

## **America Objectified: An Analysis of the Self-Objectification of Women in America and Some Detrimental Effects of Media Images**

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What is it to be beautiful? Does it require the “perfect” measurements? Being a size 2? Or is it having a symmetrical face and body? Or does it require a person to conform to the images they see walking down the runway, posing in magazines, or basking in the limelight? Are we a nation so obsessed with beauty and image that we are potentially losing sight of the true qualities of a person? Or is keeping up this image and a level of beauty a necessary part of living in American society? These are questions that face everyone on a daily basis. Every media source, whether it be the television, magazines, advertisements, or the internet have images and sometimes even guidelines to what it is to be attractive and desirable. Sometimes it seems as though there is greater

media coverage and talk about the latest fashion and who is dating who in the celebrity world than there is real news about everyday people. This is no longer something that can be overlooked and cast aside as just part of the world we live in because it is starting to have drastic effects in many areas of our lives. There is a problem when the youth of this nation begin relating to and idealize the models and celebrities like Paris Hilton, Nicole Ritchie, and Britney Spears. They look to these people whose lives are centered around an image of beauty and glam and they want to embrace this life as their own.

Everyday our youth is bombarded with images of glam, beauty, fashion, and ultra thin, airbrushed images through every type of media circuit. These standards of beauty are placed on our children at an incredibly young age and these images are nearly inescapable to every eye. Wherever one turns there are images, messages and billboards about what it is to be beautiful and how necessary it is to American society. Young woman and even young girls are acquiring a negative body image of themselves through the inundation of images that the media and society are putting out there. Not only are the television shows and magazines conveying the message that beauty is necessary but even commercials are mere advertisements for conformity. One study showed that one out of every 3.8 television commercials sent some sort of “attractiveness message” to the people who were watching (Myers et al., 1992). These messages are directed to the American consumer more often than not to sell a product but at the same time they are telling the consumer what is essential to be beautiful in American society. Another interesting fact



to add to this study is that adolescents watch on average three to four hours of television a day (Levine, 1997). So, one can only imagine how many “attractiveness messages” are being fed to the children on a daily basis. Media images are in essence telling our youth that to be attractive they must conform to this idea of thin bodies and airbrushed faces and this leads to body dissatisfaction and self-objectification. This is becoming a very serious problem in our nation and I believe it needs to be rectified as soon as possible before our youth suffer long term effects of negative body images, dysfunctional relationships and low levels of self-efficacy.

The youth of American society are facing serious problems when it comes to dealing with issues regarding body image, beauty requirements, weight and in turn the objectification of their bodies. The television and magazines do not tell them that the main reason to work out and eat right is to be healthy, it seems as though they stress the

importance that they do these things in order to attract someone of the opposite sex. This is such a detrimental and negative view to take of oneself and on health and beauty in general. Women are objectified on a daily basis and are told through every media medium that there are things they can and should be doing to become more beautiful, more desirable, and more objectified than they already are. A person can not walk past a magazine stand, especially one abundant in magazines targeted at woman without seeing messages all over the page about dieting, weight, their sex life, clothing and their overall appearance. This conveys a message that these are the only aspects in life that women should be concerned with. The magazines tell them how to be more beautiful, more fashionable, and how to improve every physical and materialistic aspect of one’s self. Magazines also commonly include guidelines to improving one’s sex life along with how to become more beautiful. In the magazine above there is a guide to “the most risqué moves” that if done “he’ll never let you go.” The image above is a typical magazine cover that a person can see on the stand every month. There are no stories about women achieving success or the inner qualities of a woman. All the messages are targeted towards the body and the physical appearance. These images and messages only further the objectification of women in our nation. The only message these magazines seem to be transmitting is that woman need to focus on their appearance and their appearance only. Not only are adult women getting these messages about what it is to be beautiful but the magazines are even targeting a younger audience. In a study done on a teen magazine over the course of twenty years researchers found that articles about fitness and exercise cited “to become more attractive” as the reason to exercise and be fit (Guillen & Barr, 1994). There is a continual pressure to conform to an ideal of what



society and the media says is beautiful and desirable instead of teaching young women to embrace the person that they are both inside and out.



