Social media and online self-presentation: Effects on how we see ourselves and our bodies

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Chapter 2

Women on Display: The Effect of Portraying the Self Online on Women’s Self-Objectification

Abstract

Objectification research has largely ignored the potential impact of Internet activities, such as online self-portrayal, on women’s self-objectification and whether this may interact with traditional sexually objectifying stimuli. In response to these research gaps, the present study had two goals: first, to investigate if portraying the self to others online leads to self-objectification in women; second, to test whether priming with sexually objectifying content from traditional media moderates the effect of online self-portrayal on self-objectification. We conducted an online experiment with a two (priming stimuli: objectifying vs. neutral) by two (audience: online audience vs. no audience) between subjects design among 221 women aged 18–25. All participants created an online profile, which consisted of choosing an avatar and writing a self-description. As expected, participants in the online audience condition self-objectified more strongly than did participants in the no audience condition. However, this effect only held among those who had been primed with sexually objectifying stimuli. Our results suggest that women’s online self-portrayal, if combined with sexually objectifying stimuli, may lead to self-objectification.
Girls and women frequently experience objectification, meaning that they are valued predominantly in terms of their physical and sexual attractiveness (Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In daily life, such objectifying treatment is experienced by women during objectifying social interactions, which on average, female students in the United States (US) encounter more than once a week, three times more frequently than male students (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). At the same time, objectifying content is pervasive in popular Western media. Women, and to a lesser extent men also, are depicted with a strong focus on their physical attractiveness in magazines, television, music videos, and other media (American Psychological Association, 2007; Calogero et al., 2011).

Evidence has accumulated that being objectified or viewing objectification of women in the media may lead individuals to “self-objectify” (for a review, see Moradi & Huang, 2008). Self-objectification entails that individuals start to view themselves “as a body” and focus on their physical appearance rather than on what they can do or how they feel (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Viewing the self in such a way can have serious negative consequences for a person’s well-being, as research has linked self-objectification with increased body shame, anxiety, and various mental and physical health problems, at least among women (as reviewed in Moradi & Huang, 2008; Tiggemann, 2011).

The link between objectifying social interactions and media content on the one hand and self-objectification on the other has been supported by a large body of research (Moradi & Huang, 2008). However, existing research has been limited almost exclusively to face-to-face interactions and traditional media, notably magazines and television (Aubrey, 2006a; Morry & Staska, 2001). This is surprising because, over the past years, the Internet has become a popular venue for social interaction and a medium in its own right (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001). Internet users’ possibilities to interact online and to generate content have multiplied (Castells, 2007). Moreover, scholars have observed a “rise of a new form of socialized communication: mass self-communication” (Castells, 2007, p. 248), which is characterized by users generating and distributing media content themselves. This digital turn in how people interact and how media content is generated also forces us to extend our notion on the antecedents of self-objectification.

Of crucial importance in this context is the popular activity of creating and sharing self-related content online, such as keeping a personal profile on a social network site (SNS). To our knowledge, the only published study investigating the
potential role of mass self-communication in self-objectification has shown that adolescent girls who spend more time using SNS report higher levels of self-objectification (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). However, it is unclear whether SNS use causes self-objectification, and if so, which features of SNS use may evoke this effect. One aspect of SNS use that may at least partly account for the correlation found between SNS use and self-objectification is that people typically portray themselves to a relatively large number of people when they portray themselves online (Krämer & Winter, 2008). Research on offline self-portrayal suggests that when individuals portray themselves to others, they can become preoccupied with how other people will judge them and their looks (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). In this way, portraying the self to others online may lead to self-objectification. It is the first aim of this study to test this.

A focus on whether self-generated Internet content in general and online self-portrayal in particular leads to self-objectification also raises important questions about the conceptualization of traditional media in the etiology of self-objectification. At least implicitly, existing objectification research is based on the assumption that objectifying content, such as scantily dressed models in advertisements or on magazine covers, affects self-objectification and related constructs in a cumulative, but largely independent way (e.g., Aubrey, 2006a, 2006b, 2010; Aubrey, Henson, Hopper, & Smith, 2009; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Morry & Staska, 2001). However, when presenting the self online, traditional objectifying content may very well present a condition that boosts the potential effect of online self-portrayal on self-objectification, for example by making objectifying ideas more cognitively accessible. In that case, exposure to traditional objectifying content interacts with online self-portrayal in its effect on self-objectification. Consequently, traditional objectifying content would have to be conceptualized as a moderator in the etiology of self-objectification. It is, therefore, the second goal of this study to test initially whether traditional objectifying content moderates the effect of online self-portrayal on self-objectification.

