Objects Don't Object: Evidence That Self-Objectification Disrupts Women’s Social Activism
Rachel M. Calogero

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What is This?
It is not a sign of revolution when the oppressed adopt the manners of the oppressors and practice oppression on their own behalf.

—Germaine Greer (1970, p. 353)

Sexual objectification of women is pervasive in Western societies. A large body of research has documented that girls and women are targeted more often than boys and men for sexually objectifying treatment in their day-to-day lives (American Psychological Association, 2007; Murnen & Smolak, 2000; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Scholars have identified self-objectification as a primary psychological consequence for girls and women living in an objectifying cultural milieu (for review, see Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Self-objectification occurs when the objectifying gaze is turned inward, such that women view themselves through the perspective of an observer and engage in chronic self-surveillance. Research has demonstrated a broad array of negative intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences of sexual objectification and self-objectification for girls and women (American Psychological Association, 2007; Calogero, 2012; Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 2011; Moradi & Huang, 2008). The investigation reported here moved beyond prior research under the umbrella of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) to examine the implications of self-objectification for social justice. That is, this research investigated not only self-objectification’s disruption of the self-body relationship but the possibility that self-objectification also disrupts women’s engagement in social activism.

Sexual objectification may be the most pernicious manifestation of gender inequality, because under a sexually objectifying gaze, women’s bodies become—even if just for a moment—the property of the observer. Research has demonstrated that, compared with men, women are perceived as being more similar to objects and less human when their appearance is emphasized (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009). Although being objectified renders women passive and powerless (Nussbaum, 1995; Saguy, Quinn, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2010), the objectified lens through which they come to view themselves simultaneously emphasizes their value to men as sex objects. Consequently, some women may self-objectify in an attempt to elicit or maintain such “positive” attention from...
men, viewing it as flattering or even validating and therefore advantageous to themselves and their in-group (Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009).

Indeed, research has demonstrated that women’s adoption of an objectified view of the self is encouraged by sexist ideologies that legitimize traditional gender roles (Calogero & Jost, 2011). When women and men were exposed to benevolent and complementary sexist stereotypes (as opposed to hostile stereotypes), only the women responded with increased levels of self-surveillance, shame about their bodies, and management of their appearance. These stereotypes effectively remind women of their subordinate status to men, painting women as objects of men’s protection and affections. Under these conditions, self-objectification focuses women’s attention on appearance—not action—as an effective form of social currency and mobility (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Unger, 1979).

The studies reported here directly tested the system-justifying function of self-objectification. System-justification theory posits that people are generally motivated to defend, bolster, and justify the status quo, even when doing so goes against their own self-interest and maintains their disadvantaged status (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). According to this theory, “members of disadvantaged groups not only pretend to accept their station in life, but actually do see themselves through the dominant cultural lens” (Jost, Pelham, & Caravallo, 2002, p. 589). Because women are obviously disadvantaged, relative to men, within the sexually objectifying cultural milieu, system-justification theorists would argue that women have more to justify and rationalize than men do, and therefore that they should provide stronger ideological support for the system (Jost, 1995; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost & Kay, 2005). Integrating objectification and system-justification perspectives, the present research was based on a conception of self-objectification as a dominant cultural lens through which women come to view themselves, and through which they perpetuate their own disadvantaged state (for a review, see Calogero, in press).

Of particular interest to me was the possibility that self-objectification limits women’s social mobility by undermining their motivation to engage in social action that would challenge gender inequalities. Research has shown that benevolently sexist portrayals of women are linked to women’s acceptance of gender inequalities (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jackman, 1994) and undermine women’s engagement in collective action (Becker & Wright, 2011). These findings are significant because scholars have identified collective action on behalf of one’s in-group as the most effective way to bring about social change and social justice for that in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). Women’s adoption of an objectified view of the self may be another way through which sexist ideology interferes with their taking the collective action necessary to improve social conditions and the relative status for women as a whole.

Specifically, I proposed that greater self-objectification leads women to provide stronger ideological support for the gender status quo, which rewards women’s focus on their appearance and adherence to traditional gender roles but ultimately disadvantages them. In this research, I expected women’s motivation to support the gender status quo to mediate the influence of self-objectification on collective action. That is, I hypothesized that self-objectification should bolster women’s support for the gender status quo by decreasing their motivation to challenge it, thereby reducing their participation in social action. In two studies, I tested the relationship between self-objectification and gender-based social activism.

