The Beast of Beauty Culture:
An Analysis of the Political Effects of Self-Objectification

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Abstract

The normalization of female objectification in American culture has given rise to self-objectification, the phenomenon of girls and women seeing themselves as objects of desire for others. Research in related social science fields has documented the negative effects of self-objectification on female mental health, sexuality, and attitudes and beliefs. This research examines the political effects of self-objectification and finds that it is negatively related to both internal and external political efficacy. The democratic implications of this finding are considered.

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the political effects of self-objectification, "a key process whereby girls [and women] learn to think of and treat their bodies as objects of others' desires" (Zurbriggen et al., 2007: 2). The recent advent of widespread self-objectification is linked to the normalization of female objectification in American society. Contrary to the idea that the sexual revolution and the third wave of feminism opened doors for women's representations in popular culture that they control to their benefit, the normalization, even embrace, of female objectification in the past decade has caused girls and women to internalize the male gaze to their own personal detriment. We begin this paper with an examination of the current state of women's objectification; a new era, characterized by consensual objectification on the part of women and the appropriation of supposed female agency for male pleasure in media images. The second part of this paper analyzes what we believe to be at the heart of this new environment of permissible widespread objectification: the rise of consumer culture in the United States in the latter part of the last century. Generations X and Y have been steeped in new consumer values, transferred through cradle-to-grave marketing, and they tend to commodify themselves and others to a greater extent than previous generations. Consumer values translate into acceptable objectification for both women and men.[1] The third section of this paper examines the rise of self-objectification, and the fourth section examines political effects.

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[1] Women's primary valuation is physical attractiveness, while societal norms prescribe that men are evaluated in terms of success and achievement. Therefore, increasing levels of objectification cannot affect men in the same way as women. We are not suggesting that the material basis for men's worth is laudable, but in terms of our analysis here, it does not necessitate objectification. Essentially, it is a consumer-product model in which men are the primary consumers and women the primary products. The secondary market that exploits for women's consumption has been considerably less lucrative and pervasive.

This research is unique in a number of ways. First, we are identifying what we believe is a new trend in acceptance of objectification of women among both men and women. This inductive finding is based on critical analysis and observation of popular culture in the past two decades. The second major contribution of this work is our identification of the new consumer culture as the culprit in inspiring this new trend of accepted objectification. Thirdly, this research extends the literature on self-objectification to include negative political effects.

Normalization of Woman's Objectification

Feminist scholars have studied the ubiquitous objectification of women for decades. Women are typically portrayed as mere objects or bodies in popular culture, and the implied subject – the consumer – is typically male (McKinnon, 1987; Dworkin, 1989). "Sexual objectification occurs when a woman's body is treated as an object (especially as an object that exists for the pleasure and use of others), and is illustrated interpersonally through gaze or 'checking out,' and in the representation of women in the media" (Slater and Tiggemann, 2002). The focus of research on this subject has typically been personal or interpersonal, that is, the effects of objectification on individuals and their relationships, sexual and otherwise. The spate of articles and books that appeared on the topic of objectification in the 1980s and early 1990s has slowed to a trickle, although research on objectification theory or self-objectification has surged in recent years (Roberts, 2004; Calogero, 2004; Muehlenkamp and Saris-Baglama, 2002; Slater and Tiggerman, 2002; Noll and Fredrickson, 1998; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Despite a diminishment of the heated debate on the subject in the academy, Nussbaum

(1995) notes that the term "objectification" has become a part of everyday vernacular, commonly used to critique popular culture. We believe it is time to revive this topic given its evolution and new importance in contemporary American culture. The objectification of girls/women is more omnipresent than ever before. The recent Take the Music Back campaign, organized by Black college women, is a response to the proliferation of female objectification in recent years (Arce, 2005). This campaign started at Spelman College where students successfully cancelled a scheduled performance by hip-hop performer Nelly, an artist who shows a man swiping a credit card through a woman's buttocks in one of his videos. But perhaps more pressing is younger women's embrace of their object status, and the broad misperception that it is empowering. These topics are addressed in turn.

The phenomenon of "consensual" objectification, the first characteristic of the new era of objectification, is likely apparent to professors and others who spend a significant amount of time with Generation Y. The American Psychological Association (APA) recently published the results of studies on the sexualization of young girls and the resultant negative consequences. Girls as young as seven are exposed to clothing, toys, music, youth magazines and television programs laden with suggestive sexual imagery and slogans (Zurbriggen et. al, 2007). The constant barrage of popular culture images that normalizes the objectification of young girls and women has driven many girls to adopt an objectified status prior even to their own sexual maturity. Starting in the mid-1990s, young women noticeably started embracing their status as sexual objects in a way that previous generations had not.