The current study initially tests the effect of online self-portrayal and the possible moderating role of objectifying media content on self-objectification among women. Although men are also subjected to objectifying experiences, women experience objectification more frequently than men, both in the media (American Psychological Association, 2007) and in interpersonal situations (Swim et al., 2001). These gender differences also surface on SNS, where girls are evaluated more strongly on the basis of their physical appearance than boys (Manago, Graham,
Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008). Possibly as a result of being objectified more frequently on SNS, girls have been found to generally pay more attention than boys to a favorable outer appearance on SNS (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Siibak, 2009). An effect of online self-portrayal on self-objectification is thus likely to occur among women. As a first approach to the issue, we therefore decided to explore this relation only among women.

**Objectification Online**

In its focus on media coverage as an antecedent of self-objectification and related constructs, objectification research has typically operated in a traditional media effects paradigm (for a review, see Grabe et al., 2008). Consequently, objectification research has largely dealt with the question of whether the reception of objectifying content that was created by others causes self-objectification in women (e.g., Aubrey, 2006a; 2006b; Aubrey et al., 2009; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Morry & Staska, 2001). The Internet has increasingly been questioning this reception-oriented perspective as Internet users not only receive information, but also distribute or even create information themselves (Castells, 2007; Dominick, 1999). As a consequence, it is striking that the reception-oriented perspective in objectification research has not yet been supplemented by a creation-oriented perspective. More specifically, it is surprising that it has rarely been asked whether the creation of content by women themselves causes self-objectification in these same women.

In the context of the online creation of content and its implications for the self-objectification process, online self-portrayal may play a particularly important role. Firstly, how one portrays the self to others influences how people view themselves (Schlenker, Dlugolecki, & Doherty, 1994). Secondly, self-portrayal is one of the most popular online activities, especially among adolescents and young adults (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). The Internet offers many opportunities for self-portrayal. For instance, users can upload and share personal photos on photo archive sites, such as Flickr, upload videos to video archive sites, such as YouTube (e.g., youtube.com), and write texts about their lives on blogs. However, the most popular form of online self-portrayal currently occurs on social network sites (SNSs) (Lenhart et al., 2010). On SNS, users portray themselves through online profiles. These profiles usually include textual information about the user, as well as self–related visual content, for example photos and videos (boyd, 2008). In addition, users view and comment on each other’s self-portrayals on SNS (boyd,
Online Self-Portrayal and Self-Objectification

In this way, SNS enable users to create self-related content, convey it to an online audience, and receive feedback.

Portraying the self to others is not a new phenomenon in itself and has, in its face-to-face, offline version, been researched extensively (for overviews see Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker & Pontari, 2000). However, online self-portrayal differs from offline, face-to-face self-portrayal in at least three ways. Firstly, in stark contrast to offline, face-to-face self-portrayals, online self-portrayals are persistent and visible to others relatively long after they have been created or modified (boyd, 2008). Secondly, online self-portrayals are characterized by reduced audio-visual cues compared to face-to-face interactions (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Walther, 1996), which gives the creator of an online self-portrayal more control over the self-portrayal. Thirdly, and most importantly in the context of the present study, most online self-portrayals are characterized by their easy accessibility to others (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). On SNS for example, some profiles are publicly accessible to everyone, while other profiles are visible only to identified contacts (boyd, 2008). However, users of SNS have on average between 151 and 200 identified contacts who can access their self-portrayals (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). In addition, online self-portrayals can be easily distributed to others who were not given access (boyd, 2008). As a result, even online self-portrayals with limited access can be seen by unknown others and, in contrast to offline self-portrayals, the creator of an online self-portrayal will never know exactly who will see the self-portrayal, thus presenting the self to an unspecific audience (boyd, 2008).

