



Exploring the relationship between appearance-contingent self-worth and self-esteem: The roles of self-objectification and appearance anxiety



Katherine E. Adams^{a,*}, James M. Tyler^a, Rachel Calogero^b, Jenifer Lee^a

^a Department of Psychological Sciences, Purdue University, 703 3rd St., West Lafayette, United States

^b Department of Psychology, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Previous work has shown that both an appearance-contingent self-worth (i.e., staking one's overall self-evaluation on one's physical appearance) and self-objectification are associated with higher appearance anxiety and lower self-esteem among women. Although prior evidence separately links both appearance-contingent self-worth and self-objectification to these negative outcomes, no work has examined the mediating processes that may underlie this relationship. With the current project, we examined the relationship between appearance-contingent self-worth and self-objectification, and the degree to which this relationship is associated with higher appearance anxiety and lower overall self-esteem. We hypothesized that appearance-contingent self-worth would be positively associated with self-objectification; in turn, we expected self-objectification to be related to higher appearance anxiety, and ultimately, lower self-esteem. Across two studies, one cross-sectional ($N=208$) and one short-term longitudinal ($N=191$), we found compelling support for this hypothesis. These findings have practical and theoretical significance for both the self-objectification and contingent self-worth literatures.

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1. Introduction

Women in Western culture are pervasively viewed and evaluated by others in terms of their physical attractiveness (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). This perspective is not limited to only the judgments of others; indeed, women also commonly evaluate *themselves* in terms of their own attractiveness (i.e., their self-worth is contingent on their physical appearance). Previous research suggests that evaluating oneself in this manner potentially can have deleterious consequences for women's self-esteem, body image, and even the likelihood of developing a mental disorder (e.g., Breines, Crocker, & Garcia, 2008; Crocker, 2002; Noser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014). For the current research, we combine and build upon prior findings to examine the mediating processes that connect appearance-contingent self-worth, self-objectification, appearance anxiety, and self-esteem. In what follows, we briefly outline contingencies of self-worth

and self-objectification, followed by the rationale underlying our proposition.

1.1. Contingencies of self-worth

Self-esteem is traditionally conceptualized as a global positive or negative self-evaluation (e.g., Rosenberg, 1965). Some researchers, however, argue for a more nuanced approach that, rather than being concerned with one's overall level of self-esteem (high or low), instead focuses on the specific areas or domains in which self-esteem is based (Crocker & Knight, 2005; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). According to this view, people's global self-worth depends on successes or failures within one or more particular domains of contingency (e.g., academic competence); by comparison, self-worth may be relatively unaffected by events that occur outside the contingent domains. For example, a person can feel devastated by an academic failure, but relatively unconcerned with his/her lack of athletic prowess (or vice versa). It should also be noted that these domains of *contingent of self-worth* are not synonymous with a person's overall level of self-esteem. Rather, the specific domain(s) of contingency influence a person's overall self-evaluation by determining the unique standards required to

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychological Sciences, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907, United States.

E-mail addresses: adams213@purdue.edu (K.E. Adams), tyler@purdue.edu (J.M. Tyler), r.calogero@uwo.ca (R. Calogero), j3453@cornell.edu (J. Lee).

maintain his/her positive self-view (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

Research has identified a number of domains in which people commonly base their self-worth, including: academic competence, physical appearance, approval from generalized others, relationship status, and family support (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003; Sanchez & Kwang, 2007). Evidence suggests that most people base their self-worth in at least one of these domains, and specific contingency domains are thought to exert unique effects on motivation and behavior (e.g., Crocker et al., 2003). For example, state self-esteem fluctuates more in response to feedback that is (vs. is not) relevant to a person's specific contingent self-worth domain; people even expend time differently as a function of the specific domains in which their self-worth is based (e.g., academic contingent self-worth uniquely predicts time spent studying; family support contingent self-worth uniquely predicts time spent with family; Crocker et al., 2003; Crocker & Knight, 2005). Additionally, although researchers generally agree that having contingent self-worth in any domain can have negative consequences for motivation and well-being, specific domains of contingency are also linked to unique negative outcomes (e.g., academic contingent self-worth is uniquely associated with academic problems during college; Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Crocker & Park, 2004).