"Consensual" objectification it perhaps most evident in the popularity of clothing with lettering placed over the breasts and buttocks, giving permission to gaze; in droves of young women sporting Playboy and similar shirts; in the prevalence of bare midriffs; and in female Olympians posing for "men's" magazines, to name a few examples. The recent and intense popularity of soft-core pornography in mainstream "men's" magazines such as Maxim, For Him Magazine (FHM), and Razor, indicates young men's willingness to embrace "consensual" objectification as well. On one hand, it's interesting to see young women displaying flagrant sexuality in ways they would never have done a generation ago. On the other hand, given knowledge of the larger social context of their actions, consensual objectification appears plainly as a tired reification of the gendered subject/object hierarchy. Figure 1 illustrates a popular new craze in "consensual" objectification of young women wearing attire that celebrates their highly sexualized object status.

Figure 1: Celebrating Object Status

www.prickwear.com

www.prickwear.com

Male objectification is also on the rise in our burgeoning consumer society

(Thompson, 2000), but it is still fairly unusual and often shunned by its targets. The fact

that some male sex symbols are publicly uncomfortable with their objectified status

speaks to a difference in how men and women are positioned vis-à-vis "consensual"

objectification. For example, in the late 1980s, singer and former Wham! member,

George Michael, was able to decide not to appear in his own music videos because he

was tired of being a sex object for teenage girls. Instead, he substituted barely-clothed

supermodels to lip-synch his songs. In the same vein, in a March, 2001 *Cosmopolitan*

interview, actor Rob Lowe celebrated no longer being a sexually objectified heartthrob at

age 36. Concerning his heartthrob status, Lowe stated, "It's the kind of mayhem and

frenzy that hot new guys get. It's bizarre, euphoric, and wonderful for a brief period of

time." (To get the full impact of this statement, imagine these words coming from

Britney Spears' mouth.) Actor Johnny Depp went to extremes to escape being a sex

symbol (and thus not a "real" actor) during his stint with the television show 21 Jumpstreet. Depp dressed in strange clothes and wandered the set "speaking in tongues" in failed attempts to get out of his contract (Tyrangiel, 2004). Simply put, the different meanings implied by the labels "actor" and "actress" reflect the fact that women's primary status in movies is as objects to be acted/ "actored" upon by (male) subjects.

The disconnect between men and objectification is perhaps most evidenced by the fact that male bodies do not sell as well as female. *Vanity Fair* sales dropped significantly at the end of 2004 because the magazine featured three covers in a row with male faces – Jude Law, Johnny Depp, and Leonardo DiCaprio. According to the editor, "the simple fact is that women tend to sell better than men on our covers" (Miller, 2005). Despite their superstar status as supposed sex symbols, these men are simply not consumed in the same way as their female celebrity counterparts.

The second major characteristic of the new era of objectification is the idea that it is empowering for girls/women. Sullivan (1999) examines the case of soccer superstar Brandi Chastain ripping off her shirt after scoring the winning goal at the 1999 Women's World Cup in front of 90,000 cheering fans, and concludes that this was good for Chastain and women in general. "All power to her . . . Perhaps the booters' out-front sexuality will prompt all their come-lately fans – girls and boys both – to reconsider what constitutes healthy, full-bodied femininity" (64). Through four structured focus groups with the same twelve students in attendance, we confirmed our suspicions that young women in general do perceive their sexual object status as empowering, especially if they are attractive. As one young woman stated, "I am in control if a guy is looking at me. He's giving me attention, and this gives me power over him." Given the power

differential implicit in the subject/object hierarchy, however, the real power lies with men who are raised believing that they are expected and entitled to consume women as objects in media and "real life," not the objects themselves. One might think that these women are in the position of suppliers who can choose where they deliver their products, but the product they are delivering is their body. The reduction of a human being from subject to object is not logically empowering.

Women's apparent agency through sexualized objectification has been appropriated as a marketing tool to appeal to both men and women. The ad in Figure 2 below for the movie "Iron Jawed Angels," an HBO film about women gaining the right to vote, demonstrates that even seemingly feminist popular culture uses women as bodies to sell products. The nude woman on the poster is literally draped in an American flag. The surprising mix of a bare back marked with "votes for women" is almost comical in its contradiction; the underlying implication being that women gained power through suffrage, but they are still objects; in this case, a bare back. This headless woman is striking a sexualized, vulnerable position, perhaps in an effort to appeal to an audience that might otherwise be threatened with the movie's content. Even the title is an oxymoron that combines "iron jawed" empowerment with the considerably more multivalent term "angels," which simultaneously means "beauties," "children," and "deliverers."