The accessibility of online self-portrayals to others, and notably the unspecific character of the audience of online self-portrayals, has consequences for how women portray themselves online and, eventually, for the extent to which they self-objectify. Of pivotal importance in this respect are people’s assumptions regarding the values and preferences of their audience (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). According to objectification theory, girls learn in their socialization that their physical appearance is a key dimension in which they are evaluated by others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The dominant role of physical appearance for girls’ and women’s evaluation also surfaces in online settings. Studies have shown that when girls and women portray themselves online, such as on SNS, they are strongly evaluated based on their physical appearance. For example, comments on SNS in response to online self-portrayals of girls frequently include remarks about the physical attractiveness of the girl portrayed (Ringrose, 2011). Furthermore, Internet users are more likely to accept a woman into their online social network if she is...
physically attractive (Wang, Moon, Kwon, Evans, & Stefanone, 2010). As a result, when girls and women portray themselves online, such as on SNS, they expect that their body and looks will be assessed and commented upon, and that they will be judged at least partly based on their physical appearance (Siibak, 2009).

Women’s anticipation of others evaluating them based on their physical appearance plays an important role in self-objectification. In line with objectification theory, research has shown that when women expect to be evaluated based on their physical appearance, they focus on their appearance (Calogero, 2004) and try to improve their bodies and looks (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). These two manifestations of self-objectification — an increased focus on one’s physical appearance and the attempt to improve how one’s body looks to others — may also occur when women portray themselves online. As described before, women and girls expect to be evaluated based on their appearance when they portray themselves to an online audience (Ringrose, 2011; Siibak, 2009). Women and girls may thus also increasingly focus on their appearance and try to enhance the presentation of their bodies and looks online. According to objectification theory, it is consequently likely that portraying the self to an online audience increases self-objectification among women. Our first hypothesis reads:

**H1:** If women portray themselves to an online audience, they will self-objectify to a greater extent relative to women who do not portray themselves to an online audience.

**The Moderating Role of Objectifying Media**

Living in media-saturated environments, women in rich Western countries are often confronted with objectifying content, which occurs in all types of media, including print advertisements, music videos and prime time television (American Psychological Association, 2007; Calogero et al., 2011). Traditionally, objectification research has conceptualized objectifying content as a direct influence on women’s self-objectification (e.g., Aubrey, 2006a; 2006b; 2010; Aubrey et al., 2009; Grabe et al., 2008; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Morry & Staska, 2001). In the context of the present study, with its focus on the impact of women’s self-portrayal to an online audience on self-objectification, objectifying media content may also be conceptualized as a moderator of this effect. One possible rationale for this conceptualization comes from media priming theory (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2009). Media priming theory states that a media stimulus renders particular cognitions temporarily more accessible in individuals’ minds.
If these individuals subsequently deal with a situation to which the temporarily accessible cognitions are applicable, they are more likely to interpret this situation in the light of these cognitions. The priming media stimulus thus presents a condition for the particular interpretation of the subsequently encountered information.

In objectification research, objectifying media images are assumed to convey the message that physical attractiveness is important for women and that women are judged based on their physical appearance (Aubrey et al., 2009). Thus, priming with objectifying stimuli likely activates cognitions about the importance for women to look physically attractive and about evaluations based on their physical attractiveness. When women subsequently portray themselves to others online, the activation of these cognitions may increase women’s expectation that their audience will judge them based on their appearance. This increased expectation of being evaluated based on appearance in turn will increase self-objectification. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**H2:** The hypothesized effect that portraying the self to others online increases self-objectification (see H1) is stronger if women have been primed with objectifying stimuli compared to when they have not.