People with an *appearance-contingent* self-worth – that is, individuals who stake their global self-evaluation on whether they meet cultural standards for physical attractiveness – expend a great deal of time and effort enhancing their attractiveness (e.g., more time grooming and shopping, Crocker et al., 2003); however, they are still less satisfied with their appearance, and may be at greater risk for developing a body image or eating disorder (e.g., Overstreet & Quinn, 2012; Phillips, Moulding, Kyrios, Nedeljkovic, & Mancuso, 2011; Sanchez & Kwang, 2007). In all, basing self-worth on one's physical appearance not only is associated with specific negative consequences for people's view of and satisfaction with their physical appearance, but also their overall self-evaluation. In fact, although several domains of contingency are negatively associated with self-esteem, this is especially true for an appearance-based contingency (Crocker, Luhtanen, & Sommers, 2004; Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003).

1.2. Sexual and self-objectification

Sexual objectification is defined as separating out an individual's body or body parts from his/her personhood (Bartky, 1990), and includes behaviors such as offensive sexual comments, cat-calling, and objectifying gazes (i.e., leering). Theorists note that sexual objectification is more common for girls and women compared to boys and men in Western societies (e.g., Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Swim et al., 2001). For example, girls and women in the media are often portrayed in ways that emphasize their outward physical appearance over personality-level characteristics (Archer, Iritani, Kimes, & Barrios, 1983; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008). By comparison, media portrayals of boys and men place greater emphasis on the face, which is typically seen as being the center of personality and agentic thought (Archer et al., 1983). Complementing these findings, daily diary studies reveal that women experience everyday instances of sexual objectification as often as 1–2 times per week; this number is significantly greater than the frequency reported by men (Swim et al., 2001).

Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) was developed as a framework for understanding how experiences of sexual objectification impact women's health outcomes. In particular, the theory posits that, over time, repeated exposure to sexually objectifying experiences may socialize women to engage in a process of self-objectification, defined as viewing the self through

the lens of an objectifying observer. The level of one's exposure to objectifying media and the frequency of sexually objectifying experiences (e.g., cat-calling, leering) are positively associated with a woman's self-objectification levels, and are typically mediated by the internalization of cultural beauty standards (e.g., Moradi, Dirks, & Matteson, 2005; Vandenberg & Eggermont, 2012). Negative outcomes linked to self-objectification include less satisfaction with one's physical appearance, decreased well-being, increased appearance anxiety, increased risk for disordered eating, increased body shame, and increased monitoring of and preoccupation with one's appearance (i.e., body surveillance; Breines et al., 2008; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; see Moradi & Huang, 2008, for a review).

1.3. Current project

With the current project, we focus attention on the relationship between appearance-contingent self-worth and self-objectification, and their potential downstream consequences for appearance anxiety and self-esteem. As noted, evidence independently links both appearance-contingent self-worth and self-objectification to greater concerns with physical appearance and a general reduction in self-esteem (Crocker 2002; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Building from this work, we propose that appearance-contingent self-worth should be associated with higher self-objectification, which should in turn be associated with lower appearance anxiety (Fredrickson et al., 1998). Finally, for women who base their self-worth on meeting cultural standards of attractiveness, any concern regarding their success in doing so (i.e., greater appearance anxiety) should be associated with lower self-esteem (see Fig. 1). In what follows, we outline the rationale supporting these hypotheses.

Although to date no work has directly examined the relationship between appearance-contingent self-worth and self-objectification, a smattering of evidence offers tangential support for our hypotheses (Breines et al., 2008; Liss, Erchull, & Ramsey, 2011; Noser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014; Teng et al., 2017). After making appearance-based evaluations of highly attractive others, women exhibited greater body shame, but only if their self-esteem was contingent on a broad array of domains (i.e., not specific to any one; Patrick, Neighbors, & Knee, 2004). One could imagine that appearance-based evaluations partially simulate a self-objectifying mindset, and though the body shame finding was linked to broad-based contingent self-esteem, it is plausible that an appearance-contingent self-worth might also be linked to similar aversive outcomes. In addition, appearance-based self-worth is associated with behaviors that relate to the self-objectification process. For example, a few studies have found a link between appearance-contingent self-worth and *body surveillance*, a construct commonly viewed as a behavioral manifestation/outcome of self-objectification (Breines et al., 2008; Liss et al., 2011; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Noser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014; Teng et al., 2017). A subset of these studies found that body surveillance mediates the relationship between appearance-based self-worth and a woman's level of satisfaction with her appearance (Noser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014; Overstreet & Quinn, 2012). These findings lend partial support for the current hypotheses.

In all, we reasoned that basing self-worth on one's physical appearance may not only increase women's exposure to sexually objectifying cues, but also change how these objectifying situations are experienced. That is, objectifying depictions of women shape the very standards of attractiveness that women with an appearance-contingent self-worth are striving to attain. Thus, in their pursuit of physical attractiveness goals, women with an appearance-contingent self-worth may be more likely to consume objectifying media (e.g., beauty magazines), and to engage

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