Figure 2: Advertisement for Iron Jawed Angels, an HBO Movie (Baby Got Back)
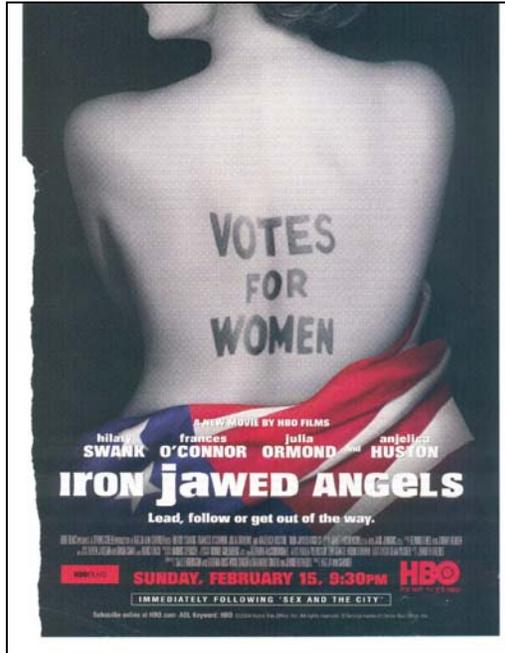
A disturbing trend of appropriating female agency and power for male pleasure is prominent in films from the past ten years. Moviemakers who have co-opted the ideals of self-identification and authentication from the most recent feminist movement have contributed to the proliferation of woman-as-body. One prominent brand of contemporary female protagonist is strong, autonomous, independent, and able to "kick ass" and kill with the best of them. She often has superhuman powers but, bottom-line, her very existence serves the pleasure of men. In fact, we posit that because she now has additional positive attributes, objectification is heightened, and she has become the ultimate Fighting Fuck-Toy (FF-T). Her autonomy spills over into presentations of consensual hypersexuality that allow filmmakers to unabashedly present female characters as sex objects in ways that would have previously been thought of as offensive, ergo, vinegar as wine. The evidence of the normalization of women's

objectification can be found around every corner of popular culture, and we posit that this shift has been enabled by the rise of consumer culture, the topic of the next section.

Consumer Culture

Historian Gary Cross defines consumerism as "the belief that goods give meaning to individuals and their roles in society" (2000:2). The new consumer society that has surfaced in recent decades has made it difficult to distinguish between citizen and consumer roles in public life (Bennet and Entman, 2001). Americans think of personal, group, and even national identity in terms of shared experiences as consumers; our worldview is shaped in the form of a consumer lens. Consumer society has mainstreamed advertising in our lives and shifted our values, both of which explain new levels and acceptance of female objectification. Simply put, we see and thus consume more female bodies than ever before, and younger generations are more comfortable objectifying and commodifying other human beings because of their new citizen-consumer outlook. Each of these arguments is discussed in turn.

The metastization and normalization of women as bodies in American culture is the result of both a pervasive use of their bodies in advertising and entertainment (Kilbourne, 1978, 2000) enabled by technology and the acceptance of advertising as a part of the "information" age. With the proliferation of franchises, cable stations and programming, television shows, video games, fashion magazines, web-browsing and on-line shopping, video and DVD rentals and purchasing, and movies, almost everyone is accessible to marketers via some form of technology. The average American saw about 500 advertisements in 1971, but by 1997, the number had risen to approximately 3,000

per day (Shenk, 1997). "Each of us sees more ads alone in one year than people of 50 years ago did in an entire lifetime" (*DMNews Magazine*, 1997). What's more, the "bundling effect," or cross-fertilization where movie or television stars sell not only their films but fashion, magazines, product, airtime and consumer philosophy, enables marketers to reach consumers from multiple angles. Marketers and entertainment peddlers use woman-as-body/women's bodies as high-powered tools to sell everything from beer and detergent, to power and happiness. New technologies have enabled advertisers to get into every nook and cranny of American culture. It is not surprising that in this technologically fecund environment, female objectification has been normalized.

But we hypothesize that beyond simple ad numbers, objectification is also the result of a new set of consumer values that have surfaced in the latter half of the Twentieth Century. Consumerist society has brought some interesting baggage that is not easily left on the door stoop when it serves profit-oriented corporate interests. One piece of Samsonite is that the producer-citizen of the past has been supplanted by a new archetype, the citizen-consumer, and this new genus is characterized in varying degrees by specific attributes that set it apart from citizens of the past: A view of the world through a lens of exchange in which he or she is always on the receiving end, and accelerated entitlement in the producer-consumer relationship. The shift from producer-citizens ("what can I do for my country") to consumer-citizens ("what can my country and everyone else do for me?), has profoundly altered ways in which citizens relate to each other and institutions. Social connectedness and civic responsibility have been replaced by an exchange model of relations wherein people perceive the world as though

they are at the receiving end of an exchange. Indeed, this type of "consumer

empowerment" has increased dramatically in recent decades (Brobeck et al., 1997).