**Method**

We conducted a web-based experiment with a two (priming stimuli: objectifying vs. neutral) by two (audience: online audience vs. no audience) between-subjects design. We opted for a web-based experiment so that participants could complete the experiment from the privacy of their own home. A web-based experiment increases participants’ anonymity and diminishes biases resulting from a lab environment, such as interaction with an experimenter, which may affect self-portrayals. Furthermore, a web-based approach meant that we were able to reach participants from different parts of the Netherlands, resulting in greater generalizability of the findings. These benefits were believed to outweigh the disadvantage of a lack of experimental control for the current experiment (Reips, 2000). Another known disadvantage of web-experiments, namely the risk of multiple submissions by the same participant, was not expected to be a problem, as we did not allow multiple entries from the same IP-address.
Participants and Procedure

Two-hundred-and-twenty-one women aged 18-25 participated in the web-based experiment. As a result, there was sufficient power (.80) to detect a medium effect size at a significance level of .05 (Cohen, 1992), which previous research has shown to be a reasonable effect size to expect (Aubrey et al., 2009). The mean age of the participants was 20.8 years ($SD = 2.2$). BMI ranged from 17.4 (underweight) to 38.0 (obese) ($M = 22.0, SD = 2.7$). Most of the participants were students of higher education (89.6%) and the remainder was high-school student (0.9%) or employed (9.5%). The sample predominantly consisted of women born in the Netherlands (95.5%) and had parents who were also born in the Netherlands (mother 91.0%, father 89.1%).

Permission for the procedure of this study was granted by the departmental ethical committee. Participants could participate by following a link to the experiment, which was programmed with the survey tool Qualtrics. Participants were recruited in two ways. First, we placed an ad on the student webpage. Students could participate in exchange for course credits. Second, we recruited participants via snowball sampling using e-mail and Facebook. These participants participated in exchange for a chance to win one of three gift-vouchers (2 x 25 Euro; 1 x 50 Euro) in a lottery.

To prevent response bias, we constructed a cover story similar to a cover story that has successfully been used in previous research (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004). Participants were told that the study aim was to investigate women’s consumer choices. Upon consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two priming stimuli conditions, and viewed and rated either two neutral advertisements or two objectifying advertisements. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two audience conditions. Subsequently, participants created an online profile, after which they filled out their demographic information. Finally, participants were probed for suspicion of the aims of the study. None of the participants guessed the study aims. Participants were then thanked for their participation and asked to fill in their contact information on a separate screen. Participants were notified that their contact information was not linked to their answers and was only meant for debriefing them, giving them course credits and informing them about the raffle.
Priming Stimuli

The stimulus material for the priming stimuli conditions consisted of two neutral advertisements and two objectifying advertisements. For this purpose, four perfume advertisements for the fictional perfume brands “Blue” and “Pink” were created. Objectifying media content is generally operationalized by featuring a female with a high degree of skin exposure (e.g., Aubrey, 2010; Reichert, Lambiase, Morgan, Carstarphen, & Zavoina, 1999). Previous research has shown that pictures of women in lingerie are a valid method to operationalize objectification of women (Aubrey et al., 2009). Therefore, the objectifying advertisements contained a woman in lingerie. The neutral advertisements did not display any persons, but instead contained a larger version of the perfume bottle to prevent a large “empty space,” which would look artificial. In addition, the advertisements contained a background with a landscape and the name of the fictional perfume. Perfume advertisements were chosen because they are targeted at women and frequently display women in an objectifying way. The advertisements were fictional, firstly to prevent effects of brand or advertisement familiarity and attitudes, and secondly to ensure that the neutral and objectifying advertisements could be made identical in every way except the objectifying features.

Participants were asked to rate on a five point scale (1 = totally disagree and 5 = totally agree) how much they agreed with two statements regarding each advertisement. The first statement was “The advertisement was interesting” and the second was “The advertisement was attractive.” These two statements were used to boost the cover story and to check if the advertisements were comparable. The average score for each advertisement was between 2.1 (SD = 0.8) and 2.6 (SD = 0.9) for interestingness and between 2.5 (SD = 0.9) and 3.0 (SD = 1.0) for attractiveness. This suggests that the advertisements were found to be attractive nor unattractive and more uninteresting than interesting. There were no significant differences between the neutral and objectifying stimuli in terms of how attractive, t(219) = 0.05, p = .957, or how interesting they were found to be, t(219) = -0.19, p = .846.

