

Not-So-Sexy: The Negative Impacts of Sexual Content on Both the Participant and Viewer

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Accompanying [Essay](#)

Introduction

Sexually suggestive and sexualized content in media is not something new or revolutionary. From advertisements to sell products to television and movies to entertain, pop culture media is no stranger to showing some skin. However, the constant bombardment of hypersexualized images and figures in media to consumers has reached a degree in recent decades that scholars have begun to wonder what effects this common phenomenon has on both the sexualized individuals themselves and those who view them. In this literature review, I explore the idea of sexualization and sexual objectification and its harmful effects. My review is going to begin with an analysis of what sexual objectification and sexualization are and how they differ in eyes of scholars. I will then explore the negative effects that sexual objectification has on those being objectified across various media through other people's perceptions of sexualized figures. I will then conclude my analysis by breaking down the negative effects that viewing this sexualized media can have on audiences viewing it, with a specific focus on the impact on male body satisfaction and the effects of body dissatisfaction on various facets of men's lives.

Sexualization and Sexual Objectification: Similar, but Distinct

In the discussions around this topic of sexual content in media and its impacts, two terms will likely be cited frequently: sexualization and sexual objectification. Both of these terms are relevant to the discussion of sexual content as a whole, but the issue arises in the way the terms are used. More specifically, the way the terms are frequently used interchangeably as if they mean the same thing. Although similar, the terms are certainly distinct in their denotation and refer to different phenomena in the field. The definitions of each differ slightly between scholars, but follow the same general principles. As defined by Fasoli et al. (2017), sexualization is "a phenomenon that implies attention on the person's appearance and thus can assume different shades: It can be merely beauty-based, namely, focusing on physical beauty, or sexually-based, namely, focusing on the person's sexual features and expected desires by implying his/her sexual readiness" (p. 338). In the same article, Fasoli et al. (2017) defines sexual objectification as "a representation of a person as a mere body/object for others' sexual desires" (p. 338). Other scholars seem to agree and follow these same general definitions while outlining these terms, with Bernard et al. (2020) defining sexualization as, "an emphasis on sexual appearance, physical beauty, and sexual appeal to other people" and sexual objectification as the phenomenon, "to appraise them as bodies and sexual body parts and behave toward them as if they were objects" (p. 134). Although

the terms may be used interchangeably by the general public, the scholarly definitions are distinct, with sexualization being a generalized increase in appearance in a sexual manner and sexual objectification being a phenomenon when sexualization reaches the point where the person being viewed is no longer a person, but an item with the sole purpose of sexual appeal. Not only are these terms distinct, however, but they also play different roles relating to the impacts sexual context can have on different groups.

Sexual Objectification: Impacting the Participant

The concept that an individual is reduced to a sexual object in the eyes of a viewer has various negative effects on the person being objectified and has been studied throughout various forms of pop culture media. These negative effects fall into two major areas: social perception and identity perception.

Effects on Social Perception

The effects that sexual objectification has on the perception of those being objectified in regards to social interaction is quite extensive and severe, with many of its effects being subconscious as a result of the way the brain categorizes sexual bodies. The human brain evaluates different types of things in different ways, with human bodies and faces being processed as a whole being, or configurally, and inanimate objects being processed as a collection of various elements in no particular arrangement, or analytically. Bernard et al. (2020) in their paper “The Sexualization–Objectification Link: Sexualization Affects the Way People See and Feel Toward Others” there is research suggesting that sexualized human bodies have been found to be more analytically processed in the human brain, as an object world, as opposed to the way a person is typically processed. In this same study by Bernard et al. (2020), it was discussed that using eye tracking technology, people tend to focus on the faces of sexualized bodies less and the bodies more than nonsexualized bodies. People are more likely to view sexualized bodies as objects instead of people, hence the term sexual objectification.

The impacts of perceiving people as objects, however, is quite severe, as when a person is perceived as less-than-human, they potentially get treated less-than-human. Compared to nonsexualized women, sexualized women are perceived as “possessing less warmth, less competence, less mind, less moral status, and less agency” (Bernard et al., 2020, p. 136). Additionally, research into the concept of empathy towards sexualized and nonsexualized women found that, both on the conscious and subconscious level, people tended to be less empathetic towards sexualized women than nonsexualized women.