On its face, consumer entitlement may sound like a good thing, especially in an

age where consumer protection from corporate abuses has become a necessity, but the

issue is that the dominant mode of identity and human relations in America –

consumerism -- inherently dehumanizes. We have raised two generations – Xers and

Generation Y – who have been told almost their whole lives that they are the most

important people on the planet, and they deserve the products marketed to them like a

steady IV popular culture drip. This new mode of citizenship, amplified in these two

generations because they have been marketed to as overly-entitled consumers from cradle

to grave, has garnered some less than positive descriptions, including the "Mc

Generation," the "Culture of Narcissism," and the "Inner Directeds" (Ray, 1997: 56). A

recent study by Jean Twange of San Diego State University confirms that the college

students of today are more narcissistic and self-centered that previous generations, and

narcissists have issues in their relationships with others that involve "game-playing,

dishonesty, and over-controlling and violent behaviors" (Crary, 2007: 2). These

generations have also been told that other human beings exist to fulfill their consumer

existence: That they are in exchanges with other human beings in which they view

themselves as being on the receiving end. Consumer values call for the commodification

of everything and everyone: everything, and everyone, has a price tag: fallow ground for

the normalization of female objectification.

Self-Objectification

        The normalization of women as objects in American society has many ill effects that researchers have documented in earnest in recent years, most notable, the advent of self-objectification. Objectification Theory, first presented by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), is a relatively new body of research focusing on the effects of living in a society where objectification of women and, increasingly, girls, is the norm.[2] According to Objectification Theory, girls and women internalize the male gaze and tend to view themselves through this lens as a result of pervasive sexual objectification. They are living what W.D. Dubois termed "double consciousness," a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (1903: 3). Dubois was using this term to describe the experience of Black Americans over 100 years ago, but his words cut to the chase of the contemporary female experience, living blind in a world that only allows women to see if they use the sight of others. Women with Body Dysmorphic Disorder, for example, actually see a different image than everyone else when they look in the mirror. Their mind has tricked them to replace their sight with a warped lens not their own. This is one of many health disorders that a disproportionate number of girls and women suffer from as a result of living in the fun house of their perception of the male gaze.

        Self-objectification is a female phenomenon. "[P]erhaps due to cultural images and cultural pressures, girls more readily develop a consistent response to objectified images of women (than boys do to objectified images of men) that relates to their feelings

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[2] For example, the November, 2001 edition of *Esquire* magazine promoted the objectification of "underage" girls in an article titled "Onward Kirsten Soldiers: Does your appreciation of Kirsten Dunst and the rest of today's incredibly talented, massively sexy (and underaged) crop of actresses make you a little, um, uncomfortable? Oh, grow up."

about their own bodies" (Murnen et. al., 2003: 1). Media images of women are the primary culprit in teaching girls to self-objectify. Images from television, video games, films, magazines, and many other sources disproportionately use female bodies to hock products, and the camera frame often focuses on female body parts rather than the whole picture in an objectifying manner (Kilbourne, 1994; Archer et. al., 1983). Girls gets the message that they should adopt the male gaze as little children. They learn early on that the holy grail of female existence is the production of a high-quality product (their body), while boys get the message that it is their job/right to consume these products. "Girls are taught to view their bodies as 'projects' that need work before they can attract others, whereas boys are likely to learn to view their bodies as tools to use to master the environment" (Murnen et. al., 2003 in Stephens, et. al., 1994).

Self-objectification comes at a high price for women in the form of disorders and other maladies of objectification. Scholarship on this subject is relatively new and sparse, but nonetheless compelling. Scholars who have measured the effects of self-objectification -- girls/women seeing themselves through the lens of the male gaze – find that this perspective is positively related to a variety of mental health disorders, including clinical unipolar depression (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Muehlenkamp and Saris-Baglama, 2002), "habitual body monitoring" leading to eating disorders (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Noll and Fredrickson, 1998; Muehlenkamp and Saris-Baglama, 2002), body shame, diet restriction, symptoms of anorexia and bulimic (Noll and Fredrickson, 1998), and "disgust and shame" about their menstrual cycles and other bodily functions (Roberts, 2004). "[S]elf-objectification has a direct relationship to restrictive eating, bulimic, and depressive symptoms" (Muehlenkamp and Saris-Baglama, 2002).

Furthermore, girls/women who are preoccupied with their appearance, known as "gaze anticipation," have more body shame and "social physique anxiety" (Calogero, 2004).

In short, girls and women who monitor themselves through the eyes of the male gaze (which many if not all girls/women do to some extent), constantly think about their bodies and physical presentation, deny themselves food, have anxiety about their bodies and bodily functions, and are likely to develop eating disorders and depression. Media images that present waif-thin women to emulate are contributing to these mental health issues by offering unreasonable standards of thinness, but the bigger issue here is the paradigm presented in media that women/girls are expected to place their value on how they stack up in the eyes of the male gaze. Even if societal standards of beauty were attainable by a majority of girls/women in America, the fact that their primary valuation is based on objectification still places them on the bottom of the subject(male)-object (female) binary.