Early on in life young children, especially girls are told what is necessary to be beautiful and attractive in our society. Young girls are constantly being fed images of what the standards of beauty are and are taught how to conform. The magazines that are targeting women are now making magazines that target young girls as well. More and more images of beauty and sex are being portrayed on television which is leading to younger girls beginning to exhibit traits of self-objectification. Everyday it seems as though television is becoming more sexually charged and displaying women and men in a much more objectifying manner. No longer can a family sit down together and watch a wholesome television show that is appropriate for every member of the family. It has become well known that sex sells and apparently makes ratings higher but my concern is, are they unknowingly selling it to the wrong audience?

When adolescents as well as adults obtain a negative body image and begin to view their body as an object for others there are serious ramifications involved. When a person is in a state of self-objectification, meaning they are viewing their body from a third person perspective they exhibit decreased levels of performance on various tasks. (Quinn, D.M., Kallen, R.W., Twenge, J.M., & Fredrickson, B.L. 2006). Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) asserts that pervasive external evaluation leads women to adopt a view of themselves as object that are valued for use by others. This is a very disturbing thought that young woman through these images begin to lose their sense of self and begin to see themselves as objects. With the amount of images sent to us through television in our country it is no wonder that studies have shown that women in the United States are at a higher risk of self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). One may wonder why self objectification is something to be concerned about since so much of a person's daily life is based on appearance but body objectification has been shown to have negative effects on the overall view of ones self. The outcomes of self-objectification have included depleted task performance, lower self-efficacy, lower intrinsic motivation, negative body emotions, and eating disorder symptomatology (e.g., Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn & Twenge, 1998; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998; Roberts & Gettman, 2004; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). These are all issues that should be broached with the utmost care and concern. With increases in self-objectification and body dissatisfaction it is no wonder why incidences in eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa have increased in the last century (Hoek, H.W., & van Hoeken, D., 2003).

As many as 10 million Americans are suffering from anorexia nervosa one of many potential eating disorders that can result from body dissatisfaction and between five and

twenty percent of those individuals will die from this disease (NEDA). That is an average of over one million people dying because of self starvation. That is a staggering number. This is a disease that affects all parts of the body. It often begins psychologically with a feeling of inadequacy due to body dissatisfaction, not being able to live up to societies standards of weight and beauty, low self esteem, loss of control and in many cases problems in their personal lives. Once this disease takes hold of the person it becomes like a self perpetuating downward spiral that is very difficult to escape. One of the reasons that anorexia nervosa is so damaging to the body as a whole is because when the body is starved and not given the proper nutrients to function correctly then it begins to "slow down." This slowing down is done in order to conserve energy and strength because it is not getting enough outside sources of energy to survive. This causes all the systems of the body to slow down which affects how the body naturally works. With the entire body weakened each area of the body begins to fall apart. Even though eating disorders usually start from a psychological disorder it is obvious that it can have a grim effect on the physical body as well. Anorexia Nervosa is a visual of how devastating negative body image and body dissatisfaction can have in extreme cases.

Having a negative body image and self-objectifying does not only effect how someone views their own body and possibly lead to eating disorders but it can also drastically affect their cognitive abilities. When a person is in a state of self-objectification they acquire a self-conscious state in which they are continually monitoring their body to make it the most attractive view for others. In doing so, they interrupt the flow of consciousness and limit their mental resources. (Fredrickson, B.L., Roberts, T.-A., Noll, S.M., Quinn, D.M. & Twenge, J.M. 1998). The following comment by John

Berger captures the idea of what it means for women to self-objectify:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisioning herself walking or weeping. . . Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. (Fredrickson, B.L., Roberts, T.-A., Noll, S.M., Quinn, D.M. & Twenge, J.M. (1998).

This may seem a bit extreme to some but this is what the objectification of a woman's body is doing to people. It makes it nearly impossible to operate in everyday life without the concern of how one appears to others. In the study *That Swimsuit becomes you* done by Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, and Twenge they found that women and men self-objectified when in the swimsuit and for woman they found that it induced a feeling of shame and disgust. In this sense shame was described as a failure to meet moral ideals. The study also indicated that woman in the swimsuits experienced a state of self-objectification which lead to a decrease in math performance. (Fredrickson, B.L., Roberts, T.-A., Noll, S.M., Quinn, D.M. & Twenge, J.M. (1998). When reflecting on this outcome it causes one to wonder about the ramifications young girls are having in school due to the objectification of their bodies. This is a serious concern if young girls are not reaching their full academic potential due to an emphasis on their appearance and their body as opposed to their mind.