Study 1

Study 1 employed a survey methodology to investigate the relationship between trait self-objectification (i.e., the chronic tendency to view the self as a sexual or decorative object), gender-specific system justification, and gender-based social activism. I hypothesized (a) that greater trait self-objectification would predict more gender-specific system justification and less gender-based social activism, (b) that gender-specific system justification would predict less gender-based social activism, and (c) that gender-specific system justification would mediate the relationship between trait self-objectification and gender-based social activism. Following established recommendations for testing mediation effects, I tested the direction of causality that is most consistent with these hypotheses.

Method

Participants and procedure. A total of 50 female undergraduates in psychology participated in this study in return for credit in a psychology course or entry into a raffle. Participants were 18.65 years old on average (SD = 2.11 years) and ranged in age from 18 to 25; 37% were Caucasian, 35% were African American, 8% were Asian, 6% were Hispanic, and 14% were of mixed ethnicity. Participants were predominantly first-year students (80%), and there was little variation in participants’ reported sexual orientation (90% heterosexual, 5% bisexual, and 5% lesbian).

Participants were recruited via an online advertisement on Virginia Wesleyan College’s Department of Psychology Web site and via class announcements inviting them to participate in a study about college women’s health and well-being. Students had a choice of participating in this study or in one of several other studies being conducted in the psychology department. The entire study was conducted online via SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com). After reading a brief description of the research and providing consent, participants completed self-report measures (described in the following section), which were part of a larger study on college women, in counterbalanced order, and then provided demographic information. A full debriefing appeared on-screen.
immediately following each participant’s completion of the study.

**Measures.** The Self-Objectification Questionnaire (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998) was used to measure trait self-objectification—the extent to which individuals considered 5 observable, appearance-based attributes (i.e., physical attractiveness, weight, sex appeal, body measurements, firm/sculpted muscles) to be more important than 5 nonobservable, competence-based attributes (i.e., health, strength, energy level, physical coordination, physical fitness). Participants were instructed to rank the 10 attributes in order of impact on their physical self-concept, from 0 (least impact on my physical self-concept) to 9 (greatest impact on my physical self-concept). The same rank could not be assigned to more than 1 attribute.

Difference scores reflecting the relative emphasis given to these two types of attributes were computed for each participant by subtracting the sum of the ranks for the five competence-based attributes from the sum of the ranks for the five appearance-based attributes. The possible range of scores was −25 to 25, with higher scores indicating greater self-objectification. Because of the initial rank ordering of the attributes, reliability was determined by correlating the sum of the ranks for appearance-based attributes and the sum of the ranks for competence-based attributes. If respondents ranked appearance-based attributes as most important, then the competence-based attributes would be ranked as less important, and therefore a negative correlation would be expected between the two sets of attributes. Indeed, I found a strong negative correlation between rankings for the two types of attributes ($r = −.97$).

Gender-specific system justification was measured with eight items reflecting the extent to which participants endorsed the current state of gender relations (e.g., “In general, relations between men and women are fair”; Jost & Kay, 2005). Responses were made using scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree). Items were averaged to create system-justification scores ($\alpha = .85$). Scores ranged from 1 to 9, with higher scores indicating greater justification of the gender status quo.

A set of feminist-activism items derived from prior research was modified to measure gender-based social activism (Stake, Roades, Rose, Ellis, & West, 1994). Participants rated eight items assessing the extent to which they had participated in various types of social activism in the area of gender equality during the previous 6 months; responses were made on scales from 1 (never) to 7 (all the time). The eight items covered the following types of activism: discussing issues related to gender equality with friends or colleagues (in person or online—e.g., through e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, or MySpace); attending meetings, conferences, or workshops on gender-equality issues; signing a petition (in person or online) in support of women’s rights and gender equality; circulating a petition (in person or online) related to women’s rights or gender equality; handing out fliers related to women’s rights issues or gender equality; attending demonstrations, protests, or rallies related to women’s rights or gender equality; working for women’s rights campaigns (e.g., fund-raising); and acting as a spokesperson for a particular gender-equality issue. Ratings for all items were averaged to create social-activism scores ($\alpha = .92$). Scores ranged from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating more participation in gender-based social activism.

