EXPLORING THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION: A SEVEN NATIONS STUDY

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Exploring the role of culture in sexual objectification: A seven nations study

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Abstract

Sexual objectification – seeing or treating a person as a sexual object – has been the topic of considerable investigation. Building from a long-standing recognition of the potential importance of culture in sexual objectification, this paper focuses on the extent to which people in different parts of the world objectify themselves and others. We explored sexual objectification amongst 588 people in seven diverse nations (i.e., Australia, France, Italy, Japan, Korea, the USA, and the UK) and found that cultural norms are important predictors of self-objectification and objectification of others. We also found that women are more likely to objectify themselves and others than men.

Résumé

L’objectification sexuelle – la tendance à voir ou à traiter une personne comme un objet sexuel – a été l’objet de nombreuses études. Sur la base de l’importance reconnue du facteur culturel dans le phénomène d’objectification, ce papier s’intéresse à la mesure dans laquelle les hommes et femmes de différentes régions du monde s’auto-objectivent et objectivent autrui. Nous avons exploré cette question auprès de 588 personnes et avons trouvé que les normes culturelles sont des prédicteurs importants de l’auto-objectification et de l’objectification des autres. Nous avons également trouvé que les femmes sont plus susceptibles d’objectifier elles-mêmes et autrui que les hommes.

Key-words
Objectification, sexual objectification, self-objectification, culture, gender.

Mots-clés
Objectivation, objectivation sexuelle, auto-objectivation, culture, genre.
Cross-Cultural sexual objectification

As this special issue testifies, sexual objectification – viewing and treating a person as a sex object – is an important and growing topic of research. This research has explored both people’s tendency to objectify the self (self-objectification) and others (other-objectification). Whereas much research focuses on the processes and consequences of objectification, here we turn our attention to the impact of culture.

Culture and objectification

In their foundational paper on sexual objectification, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) began by observing that women’s bodies are culturally constructed: “Bodies exist within social and cultural contexts, and hence are also constructed through sociocultural practices and discourses” (p. 174). This claim is made in part to distinguish their approach from biological approaches to gender and the body, and it lays the foundation upon which objectification theory and research was built. In acknowledging that the body is a sociocultural construct, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) go on to caution that: “Although our goal is to theorize about sexual objectification as it applies to all women, we recognize that much of the empirical literature that we use to buttress our theorizing has overlooked diversity among women, focusing

India, Italy, Japan, Pakistan, the UK, and the USA). Participants completed standard measures of self- and other-objectification. The results revealed that culture did affect self- and other-objectification, with objectification emerging more robustly in Australia, Italy, the UK, and the USA than it did in India, Japan, and Pakistan. These findings help support theoretical claims that culture matters for sexual objectification. Future research directions are discussed.

almost exclusively on White, middle-class girls and women… Some caution is warranted when extracting from this uneven empirical base to understand how sexual objectification factors into the lives of diverse subgroups of women” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 175).

In this manner, we can see that culture is central to sexual objectification. Further, since the inception of the field there was awareness that relying on an uneven empirical base when making conclusions about diverse groups of women is problematic. It is precisely to this problem that we speak: to what extent may culture alter people’s tendency to objectify the self and others?

Objectifying the self and others

Research on objectification has focused on whether people objectify, how they do so, and the consequences of being objectified. It is now well established that self-objectification is associated with poorer physical health (Fiissel & Lafreniere, 2006; Muehlenkamp, Swanson, & Brausch, 2005; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005), poorer mental health (Muehlenkamp & Saris, 2002) – particularly increased depression (Miner-Rubino, Twenge, & Fredrickson, 2002) – sexual dysfunction (Roberts & Gettman, 2004; Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007), reduced intellectual performance (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Gay & Castano, 2010; Gervais, Vescio, & Allen, 2011), and poorer physical coordination (Fredrickson & Harrison, 2005). A comprehensive review of the literature by Moradi and Huang (2008) detailed the scope of this physical, mental, and social impairment. In short, self-objectification has a clear, considerable negative impact on women.

Although early work focused on women, it is now well established that men can both self-objectify (Hallsworth, Wade, & Tiggemann, 2005; Morry & Staska, 2001; Rohlinger, 2002; Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005a), and be the targets of objectification (Kozak, Frankenhauser, & Roberts, 2009). The content of male objectification appears to differ from women; for instance, men report more concern regarding muscle mass (Grieve & Helmick, 2008; Wagner Oehlhof, Musher-Ezenman, Neufeld, & Hauser,
2009). Further, the negative consequences of sexual objectification appear less robust for men (Morry & Staska, 2001; Saguy, Quinn, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2010), as might be expected given their generally lower rates of self-objectification (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005a). It appears that self-objectification affects both men and women, although the burden falls more heavily on women.