Trait self-objectification describes the differences in the degree to which people internalize observers' perspectives on their physical selves in their everyday lives. (Gapinski, K.D., Brownell, K.D., & LaFrance, M. 2003). In the study done by Gapinski, Brownell and LaFrance they found that women with high levels of trait self-objectification may experience decreased

levels of intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy. This indicates that women who are more likely to internalize the views of others onto themselves may exhibit feelings of being less capable than the women who put less emphasis on appearance. This is a very disturbing thought, especially when it is related to children. If media images and societal pressures of being thin and beautiful are affecting the youth of our nation in such a severe way that their self-worth and feelings of being capable are diminished there is a crucial problem. Many studies have shown that girls at a younger age are starting to feel the pressure to be thin and fit in with society's image. One study found that 42% of first through third grade girls expressed a need to be thinner (Collins, 1991). Murnen, who has studied the effects that media, and ultra thin models have on young girls found that grade school girls, even as young as first grade feel that the culture is telling them that they should model themselves after celebrities. Murnen's research found that only 18% of girls were able to reject that image and it was these girls that had the highest self-esteem (Hellmich, N. 2006, September 26). So much attention is being paid to these celebrities, models, and objectified images that are on TV, people are not recognizing the affects that they are having on our children. Children are starting to feel the pressures of being thin and beautiful at an ever decreasing age. This is something that every person should be weary of because studies have shown that not only can it aid in the development of eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa but it also lowers feelings of self-efficacy, interrupts the flow of conscious thought and effects the cognitive process.

So much attention is paid to a person's physical appearance that they often overlook wonderful characteristics and aspects that a person has within them. It is crucially important to teach our children the importance of healthy eating and fitness

because it makes for a better life, not because they will be viewed by others as more "attractive." Changing the images children see on TV and in magazines from ones that impose negative body images on readers and viewers and unrealistic standards of beauty to images of happy, healthy adults is something that urgently needs to be addressed. There are so many negative ramifications that these idealized, airbrushed images have and it is starting to affect a younger audience. As a society and a community we need to educate our youth about realistic body standards, and healthy lifestyles. Most importantly we need to give them self confidence and a feeling of self-worth. This goal is a challenging one that will take time but it is worth it because healthy, confident adolescents have a better chance of growing into healthy, confident adults who give back and contribute to society.

With all of this in mind I intend to do further research on the topic of self-objectification, and the results of negative body images in adolescents. It is no wonder that children are acquiring body image at a younger age than ever before due to the amounts of television and ultra-thin images out there that are being fed into their homes everyday. In my research I would like to find about the age the young women first start having a body image, which is defined as the subjective concept of one's physical appearance based on self-observation and the reaction of others. Further more, I am interested in finding the most viewed media among television, magazines, or the internet and which of these three have the strongest effect on body image and self-objectification. My hypothesis is that television will have the highest correlation between time spent viewing and negative body image and high levels of self-objectification. I am still in the preliminary stages of putting together my research but from viewing past research done on this topic I have a better sense of direction.

Along with determining an age range in which body-objectification occurs and what media source is most prevalent in high levels of self-objectification I want to measure other various factors that could possibly effect self-esteem, body image and body-objectification, including views on dieting and health, parents view's of dieting and health, and involvement in positive activities such as organized sports, clubs and organizations. If possible, I would use a questionnaire similar to the one used in "That Swimsuit Becomes You: Difference in

Self-Objectification, Restrained Eating, and Math Performance." This questionnaire is used to analyze self-reports of self-objectification. My hope is that with more research and more exposure people will start realizing that ultra-thin images and glamorized celebrities serve only to produce young women with low self-esteem and low feelings of self worth and self-efficacy. This is not doubt a challenging task, but one that I believe to be very worthwhile.

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