Audience Conditions

Participants were randomly assigned to an online audience condition or a no audience condition. In both conditions, participants were instructed to make a profile, which implied writing a self-description of five sentences and choosing hair and skin color, body-size and clothing for a personal avatar. By having the
participants describe themselves and choose an avatar, we tried to operationalize the combination of text and imagery on SNS member profiles. The crucial difference between the two conditions was the accessibility of the self-portrayals because we expected this characteristic of online self-portrayals to affect self-objectification. To manipulate accessibility of the self-portrayals, participants in the no audience condition were told that nobody would see their profile, while participants in the online audience condition were led to believe that their self-portrayals would be visible to others. More specifically, participants in the online audience condition were told that their profile would be shown to other participants and that they may interact with these persons in a follow-up webcam study. In this way, it remained unspecific to the participants in the online audience condition who would see their profile, which simulated online self-portrayal as it occurs on SNS. We chose a no audience condition, rather than a face-to-face condition, to keep other factors constant that may affect self-portrayal and that distinguish online from offline, face-to-face self-portrayal, such as reduced visual and auditory cues and the persistence of the self-portrayal.

Measures

**Self-objectification.** Self-objectification was operationalized as the degree to which women's self-descriptions emphasized their physical attractiveness. Two independent coders rated how many of the five sentences of the self-descriptions "directly or indirectly lead the audience to infer that the participant is physically attractive," which included statements such as "I am beautiful" and sentences regarding "working out" and "interest in cosmetics and fashion". All participants wrote exactly five sentences about the self. If a self-descriptive sentence contained multiple elements, only the first element was coded to ensure relative measurement of self-objectification, that is, the proportion of the total self-descriptive statements which is self-objectifying. This measure is similar to the Twenty Statements Test (TST) (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998), which is shown to be reliable and responsive to experimental inductions of self-objectification (Aubrey et al., 2009; Calogero, 2011). Interrater agreement was high ($\kappa = .91$) (Landis & Koch, 1977).

**Demographic variables.** Information was collected regarding age, height and weight (to calculate BMI), relationship status (in a relationship or not), occupation (in school, student, working, or none of the above), country of birth, as well as country of birth of mother and father.
Results

Randomization Check

Before testing the hypotheses, we examined whether there were any differences between the four conditions in participants’ background characteristics. Chi-square analyses showed that the four conditions did not differ significantly with regard to occupation, \( \chi^2(6, N = 221) = 4.46, p = .615 \), relationship status, \( \chi^2(3, N = 220) = 5.72, p = .126 \), place of birth, \( \chi^2(3, N = 221) = 2.65, p = .449 \), birthplace of mother, \( \chi^2(3, N = 221) = 2.05, p = .561 \), or birthplace of father, \( \chi^2(3, N = 221) = 1.07, p = .786 \). Univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) showed no significant differences between the four conditions with regard to BMI, \( F(3,216) = .09, p = .965 \), or age, \( F(3,217) = .35, p = .788 \). Overall, the randomization was successful.

Hypotheses Testing

To test the hypotheses, two (audience: online audience vs. no audience) by two (priming stimuli: objectifying vs. neutral) between-subjects factorial analyses of variance were conducted on the outcome variable self-objectification. The first hypothesis predicted that if women portrayed themselves to others online, they would self-objectify to a greater extent relative to women who did not portray themselves to an online audience. The second hypothesis predicted that the effect of portraying the self to others online on self-objectification would be stronger if women had been primed with objectifying stimuli compared to when they had not. We therefore focused first on the interaction effect between priming stimuli condition and audience condition on self-objectification. This interaction was significant, \( F(1, 217) = 4.34, p = .037 \). Therefore, we conducted follow-up simple slope analyses to test the differences between the audience conditions separately for the priming stimuli conditions. As visualized in Figure 1, results showed that among participants in the objectifying priming stimuli condition, women who portrayed themselves to an online audience wrote more statements emphasizing their physical attractiveness in their self-description (\( M = 0.6, SD = 0.7 \)) than women who portrayed themselves privately (\( M = 0.2, SD = 0.5 \)). This difference was significant \( F(1, 218) = 9.55, p = .002 \). In contrast, among participants in the neutral priming condition the self-descriptions of women who portrayed themselves to an online audience did not contain significantly more or less statements which emphasized physical appearance (\( M = 0.4, SD = 0.5 \)) than the self-descriptions of women who portrayed themselves privately (\( M = 0.4, SD = 0.6 \)), \( F(1, 218) = 0.02, p = .875 \). Portraying the self online
thus only lead to self-objectification among participants who had been primed with objectifying stimuli and not among participants who had been primed with neutral stimuli. Hypothesis 2 was thus supported.