**Results and discussion**

A series of regression analyses was used to test the proposed mediational model. In support of the first prediction, results showed that trait self-objectification ($M = −3.61, SD = 13.73$) predicted gender-based social activism ($M = 4.06, SD = 1.23$), $\beta = −0.49, p < .001$, and the hypothesized mediator, gender-specific system justification ($M = 3.41, SD = 1.21$), $\beta = 0.52, p < .001$. In support of the second prediction, results showed that gender-specific system justification predicted gender-based social activism, $\beta = −0.59, p < .001$. In support of the third prediction, results showed that gender-specific system justification mediated the relationship between trait self-objectification and gender-based social activism (see Fig. 1).

Both trait self-objectification ($sr^2 = .04$) and gender-role-specific system justification ($sr^2 = .16$) accounted for unique variance in social activism.

A Monte Carlo resampling simulation tested the significance of the indirect effects for gender-specific system justification (MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004; Selig & Preacher, 2008). The simulation generated 20,000 Monte Carlo samples to estimate 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for the hypothesized indirect effects on the basis of distributions of the observed estimates. Indirect effects are significant when the lower limits of the CIs are greater than zero. Results indicated that gender-specific system justification significantly mediated the relationship between trait self-objectification and gender-based social activism.

![Fig. 1](image-url). Mediation model showing the influence of trait self-objectification on women's gender-based social activism as mediated by gender-specific system justification (Study 1). Coefficients in parentheses represent parameter estimates for the regression model containing trait self-objectification and gender-specific system justification as predictor variables. Asterisks indicate significant paths ($**p < .01; ***p < .001$).
and gender-based social activism (95% CI = [0.01, 0.05]).¹ The model accounted for 49% of the variance in women’s participation in gender-based social activism over the previous 6 months, adjusted $R^2 = .37, F(2, 47) = 15.50, p < .001.²

Consistent with the novel predictions of this study, results revealed that greater trait self-objectification predicted more gender-specific system justification, which in turn predicted less gender-based social activism. Results from the mediational tests suggest that the lower levels of engagement in gender-based social activism among women who were higher in trait self-objectification could be accounted for by these women’s motivation to support the status quo for gender roles. Although the hypothesized model is causal, the correlational design of Study 1 limited my ability to draw firm conclusions about the effect of self-objectification on gender-based social activism. Therefore, in Study 2, I extended this program of research to provide a more stringent test of the hypotheses by experimentally activating in participants a state of self-objectification.

**Study 2**

Study 2 provided an experimental test of the effect of self-objectification on gender-based social activism. State self-objectification (i.e., a temporary view, activated by situational cues, of the self as a sexual or decorative object) was induced in participants via instructions to think about a time when they felt objectified. I hypothesized (a) that gender-specific system justification would be greater and willingness to engage in gender-based social activism would be lower in the self-objectification condition compared with the control condition, (b) that state self-objectification would predict stronger gender-specific system justification and less willingness to engage in gender-based social activism, (c) that gender-specific system justification would predict less willingness to engage in gender-based social activism, and (d) that gender-specific system justification would mediate the relationship between state self-objectification and willingness to engage in gender-based social activism. Study 2 was designed to offer causal evidence for the relationships among self-objectification, gender-specific system justification, and gender-based social activism.

**Method**

**Participants and procedure.** A total of 78 female undergraduates in psychology participated in this study in return for being entered into a raffle for a $50 Target gift card. Participants were 21.15 years old on average ($SD = 2.73$ years) and ranged in age from 18 to 30; 91% were Caucasian and 9% were African American. Participants were predominantly first-year students (62%), and there was little variation in participants’ reported sexual orientation (90% heterosexual, 8% bisexual, and 2% lesbian). As in Study 1, participants were recruited via an online advertisement and via class announcements inviting them to participate in a study on students’ experiences in college. The entire study was completed online via SurveyMonkey. Students who expressed interest were randomly assigned to the self-objectification condition or the control condition and were sent the corresponding Web link to the survey.