Self-objectification has been the focus of most sexual objectification research. The tendency to think of others as sexual objects has only recently received sustained interest. One line of research has looked at the dehumanizing consequences of objectification (Vaes, Loughnan, & Puvia, 2013). To the extent that sexual objectification entails a loss of humanity (Kant, 1797/1996, 1963; Nussbaum, 1995), objectifying other people should involve a type of dehumanization (we see dehumanization as a component or aspect of objectification, rather than a synonym; for further discussion, see Vaes et al., 2014). Research has shown that sexualized women are attributed less mind and moral standing (Gray, Knobe, Sheskin, Bloom, & Barrett, 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010; Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013) and that focusing on a woman’s body reduces her perceived humanity (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009). This dehumanization also occurs implicitly; people fail to readily associate sexually objectified women with human related words (Vaes, Paladino, & Puvia, 2011). Another approach has been to examine how people cognitively process others. Sexualized women are processed more similarly to objects than people (Bernard, Gervais, Allen, Campomizzi, & Klein, 2012), confused with similar others (Gervais, Vescio, & Allen, 2012), and have their parts better recalled than their whole bodies (Gervais, Vescio, Forster, Maass, & Suitner, 2012). These effects may arise from how people visually inspect sexualized women, focusing on the sexualized parts of their bodies (Gervais, Holland, & Dodds, 2013). In short, people can objectify others, resulting in changes to how they see, cogitate, humanize, and care about them.

The last decade has witnessed a flourishing of research interest in objectification. However, whilst we have paid careful attention to the consequences and processes of objectification, we have paid less attention to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) caution regarding the qualifying role of culture. This focus on consequences and
process – and relative neglect of culture – is reflected in the diversity of people tested in the current literature. In the most recent comprehensive review of self-objectification research, Moradi and Huang (2008) cite articles containing 59 studies on self-objectification. The gender and source breakdown of these studies is reported in Table 1. As can be clearly seen, the studies reflect a narrow cultural and gender sampling. American women alone accounted for 75% of participants in the self-objectification studies reviewed by Moradi and Huang (2008), despite representing 2.2% of the world’s population. Turning to other-objectification, all published studies we know of have employed Australian, American, British, Belgian, or Italian participants (e.g., Bernard et al., 2012; Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011; Gervais et al., 2013; Gervais et al., 2012; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Heflick, Goldenberg, Cooper, & Puvia, 2011; Holland & Haslam, 2013; Loughnan et al., 2010; Loughnan et al., 2013; Rudman & Mescher, 2012; Vaes et al., 2014; Vaes et al., 2011). In short, just like initial theorizing, prior research has “overlooked diversity among women” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p.175), and focused on a narrow sample of humanity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>Number of Studies</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants</th>
<th>% of female participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>10,079</td>
<td>89.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1,747</td>
<td>66.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>59.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>59</strong></td>
<td><strong>11,976</strong></td>
<td><strong>85.5%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This narrow sampling of participants is not unique to objectification research. Social psychologists typically sample from universities in developed, rich, democratic, Western nations (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Ultimately, this sampling is only problematic if sexual objectification is indeed culturally relative. Unfortunately, the existing research does not provide sufficient cultural variability to critically evaluate this claim. There is a long history in psychology of diverse sampling revealing cultural differences, including differences in how people perceive
and evaluate the self and others (for extensive reviews, see Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Henrich et al., 2010; Kitayama & Uskul, 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The current research helps build this diversity in objectification research by sampling from more diverse nations.

The current study

Since its inception, objectification research has recognized the importance of culture (cf. Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). However, whilst we have developed a deep understanding of processes and consequences, we have not paid as much attention to the impact of culture. The majority of evidence for objectification comes from Anglophone nations (e.g., Australia, the UK, the US), with the remainder primarily Western European (e.g., Belgium, Italy). In the current study, we sampled from seven diverse nations. We tested some traditional nations of objectification research (i.e., Australia, Italy, the UK, and the US), where we expected to replicate the established objectification effects. We also sampled from non-traditional nations (i.e., India, Japan, and Pakistan), allowing us to see whether the previously identified effects hold in these new nations.

