e.g., Bernard, Gervais, Allen, Campomizzi, & Klein, 2012; Bernard, Gervais, Allen, Delmée, & Klein, 2015; Civile & Obhi, 2016) and sometimes sexualized male bodies (Cogoni, Carnaghi, Mitrovic, et al., 2018) processed less configurally and more analytically than nonsexualized bodies. Sexualization not only prompts an analytic focus on sexual body features but also diminishes the focus on the face. Research using an eye tracker, a device that allows one to measure the location and the duration of people's gaze when they view pictures, found that people looked at bodies of sexualized targets for more time and at their faces for less time

(Cogoni, Carnaghi, Mitrovic, et al., 2018; Nummenmaa, Hietanen, Santtila, & Hyönä, 2012). Another study found that as a result of such preferential looking, people were less likely to notice perceptual changes targeting faces than perceptual changes targeting parts of sexualized bodies (Andrighetto et al., 2019). It is also worth noting that research uncovered that priming low social power, reducing the visibility of sexual parts, and providing information about targets' personality can successfully counteract the cognitive objectification of sexualized bodies (Bernard et al., 2015; Civile & Obhi, 2016).

In addition, a recent EEG study provided neural evidence that sexualized targets are also categorized as objectlike. Vaes, Cristoforetti, Ruzzante, Cogoni, and Mazza (2019) used an oddball paradigm during which the P300 was recorded while participants viewed infrequent images of doll-like objects among a series of frequent images of human bodies that were either sexualized or not sexualized. The goal of that paradigm was to examine whether doll-like objects were categorized as different from human stimuli, which could be evidenced by an increased P300 when infrequent doll-like objects were presented within series of frequent human stimuli (i.e., an *oddball effect*). Vaes and colleagues found smaller oddball effects for images of sexualized women than for nonsexualized women, nonsexualized men, and sexualized men, indicating that sexualized women were more likely to be categorized as objectlike. Behavioral experiments found similar results: Sexualized women were less quickly associated with humanlike concepts and with agentic concepts than nonsexualized women (Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011; Vaes, Paladino, & Puvia, 2011).

Sexualization Changes the Way People Feel Toward Others

Humans tend to appraise the mental and affective states of other individuals to predict their actions and display appropriate behaviors toward them (Singer & Lamm, 2009). To attain this aim, people ascribe mental states (e.g., intention, emotions) to others, a process referred to as *mentalization* (Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008). A recent line of research has examined the effect of sexualization on mentalization. Specifically, this research addressed the sexualization–objectification link through a content-focused lens (i.e., whether people attribute less humanlike traits and more objectlike traits to sexualized individuals than to nonsexualized ones).

Behavioral research found that sexualized women are perceived as possessing less warmth, less competence, less mind, less moral status, and less agency (e.g., Bernard & Wollast, 2019; Gray, Knobe, Sheskin,

Bloom, & Barrett, 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010). Importantly, this dehumanizing effect of sexualization predicts the way people perceive suffering of women and how they behave toward them. When sexualized, rape victims and women suffering from intimate partner violence are perceived as being more responsible than nonsexualized women, and this effect is explained by diminished attributions of mental states and moral concern (Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013; Pacilli et al., 2017).

The recent cross-fertilization of theory and methods stemming from the social and neuroscience tradition has also helped to enable a fine-grained analysis of the underlying brain mechanisms involved in these effects. The interplay between sexualization and the brain networks involved in mentalization and empathic behaviors has been studied with functional MRI (fMRI). This method allows detection, with good spatial resolution but poor temporal resolution, of brain regions that are activated in response to a given phenomenon. Cikara et al. (2011) conducted an fMRI study in which participants viewed sexualized women and nonsexualized women while activations of the brain *mentalizing network* were recorded. This network comprises brain regions (e.g., the prefrontal cortex) that are typically activated when people make mental inferences about others or themselves but not when people view images of objects (for a meta-analysis, see Mar, 2011). Cikara and colleagues found that participants who held sexist attitudes showed reduced activation of the mentalizing network when watching pictures of sexualized women, but this pattern did not emerge when participants viewed images of nonsexualized women. These results thus suggest a lower mentalization of sexualized women.

