



## Verifying the Use of Dress in Objectification Research

Sharron J. Lennon, Indiana University, USA

Kim K. P. Johnson, University of Minnesota, USA

**Introduction.** Sexual objectification (hereafter *objectification*) occurs when someone is treated as an object for the sexual use of others, instead of as an independent decision-maker (APA, 2007); sexualization is a broader concept and includes sexual objectification (APA, 2007). The topic of objectification has generated interest among dress scholars (Lee & Johnson, 2009; Lennon, Zheng, & Fatnassi, 2016; Reddy-Best, Choi, & Park, 2018; Ridgway, 2018) and a few objectification scholars have acknowledged the role of clothing in facilitating (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005; Tiggemann & Andrew, 2012) or resisting objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Clothing is a subset of dress, defined as all modifications and supplements to the body (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). In this research we were interested in the extent to which dress in either or both forms (i.e., modification, supplement) had been used to operationalize objectification in experimental research. In addition, we wanted to assess whether rationales had been provided for using dress to operationalize objectification, if dress stimuli designed to evoke objectification were pretested, and if manipulation checks were performed to validate (verify) that such dress stimuli (used in experimental treatments) did in fact operationalize objectification.

**Theoretical Framework.** According to Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), girls and women living in media-saturated Western cultures are scrutinized, evaluated, and often objectified by others. They are objectified in social interaction (e.g., visual inspection), in media depictions of social interactions, and in media depictions of women as mere bodies and body parts. When women and girls are objectified by others (other-objectification) one outcome is self-objectification; they may internalize another's perspective and see themselves as objects to be evaluated primarily for their physical attributes (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005; Lindner, Tantleff-Dunn, & Jentsch, 2012).

**Literature Review.** Objectification has been experimentally operationalized in a variety of ways as an independent variable (Calogero, 2011) including manipulations of clothing and of bodies. For example, Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, and Twenge (1998) evoked self-objectification in women by having them don a swimsuit (vs. a sweater). Other-objectification has been evoked by having female athletes wear revealing clothing (Gurung & Chrouser, 2007) and by providing stimulus persons whose bodies matched the cultural ideal body type (Gervais, Vescio, & Allen, 2012), and by doing a combination of both (Holland & Haslam, 2013). Three research questions guided our research. RQ1: To what extent has dress been used in the research literature to evoke objectification? RQ2: To what extent have rationales been provided for the use of dress? RQ3: To what extent have manipulation checks and pretests been used?

**Method.** A database search was conducted using five keywords: objectification, experiment, dress, clothing, and body. We narrowed the search to refereed academic publications

and included articles from January 2000 through December 2018. After deleting articles that were not empirical (e.g., literature reviews, theory papers), 80 refereed empirical research articles containing the keywords were found. Fifty-eight articles reported one research study, 15 contained two research studies, six contained three research studies, and one reported six research studies. As a result, 80 research articles containing 112 studies were content analyzed. Two coders developed a coding scheme which was modified and adjusted during the coding process. Inter-coder agreement for each coded category was assessed and found to be acceptable ( $> .86$  for each coding category).

Results. Chi-square and descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. Ninety-one of the 112 studies were experiments. Of these, clothing attributes were manipulated to operationalize objectification in 32 studies and body attributes were manipulated in 28 studies. Of the 60 studies that manipulated dress, 57 assessed objectification as an outcome. Of those 57, six manipulated two levels of dress. In one experiment two clothing attributes were manipulated; in four studies one clothing attribute and one body attribute were manipulated, and in one study two body attributes were manipulated.

For RQ1, aspects of dress were often used in the operationalization of objectification. Dress was used in 64.4% of the studies (clothing attributes: 33.3%; body attributes: 31%). Chi-square analysis suggests that this pattern of results is unlikely due to chance,  $\chi^2(1) = 21.053, p < .0001$ . RQ2 results also show a pattern of results that is unlikely due to chance,  $\chi^2(2) = 11.325, p < .0001$ . Specifically, 40% of studies provided no rationale for their operationalization of objectification and 27% cited others' research but failed to provide a rationale. Only 14.4% actually provided a rationale for the use of dress as the means to operationalize objectification. For RQ3, analysis also revealed a pattern of results unlikely due to chance,  $\chi^2(3) = 27.987, p < .0001$ . Descriptive statistics revealed that 46.2% failed to conduct either a stimulus pretest or a manipulation check, 28.2% did only a manipulation check, and 18.9% only pretested their stimuli. Merely 3.3% conducted both a pretest and a manipulation check. The lack of stimulus pretesting and manipulation checking are serious deficits in this body of literature.