Method

Participants

In total, 588 individuals participated; 279 males (47%) and 308 females (52%), with one participant not reporting a gender (US sample). For the demographics for each nation, see Table 2. Undergraduate students were recruited in all nations and completed the questionnaire either voluntarily or as part of their course requirements.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>Total Participants</th>
<th>% female</th>
<th>Mean Age</th>
<th>Age SD</th>
<th>Age range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>21.59</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>23.28</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>27.90</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>19.22</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>21.53</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>22.28</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>26.11</td>
<td>7.45</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total/Mean</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>23.19</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Four participants (1 Australian, 2 American, 1 Japanese) did not report their age.

**Materials and procedure**

Participants completed the study either alone (Italy, UK), in small groups (Australia, Japan, Pakistan), or in class (India, US). All questionnaires were translated and back-translated into the language at the site of testing. Standard English versions were employed in Australia, India, the UK, and the United States. Italian, Japanese, and Urdu translations were used in Italy, Japan, and Pakistan, respectively. The questionnaire booklet was divided into trait objectification and target objectification.

**Trait objectification.** Participants were asked to complete a standard self-objectification questionnaire (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). Participants rank ordered the extent to which ten body attributes are important for their physical self-concept. Half of the items are relatively objectifying (i.e., weight, sex appeal, firm/sculpted muscles, physical attractiveness, measurements) and half are not (i.e., physical coordination, health, strength, energy level, physical fitness). To create objectification values, objectification items and non-objectification items are independently summed, and then the non-objectification sum is subtracted from the objectification sum. Therefore, positive scores indicate a tendency to self-objectify and negative scores indicate a tendency away from objectification and towards body-competence and body-health. Given this rank ordering and summing approach, reliability could not be calculated.
Participants then completed the same scale rating women’s and men’s bodies. For both the female and male version of this questionnaire only the target differed; all items, rankings, and scoring remained the same. Previous work has successfully employed this scale to measure the objectification of men and women in general (Kozak et al., 2009; Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005b). Due to local ethics restrictions, we were unable to ask Indian participants to complete these scales. For all participants the first half of the booklet was identical.

*Target objectification.* The second section of the booklet contained an experimental manipulation, presented as an impression formation task. The first page contained an image and a short statement about the importance of impressions. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four colored images: sexualized man, non-sexualized man, sexualized woman, or non-sexualized woman (see Appendix). Sexualization was manipulated using attire, with sexualized men and women wearing swimwear, non-sexualized men and women wearing casual clothes. This approach allows us to separately examine sexualization and target gender. Analogous manipulations have been employed in previous research (Bernard et al., 2012; Gray et al., 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010). Participants were assigned to these conditions in equal numbers based on gender, meaning that each nation contained a saturated 2 (sexualized, non-sexualized) by 2 (target: male, female) by 2 (participant: male, female) quasi-experimental design. All models were ethnically similar to the participants. Due to local ethics restrictions we were not able to show Pakistanis sexualized images of the other gender. Accordingly, in the Pakistani sample, men only viewed men (sexualized and non-sexualized) and women only viewed women (sexualized and non-sexualized). This resulted in a non-saturated design for the Pakistani sample and uneven numbers of participants in the subsequent analysis. Although not ideal, this restriction was required to allow data collection. Participants provided target ratings in three domains: personality, mind, and moral concern.
Human uniqueness and valence

Personality was measured by asking participants to rate how much the target possessed twenty traits on a 7-point scale (1: much less than average; 7: much more than average: talkative, sociable, shy, quiet, moody, anxious, gentle, contented, trusting, generous, imaginative, curious, narrow-minded, conforming, organized, thorough, distractible, negligent, selfish, aggressive). These traits were also rated for human uniqueness and desirability (outlined below), allowing for an indirect measure of dehumanization and valence through the use of within-subjects correlations (outlined below). Although attributing a target less positive traits (low valence) is not a component of objectification, it will allow us to see how much people derogate sexualized others and allow us to partial the effect of valence from the effect of dehumanization.

Given the centrality of cultural differences to the current study, we wanted to ensure that our personality scale accurately measured human uniqueness and desirability in all cultures. At the end of the questionnaire, asked participants to rate the same set of twenty traits on how much they reflected human uniqueness (1=shared between humans and animals, 7=unique to humans – not shared with animals) and how desirable they were (1= not at all desirable, 7= extremely desirable). Then, we were able to compute within-subjects correlations which measured the extent to which the traits on which the target was rated were also considered part of human uniqueness and desirable, while statistically controlling for the other factor (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009). Note that this approach does not allow the calculation of reliability values.