Importantly, this lower activation of the brain mentalizing network triggered by sexualization is also associated with diminished empathic behaviors toward sexualized women. Empathy refers to a process whereby people experience the unique affective states of another person (i.e., what the other feels is mirrored in observers' feelings; Decety & Jackson, 2004). Cogoni, Carnaghi, and Silani (2018) analyzed the relationship between sexualization and empathic reactions at behavioral and neural levels. Cogoni and colleagues relied on a social-exclusion task (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000) during which participants witnessed sexualized and nonsexualized women being excluded from an interactive ball-tossing game. Participants' neural responses were recorded together with their explicit, self-reported empathic reactions. Results indicated that participants showed less empathic reactions for sexualized women than for nonsexualized women at the explicit level. At the neural level, brain areas involved in both empathy and mentalization were recruited to a lesser extent

when participants were presented with the social exclusion of sexualized women than of nonsexualized women. In sum, sexualization affects empathic responses toward women at both neural and explicit levels.

Conclusions

Recent research using a variety of methods, including EEG, fMRI, and implicit and explicit behavioral methods, has shown that sexualization of others influences the way people see, categorize, attribute mental states to, and behave toward them. It is worth noting that, to date, whether sexualization exclusively affects perceptions of women remains a matter of debate. Research has indeed revealed mixed findings, with effects emerging sometimes for female targets only (e.g., Bernard et al., 2012; Vaes et al., 2019) and sometimes for both men and women (e.g., Bernard et al., 2019; Cogoni, Carnaghi, & Silani, 2018). Given that the level of sexualization in the media is more pronounced for women than for men (Hatton & Trautner, 2011), it might be that the more pronounced effects for female targets are partly due to higher levels of sexualization in these stimuli sets. Research that used images of women and men that are fully matched in terms of sexualization indeed found that target sexualization influenced perceptions of both female and male targets (e.g., Bernard, Content, et al., 2018; Bernard et al., 2019). A complementary explanation would be that at early stages of person perception, sexualization affects the perceptions of both male and female targets, whereas social factors, such as target gender (Bernard et al., 2015) and social power (Civile & Obhi, 2016), are implicated in these effects at later stages of person perception.

An important goal for future research would be to better understand the links between visual processing, attribution of mind, and behaviors toward sexualized women. The research of Cogoni, Carnaghi, and Silani (2018) constitutes a step in that direction because it shows that sexualization triggers lower empathic responses at both neural and explicit levels. However, these findings do not speak to the links between piecemeal processing of sexualized bodies and the attribution of mind to them. To date, it appears that researchers have mostly investigated visual processing and mentalization as two independent phenomena. However, it might be that visually processing sexualized others as fragmented rather than whole bodies and attributing less mind to them are two interconnected phenomena (Bernard, Gervais, & Klein, 2018; Fincher, Tetlock, & Morris, 2017). Consistent with this possibility, other research has found that impairing configural face information through picture inversion is associated with

diminished ascriptions of humanness (Hugenberg et al., 2016; see also Fincher & Tetlock, 2016; Wilson, Young, Rule, & Hugenberg, 2018). Concerning the sexualization–objectification link, future research should examine whether lower configural processing of sexualized bodies predicts (a) lower attribution of mind and (b) negative attitudes and behaviors toward them. This research would improve our understanding of the interplay between body perception, impression formation, and behaviors while allowing researchers to identify potential interventions aimed at reducing violence toward sexualized individuals.

Recommended Reading

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- Nussbaum, M. C. (1995). Objectification. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 24, 249–291. doi:10.1111/j.1088-4963.1995.tb00032.x. Introduces the concept of objectification from a philosophical perspective.
- Papadaki, L. (2010). What is objectification? *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 7, 16–36. doi:10.1163/174046809X12544019606067. A review and discussion of philosophical perspectives on objectification proposed by prominent philosophers, including Immanuel Kant and contemporary feminist philosophers.

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