Figure 1. Mean number of statements in self-description emphasizing the participant’s physical attractiveness by audience condition and priming stimuli condition. Confidence intervals (95%) are represented in the figure by the error bars attached to each column.

Discussion

Existing research on media as an antecedent of self-objectification has largely focused on how traditional objectifying material affects women’s self-objectification (Aubrey, 2006a; Aubrey, 2006b; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Aubrey et al., 2009; Aubrey, 2010; Grabe et al., 2008; Morry & Staska, 2001). This study is one of the first to investigate whether women’s online activities may cause self-objectification. Specifically, we were interested in whether portraying the self to others through an online profile would increase self-objectification and whether this effect would be boosted by objectifying content in an advertisement. We found that portraying the self to others online increased self-objectification in young women, notably after they had been primed with objectifying media content from a perfume ad. This study
makes several theoretical contributions to objectification research, while also having practical implications for self-objectification as a societal phenomenon.

**Contributions to Objectification Research**

The present study contributes to objectification research in at least two ways. First, the study extends our knowledge about the etiology of self-objectification. Previous research has shown that women's self-objectification increases when they encounter objectifying information in the media (Aubrey, 2006a; 2006b; 2010; Aubrey et al., 2009; Grabe et al., 2008; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Morry & Staska, 2001). The dominant reception-oriented perspective in this research has produced consistent results and has its theoretical merits, but is somewhat oblivious of recent developments in women's media environment, notably the proliferation of mass self-communication (Castells, 2007). Therefore, our study has supplemented the reception-oriented perspective of earlier research with a creation-oriented perspective. This change of perspective has enabled us to demonstrate that not only the reception of mediated content, but also the creation of it, can lead women to self-objectify, at least when this content is personal and self-related and can be viewed by others. To paraphrase a well-known line in communication research, for a better understanding of self-objectification we need to know both what media users do with the media and what media do with them.

A second, related contribution of our study to objectification theory concerns the conceptualization of conditional media effects on self-objectification. At least implicitly, objectification research has assumed that objectifying content from different media cumulates in its impact on self-objectification, but affects self-objectification independently from each other. However, as women in rich Western societies live in a media-saturated environment with abundant objectifying content (American Psychological Association, 2007; Calogero et al., 2011) it makes sense to also consider the possibility that different media activities may interact with each other. This interactive perspective seems particularly interesting when two related activities, such as the creation of an online self-portrayal and the viewing of an objectifying advertisement, occur in close temporal order. Our results show that objectifying content may present a condition in which the effect of online self-portrayal on self-objectification may be boosted. Given the increasing possibilities of online self-portrayal and the abundance of objectifying media content, it may be important to further look into the moderating role of objectifying content in the emergence of self-objectification.
Chapter 2

Implications for Self-Objectification as a Societal Phenomenon

In addition to its contributions at a theoretical level, the current study also has implications for self-objectification in modern society in which mass self-communication is common (Castells, 2007). Online self-portrayal is a particularly popular form of mass self-communication, especially among young people (Lenhart et al., 2010). A majority of adolescents and young adults keep a profile on a social network site (Lenhart et al., 2010) and on average spend around 50 min a day on these websites (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). Research suggests that online communication increasingly complements offline communication, which means that women today will create and share more self-related content than women of previous generations. Our findings tentatively point to the possibility that the opportunity and rise of online self-portrayal may result in an increase of women’s self-objectification as a societal phenomenon, notably when it occurs in combination with exposure to traditional objectifying media content. Needless to say, this hypothesis awaits rigorous testing with longitudinal survey studies.