Mind attribution and moral concern

Participants rated the frequency with which the target engages in eight mental activities selected to cover a range of simple and complex mental states. Ratings were made on a 7-point scale (1=hardly ever, 7=very frequently). Rational mind items included logic, planning, reasoning, and abstract thinking (Cronbach’s $\alpha=0.57$); emotional mind items included emotion, passion,
feeling, and desiring (Cronbach’s α=0.59). To measure moral concern for the target, participants completed four items. They reported i) how much the target deserves moral consideration and how bad they would feel if they ii) took advantage of the target, iii) heard the target had been treated unfairly, and iv) heard that the target had been hurt (1=not at all, 7=extremely; Cronbach’s α=0.78). All of these measures were based on existing objectification research (Loughnan et al., 2010; Loughnan et al., 2013).

After completing these tasks participants reported their demographics (i.e., age, gender, nationality). Following the completion of the questionnaire booklet participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results

The overwhelming majority of participants completed all measures. However, there was some missing data. Across the dependent variables, there was a total of 1.39% missing data, and missing data never rose above 2.6% for any given dependent variable. Participants were excluded from analyses when they generated missing data, resulting in slightly different degrees of freedom across dependent variables.

Trait-objectification

Self-objectification

To examine whether culture influenced self-objectification we employed a 2 (participant gender; male, female) x 7 (culture) ANOVA. Self-objectification significantly differed by culture, $F(6,569)=21.19$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2_p=0.183$, with a main effect of gender, $F(1,569)=14.85$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2_p=0.025$. These factors were qualified by a significant interaction, $F(6,569)=2.99$, $p=0.007$, $\eta^2_p=0.031$.

To understand the main effects, women ($M=-2.81$, $SD=0.66$) reported more self-objectification than men ($M=-6.50$, $SD=0.69$). Between nations, there was considerable variability, with mean
scores ranging from a low of -13.67 (SD=8.89) in India to a high of 3.28 (SD=13.22) in the UK (see Figure 1). Comparing between nations with a Bonferroni adjustment for seven analyses (α=0.007), the Anglophone nations did not differ (Australia, UK, US) and were all significantly higher than the other nations (p<0.001). Put simply, the traditional nations of self-objectification research all report high levels of self-objectification compared to the non-traditional nations (Figure 1).

To understand the interaction between gender and culture, we contrasted male and female participants’ self-objectification for each culture, using a Bonferroni adjustment for seven analyses (α=0.007). This revealed that men and women only differ in the UK, where woman (M=7.29, SD=13.00) objectified themselves more than men (M=-0.84, SD=12.26, p=0.002). In all other nations, there was no difference between the genders, p>0.007.

**Female-objectification**

To examine whether other-objectification also varies by culture, we explored general levels of objectification towards women and men, respectively. Focusing first on the objectification of women,
we used a 2 (participant gender; male, female) by 6 (culture)\textsuperscript{11} ANOVA. As with self-objectification, we found that female-objectification significantly differs by culture, $F(5, 486)=18.24, p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.158$, by participant gender, $F(1, 486)=8.45$, $p=0.004$, $\eta_p^2=0.017$, and interacted with participant gender, $F(1, 486)=3.44$, $p=0.005$, $\eta_p^2=0.034$.

Women ($M=8.49$, $SD=12.69$) objectify women more than men did ($M=5.60$, $SD=10.72$). Looking at the main effect of culture, scores ranged from a low of -2.73 ($SD=10.44$) amongst Pakistani participants to a high of 12.87 ($SD=10.84$) amongst UK participants. Comparing between nations with a Bonferroni adjustment for twenty-one comparisons ($\alpha=0.002$) revealed the major difference between nations being unusually low values in Pakistan – significantly below all nations, $p<0.001$ (Figure 1).

To unpack the interaction between gender and culture, we looked at differences between men and women in each culture separately, using a Bonferroni adjustment for six analyses ($\alpha=0.009$). This revealed a significant difference in the UK, with women ($M=16.56$, $SD=9.56$) objectifying women more than men did ($M=8.78$, $SD=10.80$), $p=0.002$. No other nation showed a significant difference between genders (Figure 1).

\textit{Male-objectification}

Turning to perceptions of men, we again used a 2 (participant gender; male, female) x 6 (culture)\textsuperscript{1} ANOVA. Levels of objectification significantly differed by culture, $F(5, 483)=27.34$, $p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.221$, with no main effect of participant gender, $F(1, 483)<1$, $p=0.80$, $\eta_p^2<0.001$, and a significant interaction, $F(5, 483)=3.22$, $p=0.007$, $\eta_p^2=0.032$.