After providing consent, participants in the self-objectification condition received the following instructions:

Please take a moment to think about a time when you felt that somebody was sexually objectifying you. For example, somebody was gazing at you or evaluating you in a sexualized way, making sexual comments about your body, or whistling at you on the street, etc. Think about what took place—where you were, who you were with, how you felt, what you were thinking, and write about your experience in the space below.

Participants in the control condition were asked to write about what they would do with the $50 Target gift card if they happened to win the raffle.

**Measures.** All participants complete a modified version of the Twenty Statements Test (TST; Roberts & Gettman, 2004), which I used to verify that the priming manipulation had effectively activated a state of self-objectification. Participants were instructed to describe themselves by completing 10 sentences, each beginning with “I am ______.” Two independent judges who were blind to the hypotheses and experimental conditions coded responses for references to body shape, weight, and general physical appearance. The number of times appearance-related descriptors were used across the 10 statements served as a measure of state self-objectification for each participant. Interrater reliability for the coding of appearance-related descriptors across the two experimental conditions was high ($κ = 0.97$).

Following the TST, participants completed the same measures of gender-specific system justification ($α = .81$) used in Study 1. Participants also completed a social-activism measure, which consisted of items that were similar to those used in Study 1 but were modified such that participants were asked to report their intentions to participate in the eight types of social activism over the next 6 months rather than their actual participation in social activism over the past 6 months ($α = .89$).

**Results and discussion**

An independent-samples $t$ test on results from the TST revealed a significant effect of condition: Women in the self-objectification condition used more appearance-based descriptors to describe themselves ($M = 1.57, SD = 0.94$) than did women in the control condition ($M = 0.81, SD = 0.56$), $t(76) = 3.81, p < .001, r = .49$. This finding confirmed that participants were more likely to be conscious of their physical appearance if thoughts about being sexually objectified were activated.

All dependent variables were analyzed using a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) with experimental
condition (self-objectification vs. control) as the between-subjects variable. In line with the first prediction, results showed that the experimental manipulation had a significant effect on gender-specific system justification and intentions to engage in gender-based social activism. Women in the self-objectification condition \( (M = 4.26, SD = 0.87) \) reported significantly stronger gender-specific system justification than did women in the control condition \( (M = 3.53, SD = 1.14) \), \( F(1, 76) = 9.85, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .12 \). Women in the self-objectification condition \( (M = 3.98, SD = 1.12) \) reported significantly less willingness to engage in gender-based social activism than did women in the control condition \( (M = 4.58, SD = 1.19) \), \( F(1, 76) = 4.84, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .06 \).

For an analysis testing the same mediational model used in the first study, participants in the self-objectification condition were coded as 1, and participants in the control condition were coded as 0. As in Study 1, I used a Monte Carlo resampling simulation to test the significance of the indirect effects where appropriate. As Figure 2 shows, the results supported the hypotheses concerning pathways of effects. In line with the second and third predictions, state self-objectification directly predicted gender-specific system justification and gender-based social activism, and gender-specific system justification predicted gender-based social activism. In confirmation of the fourth prediction, the direct pathway from state self-objectification to gender-based social activism was mediated by gender-specific system justification. Results from the Monte Carlo simulation demonstrated that gender-specific system justification significantly mediated the relationship between state self-objectification and gender-based social activism (95% CI = [0.08, 0.62]). The predicted model described 17% of the variance in participants’ gender-based social activism, adjusted \( R^2 = .17, F(2, 75) = 8.62, p < .001 \). Both state self-objectification \( (sr^2 = .01) \) and gender-specific system justification \( (sr^2 = .13) \) explained unique variance in gender-based social activism.

Overall, these findings indicate that situational activation of self-objectification motivated women to increase their support for the gender status quo and reduced their willingness to participate in social action that would challenge gender inequality. These results build on the findings from Study 1 to offer experimental evidence that diminished willingness to engage in gender-based social activism is one specific manifestation of how self-objectification serves to perpetuate women’s subjugated status.

### General Discussion

Although a great deal of research has examined the effects of self-objectification on women’s self-evaluation, physical health, mental health, and cognitive performance, these studies are the first to examine how self-objectification affects women’s engagement in gender-based social action. Findings across two studies supported the novel proposition that greater self-objectification predicts more support for the current state of gender relations and less participation in efforts that would serve the interests of women as a group. There was also evidence that support for the gender status quo fully mediated the link between both trait and state self-objectification and gender-based social activism.