Effects on Identity Perception

Sexual objectification additionally has impact on how sexualized individuals are viewed as people across multiple facets of media in regards to their identity and characteristics. In a study done by Elizabeth A. Daniels and Jennifer Ruh Linder (2021) titled “Sex Object vs. Athlete: Boys’ and Men’s Responses Toward Sexualized Male Athletes” a comparison was done between sexualized and performance images of male athletes and found that the athletes in the sexualized images were rated to have lower esteem, or being likeable and a role model, and lower competence, or having talent and athleticism, but higher sex appeal (Daniels & Linder 2021). A study done by Fasoli et al. (2017) entitled “Shades of Sexualization: When Sexualization Becomes Sexual Objectification” found similar results, but as opposed to being images of athletes they utilized images of models. Their findings also found that increased sexualization in images led to a decrease in ratings of competence. For images of men, the models in the sexualized images were additionally rated as less masculine with the increased amount of sexualization (Fasoli et al., 2017).

Sexualization: Impacting the Audience

While sexual objectification certainly impacts the participant in the media, the general increase in sexualized content has a negative impact on the viewer of that media as well.

Effects of Sexualized Content on Male Body Image

There have been numerous studies discussing the effects of sexualized and idealized body content on body image and body dissatisfaction, but much of that research concerned the effects that sexualized images of women had on the body satisfaction of women. Although there has not been as substantial a body of work around male body image, the scholarly research that has been conducted paints a very similar picture. When presented with images of average men vs muscular men, men who were shown images of muscular men had a decline in body satisfaction before and after viewing the images when men who viewed the average men did not (Lorenzen et al., 2004). Other research agrees, with another study having a decrease in men’s body satisfaction after viewing muscular men and slender men in advertisements as opposed to product only advertisements (Blashill, 2010) The concept that men being exposed to sexualized and idealized versions of their own bodies causing a decrease in body satisfaction aligns with the widely-accepted fact that sexualized and idealized imagery of women’s bodies causes body dissatisfaction in women (Lorenzen et al., 2004). Although all men would certainly bear the effects of this sexualized context, this decline in body satisfaction could be amplified to a select group of men in particular. Gay and bisexual men have been shown to already have lower body satisfaction rates than heterosexual men, with gay men also having lower rates than lesbian women and being similar to heterosexual women (Basabas et al., 2019).

Negative Effects of Body Dissatisfaction in Queer Men

There are a few negative effects that poor body satisfaction rates have shown to have on queer men. Poor body satisfaction rates in queer and bisexual men have a negative impact on sexual performance, with a lower positive perception of the body and an increased desire to be more muscular correlating to erectile dysfunction and poor body self-evaluation and poor body image during sex correlating to premature ejaculation (Levitan et al., 2018). Queer men's body dissatisfaction could also impact their lives outside the bedroom. Gay men with higher rates of body fat dissatisfaction also had higher rates of "depression, eating restraint, eating concerns, and social sensitivity" while those higher rates of muscular dissatisfaction also had higher rates of "social sensitivity" (Blashill, 2010, p. 314).

Conclusion

Sexualization and sexual exploitation are a common element of society in today's modern world. However, just because something is common or tolerated does not mean it is good. As shown in the review, the harmful effects of sexualized media not only negatively impact the participants in the sexualization and others perception of them, but also impacts the audience of this media and their perception of themselves in a negative way. Why should phenomena such as these be allowed to become normalized in the media that people consume? Especially in media that has a target demographic that is particularly susceptible to harmful effects from body dissatisfaction and that also preaches body inclusivity. One such example of this is the reality competition show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a show that is certainly no stranger to sexualization and sexual objectification of the male body with a target audience of queer men. Moving forward with my research, I will explore why a show as "inclusive" as *RuPaul's Drag Race* takes part in the sexualization and sexual objectification, the harm it is likely doing to its viewers, and what steps the show should take moving forward to truly be a place of body positivity and inclusivity.

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