Looking at the main effect of culture, scores ranged from a low of -12.16 ($SD=9.95$) amongst Japanese participants to a high of 4.67 ($SD=11.88$) amongst US participants. To compare between nations we ran all comparisons using a Bonferroni adjustment for twenty-one comparisons ($\alpha=0.002$). This revealed the major

\textsuperscript{11} Recall that due to local ethics restrictions, we were unable to collect some types of data from India (trait-objectification for male and female targets) and Pakistan (target-objectification for members of the opposite gender). This reduces the number of analyzable cultures in some instances.
difference between nations being unusually low values in Japan and Pakistan – significantly below all other nations, \( p \leq 0.002 \) (Figure 1).

To unpack the interaction between gender and culture, we looked at differences between men and women in each culture separately, using a Bonferroni adjustment for six analyses \((\alpha = 0.009)\). Once the Bonferroni adjustment was made, there were no significant effects within nations.

In sum, culture appears to play an important role in trait-objectification. An inspection of Figure 1 will reveal the considerable variability between cultures across self-objectification (range=10.25), female-objectification (range=10.60), and male-objectification (range=7.50). Looking between nations, we found that objectification was higher in the traditional nations of objectification research (Australia, US, UK), and lower – sometimes far lower – in non-traditional nations (Japan, India, Pakistan).

**Other-objectification: morality, humanness, and mind**

The same experimental approach was applied in seven different nations, yielding a non-saturated 2 (participant gender; male, female) x 2 (target gender; male, female) x 2 (sexualized, non-sexualized) design. For brevity, rather than report a series of 4-way 2x2x2x7 ANOVAs, we ran a simpler 2 (sexualization; sexualized, non-sexualized) x 7 (culture) ANOVA. If the main effects of culture and sexualization or their interaction were qualified by participant or target gender interactions, we report these analyses in the supplementary materials.

**Morality**

Exploring first attributions of moral standing, we calculated an average moral standing score from the four-item scale. An initial 2 (target condition; sexualized, non-sexualized) x 7 (culture) ANOVA was conducted. This revealed a main effect of sexualization, with participants attributing less moral concern to sexualized targets \((M = 4.78, SD = 1.32)\) compared with non-sexualized targets \((M = 4.98, SD = 1.24)\), \( F(1,572) = 4.35, p = 0.037, \eta_p^2 = 0.008 \). There was a main effect of culture, \( F(6,572) = 9.83, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.093 \).
To look at this effect, we compared all cultures with a Bonferroni adjustment for twenty-one comparisons (\(\alpha=0.002\)). Most significant effects emerged for Pakistani participants, who expressed significantly less moral concern for their same-sex target than Australia (\(p=0.001\)), UK (\(p<0.001\)), US (\(p<0.001\)), and Italian (\(p<0.001\)) participants. In addition to this, Japanese participants expressed significantly less concern in general than US (\(p<0.001\)) and Italian (\(p<0.001\)) participants. Finally, Indian participants cared significantly less than US participants (\(p<0.001\)).

These two factors did not significantly interact, \(F(6,572)=1.31, p=0.249, \eta_p^2=0.014\). Thus, we can see that although sexualization and culture both play a role in determining attribution of moral concern, the effects of sexualization identified in prior research and replicated here are not qualified by culture.

**Mind attribution**

Turning to mind attribution, we computed mean rational and emotional mind scores separately. A 2 (participant gender: male, female) x 7 (culture) ANOVA for emotional mind was conducted. This revealed no main effect of sexualization, \(F(1,571)<1, p=0.57, \eta_p^2<0.001\). There was a marginal effect of culture, \(F(6,571)=2.05, p=0.058, \eta_p^2=0.021\), and no interaction between the two factors, \(F(6,571)=1.46, p=0.19, \eta_p^2=0.015\). In short, attribution of emotional aspects of mind was uninfluenced by sexualization or culture.