The results of Study 2 are especially compelling because sexually objectifying encounters occur in a variety of public and private spaces that girls and women frequent on a daily basis (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; MacMillan, Nierobisz, & Welsh, 2000; Murnen & Smolak, 2000; Puwar, 2004; Swim et al., 2001). Sexual objectification includes gazing or leering at women’s bodies, making sexual comments about women, whistling or honking at women, taking unsolicited photographs of women’s bodies, presenting sexualized images of women in media or pornography, sexually harassing women, and engaging in sexual violence against women. Although some of these experiences are more common than others, overall, their recurrence in women’s lives implies that self-objectification is temporarily but repeatedly activated for many women.

Given the number of opportunities for women to experience self-objectification in their daily lives, it is troubling that such experiences appear to thwart women’s engagement in activism on their own behalf. The findings reported here support a motivational account for the hypothesized model based on an integration of objectification theory and system-justification theory. That is, engagement in activism is disrupted because women are more motivated to support (and thus less likely to challenge) the gender status quo when they...
are more focused on how they look than on how they feel or what they can do. Self-objectification guides women’s attention to their appearance and leads them to comply with traditional gender roles (e.g., that of a sex object), thereby garnering their participation in the very system that maintains their disadvantaged status. In line with system-justification theory, participation in such a system requires one’s justification of it—hence the strong ideological endorsement by women of existing gender roles and relations (Jost, 1997; Jost et al., 2004; Jost & Kay, 2005).

This program of research could be advanced in a number of ways that would address limitations of the studies reported here and shed light on other, untested psychological mechanisms at play. Sexist ideologies have been causally related to the perpetuation and entrenchment of systemic gender inequality (Brandt, 2011). Given that women’s exposure to widely available sexist ideologies and to sexual objectification is at the crux of the argument as to why women’s adoption of a self-objectified perspective reduces their engagement in gender-based social activism, to fully contextualize the model, researchers need to simultaneously test the relations among sexist ideology, self-objectification and related variables, and system-justifying motives and behaviors. Other circumstances that make salient women’s dependence on or perceived inability to escape the existing system of gender relations may exacerbate the relationship between self-objectification and system justification and therefore merit investigation (Kay & Friesen, 2011). It will also be important for researchers to examine whether other objectification-theory variables (e.g., body shame, disrupted attention, appearance anxiety), either independently or in conjunction with self-objectification, reduce gender-based social activism. Certainly these patterns of effects should be replicated in larger and more diverse samples of women. As it stands, these findings, along with much of the data supporting objectification theory, are culture bound—whereas the objectification of women and its consequences are not (Jeffreys, 2005; United Nations, 1995). The relationship between self-objectification and gender-based social activism across the life span, and among nonstudent samples, also requires further research. Given that self-objectification has been found to decrease with age (McKinley, 2006; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001), it is plausible that older women’s motivations and behaviors with regard to collective action are unrelated to self-objectification, although it is not clear at what age this alternative pattern might begin to emerge.

In conclusion, this research broadens our knowledge of the scope of the impact of self-objectification beyond the implications originally proposed by objectification theory. The present work integrates objectification theory and system-justification theory to distinguish self-objectification as a critical psychological event that disrupts women’s gender-based social activism. It seems that once the lens of self-objectification is in place, women become less likely to object to the system that constructs and sustains this harmful lens. Women’s bodies effectively become the site for system justification.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author declared that she had no potential conflicts of interest with respect to her authorship or the publication of this article.

Notes
1. Tests of alternative models revealed no significant mediation of the relationship between social activism and system justification by trait self-objectification with social activism as the outcome (95% CI = [−0.08, 0.30]) or as the predictor (95% CI = [−0.31, 0.03]).
2. Because of the diverse ethnic composition of the sample, the pattern of relations was tested in an analysis controlling for ethnicity. Results from this analysis showed that the same mediational model held, adjusted $R^2 = .41, F(3, 46) = 12.41, p < .001$.
3. Tests of alternative models revealed no significant mediation of the relationship between social activism and system justification by state self-objectification with social activism as the outcome (95% CI = [−0.14, 0.46]) or as the predictor (95% CI = [−0.02, 0.09]).

References