One of the most interesting side effects of objectification and women's self-objectification is sexual dysfunction. According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), women who self-objectify are more likely to habitually monitor their bodies, and situations of nudity are cause for anxiety which can limit sexual activities and pleasure. Women who are preoccupied with how their bodies look in sexual positions are less engaged in the activity than they could be, and are probably less comfortable with more "revealing" sexual positions. We speculate that the stereotype of the "frigid" woman likely reflects hyper-self-objectification. Taking this finding to a larger scale, the cultural expectation that men will objectify women sexually diminishes the "quality" of sexual activities. We wonder if the trade-off of easy visual access to women's bodies is worth

diminished sexual pleasure in bed for men. The relationship between self-objectification

and sexual dysfunction is a ripe nexus for future research.

Scholars have also found a link between self-objectification and cognitive

functioning (Gapinski et al., 2003; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Cognitive

functioning is diminished among girls/women who self-objectify because their attention

is partially dedicated to body monitoring. "Self-objectification diverts attention inward,

with women monitoring their own bodies as a reaction to (or in anticipation of) the

sexually objectifying gaze of others" (Gapinski et. al., 2003: 377). Two creative studies

assessed the performance of two groups of women on a math exam – one group in

swimsuits and the other in sweaters (Fredrickson et al.,1998; Gapinski et al., 2003). The

randomly-selected group wearing swimsuits performed significantly worse on the exam

than their peers in sweaters in both the original and replication study. This finding

suggests that when girls/women are engaged in body monitoring, their ability to think at a

high level is reduced. Since most women self-objectify frequently, we posit that female

performance overall in work and other situations requiring high-order mental processing

is lower than it would otherwise be sans the societal norms of objectification.

Not surprisingly, girls/women who self-objectify have lower self-esteem than

others (Murnen, 2003; Strelan, 2003). Murnen et al. (2003) tested this link among

elementary school girls by showing them pictures of objectified women and asking them

to respond to the pictures. Girls who consistently rejected pictures showing female

objectification were found to have higher self-esteem than other girls. Strelan (2003)

finds that self-objectification is negatively related to body satisfaction and self-esteem. It

is also linked to lower personal efficacy, "the belief in one's own capability" (Gapinski et

al., 2003: 378). Bandura (1997) finds that individuals with higher efficacy are more successful and healthier than people with lower efficacy. The norm of female objectification in American society, displayed in every corner of popular culture, suppresses women's success because so many girls/women internalize this norm and engage in double consciousness.

Along these lines, we anticipate finding that women who self-objectify also lack political efficacy, or the belief that their potential political action will have an impact upon the political process. It seems logical that, if women who self-objectify lack self-esteem in general, this will affect their confidence to effectuate change in the political realm. Political efficacy is an important factor in a functioning democracy given that it has been linked to electoral participation. Simply put, citizens with higher political efficacy are more likely to vote and engage in other acts of civic participation (Clarke and Acock, 1989). On the flip side, citizens who lack political efficacy are not likely to participate in politics, and their concerns and interests are thus easier to overlook in resource allocation decisions.

To measure the effects of self-objectification on political efficacy, we test for both internal and external efficacy effects. Internal political efficacy refers to an individual's confidence to understand that participate effectively in politics, whereas external efficacy refers to beliefs about whether the government will respond effectively to the demands of its citizens (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei, 1991). These two concepts are different in that only internal political efficacy involves personal feelings of self-worth. When it comes to internal efficacy, we expect to find that

H$_1$:   Women who rate high on the self-objectification scale will exhibit **lower**

internal political efficacy than other women.

Given that self-objectification affects individual confidence rather than actual beliefs about government or government response, we anticipate finding that

H$_2$:   Women who rate high on the self-objectification scale will exhibit **similar**

levels of external political efficacy than other women.

The next section describes the survey data and methods used to test these hypotheses. The following section details the findings.

Data and Methods

Survey data is used to test the effects of self-objectification on political efficacy. The Self-Objectification Database was generated through administration of a survey to students attending a small, liberal arts college in Southern California. A total of 126 students completed the College Experience Survey in the spring of 2006.[3] Surveys were administered to classes that were randomly selected from a complete listing of college courses offered. Thirty-three courses were selected, and 26 professors agreed to participate. Student research assistants who had participated in an extensive training session administered the surveys with a standard script for each class. A variety of

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[3] We took the liberty of not mentioning the terms "self-objectification" or "objectification" in the survey title or questions to avoid responses based on social desirability. We also included many non-germane questions to lead the respondent to think that the survey was truly measuring different aspects of their college experience. This level of deception was necessary given that survey responses likely would have been quite different had respondents known the true aim of the survey.

incentives were offered to encourage students to complete the survey, ranging from a raffle for free movie tickets to an I-Pod Shuffle. Virtually every student in attendance completed a survey, despite participation not being a requirement for winning a raffle prize. A copy of the questionnaire is located in Appendix A.