For rational mind the same 2x7 ANOVA was conducted. This revealed a main effect of sexualization, such that sexualized people (\(M=3.80, SD=1.29\)) were attributed less rational mental attributes than non-sexualized people (\(M=4.13, SD=1.06\)), \(F(1,571)=13.32, p<0.001, \eta_p^2=0.023\). Likewise, there was a significant main effect of culture, \(F(6,571)=17.05, p<0.001, \eta_p^2=0.152\). These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, \(F(6,571)=2.76, p=0.012, \eta_p^2=0.028\). To unpack this interaction, we looked at the effect of sexualization in each culture separately, using a Bonferroni adjustment for seven comparisons (\(\alpha=0.007\)). This revealed that significant or marginal effects between sexualized and non-sexualized conditions in Australia (\(p=0.002\)), the UK (\(p=0.006\)), and Pakistan\(^1\) (\(p=0.008\)).
By contrast, there was no significant effect in Japan ($p=0.759$), India ($p=0.248$), Italy ($p=0.085$), and the US ($p=0.434$). In short, the effects of sexualization do hold in a multiple of samples; however culture plays an important role.

**Human uniqueness**

Exploring attributions of human uniqueness, we conducted the same 2x7 ANOVA. This revealed no main effect of sexualization condition, $F(1,559)<1$, $p=0.99$, $\eta_p^2<0.001$. There was, however, a main effect of culture, $F(6,559)=2.51$, $p=0.021$, $\eta_p^2=0.026$. There was no significant interaction, $F(6,559)<1$, $p=0.77$, $\eta_p^2=0.006$. To look at this effect, we compared all cultures with a Bonferroni adjustment for twenty-one comparisons ($\alpha=0.002$). This revealed a single significant effect, with US participants assigning less human uniqueness than Indian participants, $p=0.001$. In short, there was little evidence for effects of our manipulation or culture on attributions of human uniqueness.

**Valence**

Exploring attributions of valence, the same 2x7 ANOVA was conducted. There was a significant main effect of sexualization, such that sexualized targets were less associated with positive valence ($M=0.070$, $SD=0.40$) compared to non-sexualized targets ($M=0.295$, $SD=0.45$), $F(1,559)=42.03$, $p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.070$. Similarly, there was a main effect of culture, $F(1,559)=10.64$, $p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.102$. To look at this effect, we compared all cultures with a Bonferroni adjustment for twenty-one comparisons ($\alpha=0.002$). This revealed that the culture effect was primarily driven by generally low correlations between valence and target rating in the US and Pakistan compared to all other nations except Australia, $ps<0.001$. Finally, there was no significant interaction between sexualization and culture, $F(6,559)=1.28$, $p=0.263$, $\eta_p^2=0.014$. 
Discussion

Looking across the scope of these results, we can see that Fredrickson and Roberts were correct to highlight the important role of culture in sexual objectification. We will now summarize and discuss the effects for trait and target objectification, before proceeding to examine which cultural factors might help us explain this pattern of results.

**Trait objectification**

For self-objectification and the objectification of men and women at the trait level, we observed main effects of participant gender, culture, and interactions for all variables. This finding points to the important role that individual characteristics (e.g., gender) and broader social factors (e.g., culture) can play in constructing objectification.

Trait self-objectification has been the primary focus of previous research (Moradi & Huang, 2008). This study indicates that self-objectification is heavily influenced by culture. The three non-traditional nations (India, Japan, and Pakistan) report robustly lower levels of self-objectification than traditional nations of objectification research (Australia, Italy, the UK, and the US). It appears that people in those traditional nations are more prone to self-objectify and accordingly that prior research may have highlighted a particularly self-objectifying group of people.

Culture also plays an important role in the trait-objectification of men and women. Female objectification was typically high in the nations we tested. This result replicates previous findings that women are routinely sexually objectified (see Moradi & Huang, 2008). However, culture did play a critical role; Pakistani men reported lower levels of female objectification and Pakistani women show very low levels of objectification. A similar pattern of results emerges for male objectification, with the non-traditional nations of Japan and Pakistan reporting far lower levels of male objectification than the traditional nations. Thus, although there was a general consensus that women were objectified more than men, Pakistan and Japan serve to indicate that culture can qualify these broad effects.
Looking across the three targets of trait objectification (self, women, and men) suggests that objectification is simply more prevalent in the traditional nations of objectification research and is considerably less pronounced outside those nations. These lower levels of objectification outside of traditional nations of research may have implications for the robustly demonstrated association between self-objectification and poor physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Whether the consequences of self-objectification are reduced in non-traditional nations depends on whether the negative consequences are caused by relative or absolute self-objectification. If being relatively self-objectifying compared to your peers is linked to negative personal outcomes, the mean shift towards competence observed in non-Western nations may be inconsequential. By contrast, if absolute levels of self-objectification – giving primacy to appearance over competence and health – matter, then we may expect reduced personal and social consequences of self-objectification in non-traditional nations. Regardless of the links to negative consequences, this study has revealed for the first time an important cultural influence on people’s tendency to objectify themselves and others.

