

Self-objectification, habitual body monitoring, and body dissatisfaction in older European American women: Exploring age and feminism as moderators[☆]

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of feminist attitudes on self-objectification, habitual body monitoring, and body dissatisfaction in middle age and older women. The participants were 138 European American heterosexual women ranging in age from 40 to 87 years old. Consistent with previous research, self-objectification and habitual body monitoring were positively correlated with body dissatisfaction and, self-objectification and habitual body monitoring remained stable across the lifespan. While age did not moderate the relationship between self-objectification and body dissatisfaction, age was found to moderate the relationship between habitual body monitoring and body dissatisfaction such that the relationship was smaller for older women than for middle-aged women. Interestingly, feminist attitudes were not significantly correlated with body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, or habitual body monitoring, and endorsement of feminist attitudes was not found to moderate the relationship between self-objectification or habitual body monitoring and body dissatisfaction. Potential implications for older women are discussed.

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Introduction

In a culture that emphasizes physical beauty for women of all ages, it is not surprising that this focus on the outward body would lend itself to various internal psychological concerns in the lives of women (e.g., body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, depression, and

eating disorders). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) proposed objectification theory in an effort to describe how living in a culture that emphasizes beauty and ultimately objectifies women can lead to negative psychological consequences for women. According to objectification theory, repeated experiences of objectification result in women taking on an observer's perspective of their bodies, thus treating their own bodies as objects to be looked at and evaluated (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This internalization of the observer's perspective, or "self-objectification," and its corollary habitual monitoring of the body's outward appearance, are theorized to account for many of the negative psychological consequences women experience including body dissatisfaction, body shame, and disordered eating. A sizeable body of research, primarily using

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college-aged samples, has demonstrated that the more women tend to self-objectify their bodies or habitually monitor their outward appearance, the higher their level of body dissatisfaction (e.g., Noll, 1997; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001), and eating disorders (Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Noll, 1997). In an attempt to find buffers to this process, the current study explores whether age and feminist identity assist women in “relinquish[ing] the internalized observer’s perspective” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 195).

Body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, habitual body monitoring, and older women

While women of all ages experience the impact of societal beauty standards (Hetherington & Burnett, 1994; Tunaley, Walsh, & Nicolson, 1999), researchers have only recently begun to focus on the unique body image issues of middle aged and older women (e.g., Chrisler & Ghiz, 1993; Clarke, 2001; Fey-Yensan, McCormick, & English, 2002; McKinley, 2006; Tiggemann, 2004). In a culture where beauty is often equated with youth, especially for women, growing older provides unique challenges for women’s mental health (The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, 1998).

Similar to the “normative discontent” found in younger women (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984), research has found body dissatisfaction in women remains relatively stable across the adult life span (Hetherington & Burnett, 1994; Tiggemann, 2004; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). Recent research with large samples of older women has found that over 60% of women aged 60–70 years old (Mangweth-Matzek et al., 2006) and nearly 80% of 54-year-old women reported body dissatisfaction (McLaren & Kuh, 2004).

According to objectification theory, how aging affects older women in part depends on the extent to which one continues to “internalize the feminine ideals prescribed by a culture that objectifies the female body” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 194). Some older women may continue to internalize the mainstream cultural ideal of beauty and try to “maintain” the illusion of youth and, as a consequence, experience further detachment from their bodies through continued self-objectification and habitual body monitoring. Alternatively, as they age, women may escape the culture of objectification by “relinquish[ing] the internalized observer’s perspective as her primary view of physical self” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 195). Older women may begin to value

other achievements in their lives (e.g., creativity vs. establishing intimate relationships), thus decreasing the amount of time they spend self-objectifying or monitoring their outward appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Recent research has shown that the importance women place on their physical appearance, including self-objectification and habitual body monitoring, does diminish with age (e.g., Cash, Winstead, & Janda, 1986; Clarke, 2001; McKinley, 1999; Tiggemann, 2004; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). Tiggemann and Lynch (2001) note, “When body image is conceptualized in terms of body satisfaction, no age effects are found. Women consistently want to be thinner. When body image is conceptualized in terms of importance, however, age effects are found” (p. 250). Based on this body of literature, it was hypothesized that (a) body dissatisfaction would remain stable across the adult lifespan, and (b) self-objectification and habitual body monitoring would decrease with age.

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) suggests, and previous research in younger women has supported (e.g., McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001), that self-objectification can lead to habitual body monitoring which can lead to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in women. However, research has found that self-objectification and habitual body monitoring decrease with age, while body dissatisfaction remains stable, which calls in to question the applicability of this model to older women. It is possible that the repeated sexual objectification many adolescent and young women experience sets the stage for a lifetime of body dissatisfaction through teaching women to treat their own bodies as objects to be looked at and evaluated. However, it is also possible that as women age, they may find ways, through various means, to relinquish this view of themselves (thus self-objectifying less), yet still experience an ingrained, lingering dissatisfaction with their bodies. In other words, while self-objectification may initially be the culprit of the development of body dissatisfaction in women, it may not be necessary to maintain a significant level of body dissatisfaction. Similarly, it could be hypothesized that as women age their dissatisfaction with their bodies may be less dependent on seeing themselves as an object. Thus, it was hypothesized that age would moderate the relationship between self-objectification, habitual body monitoring and body dissatisfaction such that the relationship between self-objectification or habitual body monitoring and body dissatisfaction would be smaller as women got older. Research conducted by McKinley (1999, 2006) in which body surveillance was not significantly related to

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