The self-objectification scale asks respondents to rank twelve body attributes in order of their importance. "It taps into how concerned respondents are with their own appearance without a judgmental or evaluative component" (Noll and Fredrickson, 1998). The scale contains two sub-scales – appearance-based and competence-based body attributes. Appearance-based measures include aspects such as physical attractiveness and sex appeal, whereas competence-based attributes include questions about energy level and stamina. The score for the appearance-based sub-scale is subtracted from the score for the competence-based sub-scale for an overall self-objectification score. With this population, the scale was then ranged from 0 (low self-objectification) to 58 (high self-objectification), with a mean score of 34.5 for women who completed the survey (n=71). The scale was then recoded by dividing the range into thirds to create three categories: low, medium, and high self-objectification. Table 1 shows the percentage of female respondents in each group.

Table 1: Rates of Self-Objectification

Self-Objectification	Percentage (n=71)
Low	29.6%
Medium	49.3%
High	21.1%

This table indicates that about half of the sample is in the middle range of self-objectification, while one-in-five female respondents can be considered high self-objectifiers.

Significant differences in rates of self-objectification surface in the sample with regard to race. Latinas report that highest average self-objectification scores (41.1) followed by White women (36.5), Black women (28.0), and Asian, Pacific Islander women (17.4) (p=.022). Differences are also found in terms of party affiliation, with Republican identification linked to higher self-objectification. Nineteen percent of female respondents who identify with the Democratic Party are high self-objectifiers compared to 25 percent of respondents who identify with the Republican Party (p=000). One possible explanation for this is the proclivity for Conservative women to embrace more traditionally feminine roles, including notions of "proper" female sexuality.

Also of note is a grade point average (GPA) difference in terms of self-objectification. Female students with low self-objectification self-report a GPA of 3.47, whereas students with medium and high self-objectification report GPAs of 3.36 and 3.11, respectively (p=.077). In other words, the more a female college student engages in self-objectification, the lower her GPA. When it comes to other demographic variables, differences were not found in terms of income, and questions of educational level, age, and sexual orientation did not vary enough to test for possible differences.

Our other primary variable of interest – political efficacy – was measured in the survey with seven standard questions from the American National Election Study; four measuring internal political efficacy, and three measuring external efficacy. Question wording for each item is included in the College Experience Survey, located in Appendix

A. Overall political efficacy scores in the sample ranged from 0 to 27, with a mean score of 15.7. Internal political efficacy scores in the sample ranged from 0 to 16, with a mean score of 8.6, while the external sub-scale ranged from 0 to 12, with a mean of 7.1. The next section examines the relationship between self-objectification and internal and external political efficacy.

Analysis and Findings

As H_1 indicates, we anticipate finding that respondents with high self-objectification exhibit lower rates of internal political efficacy than other respondents given their tendency to experience compromised self-esteem. This is tested by parsing the Internal Political Efficacy Subscale into three even categories, and crossing it with the Self-Objectification Scale (organized into two categories). As Table 2 shows, self-objectification is negatively linked to internal political efficacy.

Table 2: Self-Objectification and Internal Political Efficacy

	Internal Political Efficacy		
Self-Objectification	**Low**	**Medium**	**High**
Low & Medium	13%	68.5%	18.5%
High	33.3	56.7	10.0

This table indicates that one-third of the female respondents who rate high on the self-objectification scale experience low internal political efficacy, compared to only 13 of respondents who are not high self-objectifiers (p=076). Likewise, only 10 percent of

high self-objectifiers enjoy high internal political efficacy – half the rate of other respondents. In short, the more college-age women self-objectify, the less confidence they have that their actions have the potential to influence politics. **Therefore, H₁ is accepted**. We surmise that self-esteem in general is an intermediary variable in this relationship, although we are unable to test this with the available dataset.

As hypothesized above with H_2, we do not anticipate finding a link between self-objectification and external political efficacy because the latter variable does not reflect the internal confidence issues indicative of self-objectification. As Table 3 illustrates, our second hypothesis is not supported.

Table 3: Self-Objectification and External Political Efficacy

	External Political Efficacy		
Self-Objectification	**Low**	**Medium**	**High**
Low & Medium	21.4%	57.1%	21.4%
High	13.3	66.7	20.0

This table shows that high self-objectifiers and other respondents have approximately the same rates of high external political efficacy, yet, high self-objectifiers are much more likely to exhibit lower external political efficacy (21.4% compared to 13.3%). Therefore, it appears that self-objectification has a deflating effect on both internal and external political efficacy that requires further exploration. **Therefore, H₂ is rejected**.

The finding that college women who self-objectify at higher rates feel less political capable has important implications for the health of American democracy.

Researchers have identified a precipitous decline in political participation, starting in the 1950s, with each subsequent generation pulling a little further away from the political process (Putnam, 1995, 2000; Barber, 1989). At present, less than 40 percent of young people ages 18 to 24 turn out to vote in presidential elections in the last few decades, and the turnout in non-presidential years has been hovering around 20% (CIRCLE, 2007). Self-objectification appears to be yet another factor contributing to the separation of young people from the polis.

Conclusion

Women's objectification has become normalized and thus invisible in contemporary consumer culture, marked by an increasing emphasis on individual entitlement as consumers, visual representations, and accepted objectification and commodification of other people. Widespread acceptance of objectification leads to self-objectification, which has been linked to many negative outcomes for girls and women. As this study has shown, self-objectification also has a negative effect on internal and external political efficacy.

The objectification of girls and women ultimately has very negative consequences for the political realm when one considers the importance of public confidence and participation in their own governance. Benjamin Barber argues that "democracy can only survive as strong democracy, secured not by great leaders but by responsible, competent citizens" (1989: xvii). This requires active political participation on the part of the citizenry, what Barber terms "self-governance." Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1996) propound similar ideas when they write that "citizen participation is at the heart of

democracy. Indeed, democracy is unthinkable without the ability of citizens to participate freely in the governing process" (1). Without citizen participation, the "interests, preferences, and needs" of "the people" will not be communicated to elected officials. Self-objectification thus ultimately threatens the health of democracy in an unevenly gendered way that has serious implications for our future political world. Further research is needed to determine the intricacies of the relationship between self-objectification and political efficacy, and how this depressing effect can be remedied.

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College Experience Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this important survey. Your participation is *completely voluntary* – feel free to stop at any point. We would like your answers to remain anonymous, so please do not put your name anywhere on the survey. Thanks in advance for your honesty and objectivity.

The purpose of this survey is to gather information about typical student experiences in college. More specifically, we want to know how interested you are in media, what is important to you in terms of physical attributes, romantic relationships, sexual practices, ideas about physical attraction, and attitudes towards politics. This is a wide-ranging survey that will be used to better understand your day-to-day experiences.

Media Interest

1. How many hours of television did you watch in the last 7 days? (*Please circle the response that fits best.*)
> (1) 0 hours
> (2) 1 to 5 hours
> (3) 6 to 10 hours
> (4) More than 10 hours
> (9) Unsure

2. *Please check the box that fits best for each response.*

	Read Frequently	**Read on Occasion**	**Never Read**
A. *Cosmopolitan*	☐	☐	☐
B. *Glamour*	☐	☐	☐
C. *FHM*	☐	☐	☐
D. *Maxim*	☐	☐	☐
E. *Penthouse*	☐	☐	☐
F. *People*	☐	☐	☐
G. *Hustler*	☐	☐	☐
H. *Newsweek*	☐	☐	☐
I. *Playboy*	☐	☐	☐
J. *Playgirl*	☐	☐	☐
K. *Stuff*	☐	☐	☐
L. *Time*	☐	☐	☐
M. *U.S. News and World Report*	☐	☐	☐
N. *US Weekly*	☐	☐	☐
O. *Vogue*	☐	☐	☐

Physical Attributes and Attention

3. Now we would like to know how much importance you place on different aspects of your body. Please rank each of these characteristics in ascending order in terms of importance, from most important (rank = 1) to least importance (rank = 12). *Please use each number from 1 through 12 **only once**.*

a. Physical attractiveness _____
b. Muscular strength _____
c. Coloring _____
d. Physical coordination _____
e. Weight _____
f. Stamina _____
g. Sex appeal _____
h. Health _____
i. Measurements _____
j. Physical fitness _____
k. Muscle tone _____
l. Physical energy level _____

4. *Please check the box that fits best for each response.*

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
A. It's okay to "look as long as you don't touch" when you're in a relationship.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
B. Television goes too far in showing women in revealing clothing.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C. Women can effectively use their looks to get ahead in life.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
D. Everyone should be comfortable with other people "checking them out."	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
E. I feel powerful when I get attention for the way I look.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
F. People make too big a deal about girls baring their midriffs nowadays.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
G. I think it's cool when women like porn.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Physical Attraction

5. *Please check the box that first best for each response.*

How often do you …	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
A. "Cat call" people you are attracted to.	☐	☐	☐	☐
B. "Check out" people you are attracted to.	☐	☐	☐	☐
C. Wear clothing that has lettering on the butt.	☐	☐	☐	☐
D. Wear revealing clothing.	☐	☐	☐	☐
E. Make comments to other people about the body of a person you are attracted to.	☐	☐	☐	☐
F. Kiss someone of the same sex to get attention.	☐	☐	☐	☐
G. Visit a strip club.	☐	☐	☐	☐
H. Talk about liking porn with your friends.	☐	☐	☐	☐

Sexual Habits

Now we would like to know about the typical sexual experiences of college students. Please remember that your responses are *completely anonymous*. Honesty is greatly appreciated!

6. Please describe your most recent sexual partner. (*Please circle only one.*)
   (1) Stranger
   (2) Casual acquaintance
   (3) Close but not exclusive partner
   (4) Exclusive partner
   (8) Other (Please specify) _____

7. If you have had vaginal intercourse, did you use a condom the last time you had vaginal sex? (*Please circle only one*.)
   (1) Yes
   (2) No
   (3) Doesn't apply (Please specify)

   _____
   (9) Unsure

8. If you have had vaginal intercourse, the last time you did, what did you or your partner use as your primary method of pregnancy prevention? (*Please circle only one*.)
   (1) Nothing
   (2) Withdrawal
   (3) Condom, spermicide, IUD, or other contraceptive
   (4) Withdrawal and contraceptive
   (8) Other (Please specify)

   _____

9. How many women have you had vaginal, oral, or anal sex with in the past 12 months?
_____

10. How many men have you had vaginal, oral, or anal sex with in the past 12 months?
_____

11. Were you intoxicated the last time you had vaginal, oral, or anal sex?
    (1) Yes
    (2) No
    (9) Unsure

12. How many times have you had vaginal, oral, or anal sex in the past 12 months? (*Best estimate*) _____

Attitudes about Politics

Now we would like to shift gears a bit and ask you about your thoughts on politics.

13. *Please check the box that fits best for each response.*

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
A. I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
B. I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing the country.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C. I feel that I could do as good a job in public office as other people.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
D. I think that I am better informed about politics and government than other people.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
E. Public officials don't care much about what people like me think.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
F. People like me don't have any say about what the government does.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
G. Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't understand	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

what's going on.					

Attitudes about Competition

Now we would like to know your thoughts about competition with others, both inside the classroom and in everyday life.

14. *Please check the box that fits best for each response.*

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
A. I feel good about myself when I earn a higher grade than others on a paper.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
B. I often compare myself to people of the same sex.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C. I feel bad about myself when other people get praise from a professor and I do not.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
D. I feel like I am constantly in competition with people of the same sex.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
E. I often feel jealous of other people who get more attention for their looks.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
F. I feel bad about myself when I see an attractive celebrity of my sex in a magazine, movie, or on television.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
G. I feel good about myself when I complete an assignment before other students.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
H. I frequently "talk trash" about people of my same sex to my friends.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I. I feel bad about myself when I am around attractive people of my same sex.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
J. I feel good about myself when I talk more	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

than others in class.					

Background Information

Now we would like some information about your background to classify your answers.

15. What is your gender?
    (1) Male
    (2) Female

16. What is your current Grade Point Average (GPA)? _____

17. What is your age? _____

18. What is your sexual orientation?
    (1) Heterosexual
    (2) Homosexual
    (3) Bisexual
    (8) Other (Please Specify)
_____
    (9) Unsure

19. What is your race?
    (1) Black, African American
    (2) White, Caucasian
    (3) Spanish, Hispanic, Latino
    (4) Asian, Pacific Islander
    (5) American Indian
    (8) Other (Please specify)_____

20. What is your annual household income (all members of the household combined)?
    (1) Less than $10,000
    (2) $10,000 to $19,999
    (3) $20,000 to $29,999
    (4) $30,000 to $39,999
    (5) $40,000 to $49,000
    (6) $50,000 to $59,999
    (7) $60,000 to $70,000
    (8) More than $70,000
    (9) Unsure

21. What is your political party affiliation?
    (1) Strong Democrat
    (2) Leaning Democratic
    (3) Middle of the Road
    (3) Leaning Republican
    (5) Strong Republican
    (6) Other (Please Specify) _____
    (9) Unsure

22. Have you ever taken, or are you currently enrolled in, a course on gender or feminism?
    (1) Yes
    (2) No
    (3) Don't know

23. Do you consider yourself to be a feminist?
    (1) Yes
    (2) No
    (3) Don't Know

Thank you!

If you would like a copy of the results of this survey, please write your contact information below, TEAR THIS SHEET OFF OF THE SURVEY, and give this sheet to the person who is administering the survey.   It is important that this sheet be detached from your survey!

_____

_____

_____

_____