**Target objectification**

The role of culture in influencing people’s tendency to objectify specific sexualized and non-sexualized targets was more complex. For rational mind attribution and valence, culture qualified the effect of the sexualization manipulation; the dementalization and dislike of sexualized targets was stronger in traditional nations (e.g., Australia, the US) than in non-traditional nations (e.g., India, Japan). For moral concern, culture had a main effect but did not qualify the sexualization effect. Finally, for attributions of emotional mental states and human uniqueness, neither the manipulation nor culture played an important role. It seems that culture influences the extent to which sexualized people are seen as rational and possessing positive characteristics. Investigating this effect of culture, we often found that objectification was lower in non-traditional nations of objectification research. By contrast, it does not seem to effect the extent to which people care about sexualized others, and see them as emotional or human beings.
One notable finding from the other-objectification data was the general lack of higher order interactions. As a rule, most analyses produced significant main effects which were unqualified by interactions. Previous work has both found (Bernard et al., 2012) and failed to find (Loughnan et al., 2010) differences in objectification as a function of target gender. The current study is the largest study of other-objectification conducted to date. The failure to find robust, significant target gender interactions suggests that when individuals are sexualized they are typically objectified independent of their gender.

Just as target gender generally failed to qualify the impact of sexualization, so too did participant gender. Despite a clear impact of sexualization, the extent to which the image manipulation changed perceptions of mind, moral rights, and attitude was typically not influenced by the gender of the participant. It now appears clear based on this study and other recent work (Bernard et al., 2012; Loughnan et al., 2010; Loughnan et al., 2013) that the gender of the perceiver does not strongly qualify other-objectification. Rather, it seems that the reasons for objectification vary by gender. Men may objectify women when pursuing a sex goal (Vaes et al., 2011), whereas women objectify women because they might represent sexual competition (Puvia & Vaes, 2013) or represent a disliked subgroup (Vaes et al., 2011). In short, the current study provides limited evidence that gender – whether observer or observed – plays a role in determining sexual objectification.

**Implications**

This study has corroborated the notion that culture does matter when thinking about sexual objectification. This raises the question of why culture has these effects, or more precisely, what aspects of a culture will change the extent to which people objectify themselves and others?

These findings may indicate that norms regarding sexual expression may play a more central role in sexual objectification than previously realized. India, Japan, and Pakistan differ in many regards from the traditional nations of objectification research, however they typically displayed low levels of trait- and
other-objectification. One explanation may be that these nations promote strong norms against sexually objectifying other people, however this currently is an empirical question.

Engaging in sexual objectification – particularly female self-objectification – may elicit a strong negative reaction from other community members in certain cultures. Women in India and Pakistan may face severe physical maltreatment (including death) for sexually objectifying themselves. By contrast, in Japan social censure might involve negative appraisal or admonishment, powerful aversive motivators in a culture where shame plays an important regulatory function (Furukawa, Tangney, & Higashibara, 2012). In short, it may be that some cultures actively dissuaded objectification by the threat of public censure and violence. Regarding other-objectification, in cultures with strong religious prohibitions against sexually objectifying others, people may consider objectification to be immoral, perhaps indicative of an impure mind. This account is currently speculative; however an investigation of the association between norm internalization and sexual objectification may provide direct evidence for the role of norms.

**Future directions**

Where cultural differences emerge, the current study shows that people in non-traditional nations are less likely to express – but not necessarily engage in – sexual objectification. That is, the observation that Indian, Pakistani, and Japanese people express sexual objectification to a lesser extent than Westerners does not mean that they experience less objectification. Focusing on implicit or cognitive measures of objectification may address this shortcoming.

Although no studies to date have examined implicit self-objectification, it is relatively clear that such an approach could be adopted. Implicit self-humanization (O’Connor, Loughnan, & Haslam, 2008) research indicates that self-objectification might be measured implicitly. Work by Bernard et al. (2012), Gervais, Vescio, Forster et al. (2012), and Vaes et al. (2011) has recently shown that sexualized women can be implicitly dehumanized or that objectification can be measured non-verbally. A strong,
simple, language-free measure of objectification was recently demonstrated by Bernard and colleagues (2012). The ‘inversion effect’ employs a target matching paradigm to assess whether sexualized men and women are cognitively processed as people or objects. By examining levels of objectification without relying on questionnaire techniques, the tension between belief and public expression may be resolved. If the pattern of results reveal significant cognitive or implicit objectification, and non-significant explicit or questionnaire objectification, it seems likely that sexual objectification is culturally universal, but only expressed in certain cultures. By contrast, if both measures of objectification display an absence in some cultures, it would indicate that objectification itself is culturally relative.