Girls and women today are also exposed to more objectifying content than women of previous generations (American Psychological Association, 2007; Reichert et al., 1999). As the level of exposure to objectifying media has been shown to positively predict self-objectification (Aubrey, 2006a; 2006b), the increased pervasiveness of objectifying media content may lead to an increase of self-objectification among women. The current study has shown that objectifying media content enhances self-objectification when it precedes online self-portrayal and possibly also other situations in which women may expect to be evaluated based on their appearance. As a result, the fact that young women frequently encounter objectifying content while they are using social network sites (Zhong, Hardin, & Sun, 2011) may have implications for the incidence of self-objectification. Specifically the placement of objectifying advertisements on SNS, which for instance occurs on popular SNS Facebook, may increase the occurrence of self-objectification and deserves our attention. However, also this hypothesis should be subjected to rigorous testing before drawing any conclusions.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current research has identified one particular Internet activity which plays a role in the self-objectification process, namely online self-portrayal. However, there may be other Internet activities that may also impact self-objectification. For example, the time spent on SNS is not only used to portray the self, but also to
Online Self-Portrayal and Self-Objectification

view the self-portrayals of contacts (boyd, 2008). As a result, women may witness other women being judged based on their appearance, for instance through public comments on these women’s online profiles. These comments may contribute to self-objectification in various ways, for example through rendering cognitions about appearance as an evaluation standard more accessible, which may affect subsequent self-portrayal, or even by making witnesses of such comments regard themselves through the eyes of the commentators.

In the current study, we investigated and manipulated one feature of online self-portrayals, namely their accessibility to others. However, there are several other characteristics that accompany the accessibility of online self-portrayals, notably the size and composition of the audience. Depending on women’s perception of how big their audience is and who may see their self-portrayal, women may vary in their self-objectification. Moreover, two features of online self-portrayals, namely their reduced cues and their persistence compared to offline self-portrayals, are important concepts that may affect the influence of online self-portrayal on self-objectification. For example, the possibility to include (audio) visual cues in a self-portrayal may influence the extent to which women self-objectify, with enhanced possibilities to include such cues probably increasing self-objectification. Similarly, relatively persistent self-portrayals, as those on SNS, may increase self-objectification more strongly than those that are less persistent such as on Instant Messaging. Research into the effects of different features of online self-portrayal on self-objectification may help predict and explain the roles of the many different and continuously changing forms of communication (e.g., Facebook, Instant Messaging, Twitter, Skype and Instagram) in the self-objectification process.

The current study assumed that women’s expectations of being evaluated based on their appearance may explain why online self-portrayal leads to self-objectification after being primed with objectifying content. This assumption is in line with previous research regarding the online self-portrayal of girls and women (Ringrose, 2011; Siibak, 2009), and fits within the framework of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Still, our study does not rigorously demonstrate that the expectation to be evaluated based on one’s appearance underlies the effect we found. Therefore, a formal test of the theorized mediating process is necessary for a more complete understanding of the effect of online self-portrayal on self-objectification. Another limitation of this study is that participants on average only wrote 0.4 statements which emphasized their physical attractiveness, which constituted eight percent of the total self-description. However, the rate
of appearance related statements in women’s self-descriptions is in line with the average (7.5%) found by Aubrey et al. (2009) when studying media priming effects on self-objectification using the well-known Twenty Statements Test (Fredrickson et al., 1998).

The current study was conducted among a sample which consisted predominantly of Dutch students and only included women. Therefore we lacked statistical power to test if ethnicity moderated our results and cannot conclude how online self-portrayal may affect men. Most studies show that women of all ethnicities report higher trait self-objectification than men (Moradi, 2010), which is in line with the original tenet of self-objectification that women are objectified more frequently than men (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). However, there is evidence that men also experience self-objectification in response to some objectifying situations (Moradi, 2010). In addition, ethnicity may influence the degree to which certain situations lead to self-objectification (Moradi, 2010). As a result, we cannot generalize our findings to other groups in terms of gender, ethnicity and possibly other personal characteristics. Therefore, addressing gender and cultural diversity is an important venue for further research into the effects of SNS on self-objectification. Finally, the current study only focused on a short-term manifestation of self-objectification. To understand the role of online self-portrayal and broader Internet use in self-objectification among women more thoroughly, long-term effect studies are necessary.
Online Self-Portrayal and Self-Objectification

References


Chapter 2


Online Self-Portrayal and Self-Objectification