Conclusions, Recommendations, Limitations. Dress was used to manipulate objectification in a majority of the sample studies; yet, in many studies no justification for the use of dress was provided. A plurality of studies provided no manipulation check or pretest of their stimuli. These practices call into question the validity of findings reported since manipulation checks ensure that the independent variable has been varied effectively (Mutz & Pemantle, 2015) and pretests are necessary to determine how well treatments are manipulated and operationalized (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

In addition, numerous terms were used to describe the manipulations (e.g., sexy, provocative, objectified dress) without definitions; in a notable exception Loughnan, Haslam, Murnane, Vaes, Reynolds, and Suitner (2010) described their operationalization as varying the amount of skin displayed. As has been previously noted (Budesheim, 2011), clarity is needed in operationalizing and measuring objectification. Also by using the two-pronged definition of dress (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992) dress researchers can bring a new lens to objectification research. The study is limited by the keywords, databases, and time frame used.

## References

- American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2007). Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Retrieved from [www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html](http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html)
- Bhattacharjee, A. (2012). *Social science research: Principles, methods, and practices. Textbooks Collection*. 3. [http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/oa\\_textbooks/3](http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/oa_textbooks/3)
- Budesheim, T. L. (2011). Going out on a limb in an underdeveloped branch of objectification research, *Sex Roles*, 65(3-4), 165-172.
- Calogero, R. M. (2011). Operationalizing self-objectification: Assessment and related methodological issues. In Calogero, R. M., Tantleff-Dunn, S., & Thompson, J. K. (Ed.). *Self-objectification in women: Causes, consequences, and counteractions* (pp. 23-49). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. A. (1997). Objectification theory. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2), 173-206.
- Fredrickson, B. L., Roberts, T., Noll, S. M., Quinn, D. M., & Twenge, J. M. (1998). That swimsuit becomes you: Sex differences in self-objectification, restrained eating, and math performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(1), 269-284.
- Gervais, S. J., Vescio, T. K., & Allen, J. (2012). When are people interchangeable sexual objects? The effect of gender and body type on sexual fungibility. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 51(4), 499-513.
- Gurung, R. A., & Chrouser, C. J. (2007). Predicting objectification: Do provocative clothing and observer characteristics matter? *Sex Roles*, 57(1-2), 91-99.
- Holland, E., & Haslam, N. (2013). Worth the weight: The objectification of overweight versus thin targets. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 37 (3), 462-468.
- Lee, J., & Johnson, K. K. P. (2009). Factors related to engagement in risky appearance management. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 27(3), 163-178.
- Lennon, S. J., Zheng, Z., & Fatnassi, A. (2016). Women's revealing Halloween costumes: Other-objectification and sexualization. *Fashion and Textiles*, 3(1), 21-38.
- Lindner, D., Tantleff-Dunn, S., & Jentsch, F. (2012). Social comparison and the 'circle of objectification.' *Sex Roles*, 67(3-4), 222-235.
- Loughnan, S., Haslam, N., Murnane, T., Vaes, J., Reynolds, C., & Suitner, C. (2010). Objectification leads to depersonalization: The denial of mind and moral concern to objectified others. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 40(5), 709-717.
- Mutz, D., & Pemantle, R. (2015). Standards for experimental research: Encouraging a better understanding of experimental methods. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, 2, 192-215.
- Prichard, I., & Tiggemann, M. (2005). Objectification in fitness centers: Self-objectification, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating in aerobic instructors and aerobic participants. *Sex Roles*, 53(1-2), 19-28.

- Reddy-Best, K. L., Choi, E., & Park, H. (2018). Race, colorism, body size, body position, and sexiness: Critically analyzing women in fashion illustration textbooks. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 36 (4), 281-295.
- Ridgway, J. L. (2018). Before and after avatar exposure: The impact of body scanning technology on body satisfaction, mood, and appearance management. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 36 (2), 91-103.
- Roach-Higgins, M. E. & Eicher, J. (1992). Dress and identity. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 10 (4), 1-8.
- Strelan, P., & Hargreaves, D. (2005). Women who objectify other women: The vicious circle of objectification? *Sex Roles*, 52(9-10), 707-712.
- Tiggemann, M., & Andrew, R. (2012). Clothes make a difference: The role of self-objectification. *Sex Roles*, 66(9-10), 646-654.