Future research should also explore whether there could be different types of objectification involved across cultures. In India, for instance, women may pass from a paternal to a spousal possession after marriage (Nubile, 2002). Perhaps the objectification of Indian women would be more domestic than sexual. Addressing these possibilities in subsequent studies would allow us to both clarify whether there are different kinds of objectification (e.g., public versus private; sexual versus domestic) and the extent to which objectification may manifest in different ways in different cultures.

**Limitations**

There are several important limitations with the current work. The nations selected for the current study cover the major cultures of previous objectification research (Australia, Italy, the UK, the US) and three cultures which have received no previous attention (India, Japan, Pakistan). Although these samples provided a proof-of-concept for cultural approaches to objectification, they are hardly reflective of the diversity within the entire world. Additionally, differences between cultures might reflect differences in the translation and meaning of terms from English to other languages. Further, with only seven nations a multilevel model which might be able to test some of the mechanisms speculated here (e.g., social norms, media environment) cannot be constructed. A wider sampling of 15-20 nations would allow a more diverse, representative sample of nations and for a
multi-level model to be constructed. Further, it would allow us to consider the role of cultural values (e.g., individualism/collectivism), socioeconomic differences (e.g., wealth, equality), and religiosity.

We assessed human uniqueness attributions, not human nature attributions. It is clear that the objectified can be viewed as animal-like (Vaes et al., 2011), and the current study fits with this line of research. Future research should include measures of human nature to allow for a more complete comparison with previous research (see Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Heflick et al., 2011).

The current study employed an undergraduate student sample. This is common practice throughout psychology (Henrich et al., 2010). The current study generalizes from students to nations, and this generalization may be unwarranted. However, by selecting participants of a similar age, occupation, and educational degree, we have made it more difficult for national differences to emerge. Despite this, our data clearly show some cultural differences in sexual objectification. A more representative sample may find stronger effects of culture.

Our participants all rated members of the same ethnic group (e.g., Caucasian participants rated Caucasian targets, Japanese participant’s rated Japanese targets). Although ecological valid and culturally relevant, it leaves open the possibility that the cultural effects being observed are driven by the culture of the target and not the culture of the participant. For instance, it may be that Caucasian people are simply more objectified by everyone, regardless of whether the objectifier is Caucasian or non-Caucasian. Future research can overcome this limitation by having people view ethnic ingroup and ethnic outgroup members, to examine the potential intergroup dimension of objectification.

Finally, the method employed, particularly the trait-objectification method (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998), raises several potential limitations. First, as suggested by a reviewer, this body aspect rating task may be better suited to female respondents than male respondents. For instance, ‘strength’ is considered a body-competence trait in women, but might reasonably be considered
an objectifying attribute in men. Acknowledging that this might be the case, different interpretations of the measure should create differences between the genders, but not necessarily nations. Put simply, it could not explain cultural differences. Second, the trait measure of objectification was created and normed on western samples. As such, it may capture a specifically ‘Western’ form of objectification which does not reflect objectification in other parts of the world. Overcoming this potential limitation is an important aim for future research, and one which might be reached with the aid of implicit or automatic measures of objectification.

Conclusions

The current study represents an important step in our understanding of objectification. As Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) cautioned in their landmark paper, culture is important in conceptualizing sexual objectification. This paper has taken up their claim and sampled from a range of nations to directly explore the role of culture. In finding cultural differences, we hope that this study can open the door for a cultural approach to sexual objectification research.

References


Cross-Cultural sexual objectification


Saguy, T., Quinn, D., Dovidio, J., & Pratto, F. (2010). Interacting like a body: Objectification can lead women to narrow their


Appendix

Stimuli for between-subjects questionnaires in each nation. Originals presented in color. For stimuli, please contact the first author.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Indian/Pakistani</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
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<td><img src="image2" alt="Indian/Pakistani Men" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Japanese Men" /></td>
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<tr>
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<td><img src="image5" alt="Indian/Pakistani Women" /></td>
<td><img src="image6" alt="Japanese Women" /></td>
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CROSS-CULTURAL SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION