

Body Image, Self-Objectification, and Appearance Maintenance Among College-Aged Women

Direct Original Research

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Abstract

Introduction: Perceptions about one's body can have a significant impact on social activities, quality of life, and overall psychological well-being. Women by far bear the brunt of negative psychological outcomes associated with poor body image. Little is known about the investment in appearance maintenance behaviors that women may engage to attain an idealized body standard. The current study investigated the connection between self-objectification, body image, and the time and money women invest in their appearance.

Methods: 450 college-aged ($M = 20.23$) women completed an online survey that assessed self-objectification, body image, and appearance maintenance (e.g., non-hygienic grooming) behaviors.

Results: Higher self-objectification scores were significantly correlated with body dissatisfaction ($r = .41, p < .001$). Self-objectification was also correlated with the amount of time ($r = .17, p < .001$) and money ($r = .21, p < .001$) that women invested in grooming. These associations suggest that women who engage in self-objectification tend to spend more time and money on appearance. There was also a significant association between grooming and body dysphoria ($r = .11, p = .039$).

Conclusions: Overall, these findings provide initial support that women who self-objectify invest more time and money in their appearance and tend to have fewer positive feelings towards their bodies.

Key Words: body dissatisfaction, non-hygienic grooming, objectification theory.

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Introduction

Technology-fueled innovations like the smartphone and a variety of social networking platforms have led to increased exposure to appearance-related content that often presents unrealistic or unattainable body standards^{1, 2}. While both men and women can be the focus of these media, women appear to be more sensitive to and affected by these ideals. In the United States, over 60% of women have reported experiences of negative body image or body dissatisfaction^{3, 4}. As a group, women are significantly less satisfied with all aspects of their bodies. Poor body image has

been linked with a host of negative mental health consequences. This includes depression, low self-esteem, and disordered eating^{5, 6}. Current knowledge pertaining to body image is considerable⁷. However, less attention has focused on appearance maintenance behaviors, like non-hygienic grooming (i.e., hair styling, hair removal, makeup application, nail adornment, and other grooming behaviors). The current study sought to examine the amount of time and money that women invest in appearance maintenance behaviors and explore the extent to which these activities are associated with self-objectification and body image.



Sexual objectification occurs when an outside observer reduces women's identities to that of an object of sexual desire, rather than a unique and complete human being⁸. Experiences of recurrent sexual objectification throughout their lifetime lead some women to internalize this view of the self as an object (i.e., self-objectification). Consequently, some women may view their bodies as entities that will constantly be evaluated based on appearance⁹. According to objectification theory, women who self-objectify engage in more appearance monitoring by comparing their appearance with idealized standards for beauty. They may also be more likely to try to achieve these standards thus, investing more time and financial resources in appearance. The primary goal of this research was to further clarify the connections between self-objectification, body image, and investment in appearance. We hypothesized: a) self-objectification predicts body image dissatisfaction and more negative views of one's body, b) self-objectification predicts greater resource investment (i.e., time and money) in appearance maintenance behaviors and c) resource investment in appearance behaviors (i.e., non-hygienic grooming) is associated with body image.

Scientific Methods

Participants

450 female students at a large southeastern university in North America completed study measures between 2019 and 2022. Responses that exceeded missingness tolerance or did not meet inclusion criteria were excluded from analyses. This left 380 participant responses in the final sample. Sample participants had a mean age of 20.23 years ($SD = 1.85$). The race and ethnic demographics included 50.3% of participants identifying as White, 23.6% Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, 15.2% Black or African American, 7.4% Asian, 1.2% Middle Eastern or North African, 1.9% other race, ethnicity or origin, and 0.4% of participants preferring not to disclose this information.

Protocol

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval and scale permissions were obtained, participants were recruited to complete an online survey using a link to the Qualtrics survey system. Participants were provided with information concerning the study's purpose and asked to consent to participate in the study. Study assessments included: appearance maintenance (non-hygienic grooming) items, Body Areas Satisfaction Scale (BASS)¹⁰, Situational Inventory of Body Image Dysphoria short form (SIBID-S)¹¹, Body-surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBC)¹², and demographic questions.

Self-objectification

Self-objectification was assessed with the Body-surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBC)¹². The subscale consists of 8 items in which participants rate various statements about self-surveillance, indicating the degree to which they engage in self-surveillance or close monitoring of their appearance. Due to self-surveillance and appearance monitoring being the physical manifestations of self-objectification, the surveillance subscale can be used as a reliable measure of self-objectification¹³. Response options on the subscale range from (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-objectification. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .82.

Body Image

The Body Areas Satisfaction Scale (BASS) was used to assess participants' self-reported level of satisfaction with individual body areas (e.g., hair, face, midsection)¹⁰. This was a 9-item scale with a 5-point response set (1=very satisfied, to 5=very dissatisfied). A mean score for the overall level of body satisfaction was calculated. Higher scores indicate higher levels of dissatisfaction. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .83.

The Situational Inventory of Body-image Dysphoria short form (SIBID-S) is a 20-item version of the original 48-item SIBID¹¹. Participants indicate how frequently they experience negative body image emotions in a variety of situations and contexts, such as looking in the mirror or attending a social gathering¹¹. Responses are rated on a 5-point scale (0=never, 4=always/almost always), with higher scores indicating more frequent negative body image emotions¹¹. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .96.

Appearance Maintenance (Non-hygienic Grooming)

Participants were asked to estimate the average amount of money (in US dollars), and the average amount of time spent on appearance behaviors. Participants indicated time and money allotted to: a) hair removal, b) hair styling, c) makeup application, d) nail adornment, and e) other grooming behaviors. Participants reported their estimated financial

costs for appearance maintenance, yielding an overall estimate of the dollar amount spent on grooming in a typical one-month period. Participants also reported the amount of time devoted to grooming, yielding an overall estimate of the number of hours spent grooming in a typical one-month period.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive analyses, including means and standard deviations, were completed to explore the estimated amount of time and money participants spent in a one-month period on appearance. To examine the statistical association between participants' self-reported levels of self-objectification, body satisfaction, and appearance behaviors, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed. Prior to statistical testing, the alpha level was set to .05. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 28.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Participants reported spending 0 to 138 hours on appearance-related behaviors in a month ($M = 28.35$, $SD = 21.10$), thus a wide range of responses were recorded. As it relates to the amount of money (US dollars) participants reported spending on appearances in a month, responses ranged from \$0 to \$1,092 ($M = 145.75$, $SD = 139.23$).

Self-objectification and Body Image

See Table 1 for all correlation coefficients. We hypothesized that self-objectification and body image would be associated. Correlational analysis revealed a positive relationship between OBC self-objectification scores and BASS body (dis)satisfaction ($r = .41$, $p < .001$). Additionally, a positive correlation was found between OBC self-objectification scores and SIBID-S body-image dysphoria. This confirmed our hypothesis.

Self-objectification and Appearance Maintenance

As hypothesized, a significant association was found between self-objectification and the financial cost of appearance ($r = .17$, $p < .001$). Self-objectification and the amount of time spent on appearance were also significantly positively correlated ($r = .21$, $p < .001$). Overall, these findings suggest that women with higher levels of self-objectification tend to spend more time and money on appearance maintenance behaviors, like non-hygienic grooming.

Appearance Maintenance and Body Image

We also found significant relationships between body image dysphoria and appearance behaviors. For example, participant scores on the SIBID-S were significantly positively correlated with money spent on appearance ($r = .11$, $p = .039$). This confirmed our hypothesis.

Table 1. Inter-Correlations for Self-Objectification, Body Image, and Appearance Maintenance Behaviors

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Appearance-Time	---				
2. Appearance-Money	.33**	---			
3. OBC-Surveillance	.21**	.17**	---		
4. BASS	.14*	.12*	.41**	---	
5. SIBID-S	.17**	.11*	.54**	.76**	---

Significant values highlighted * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$. OBC=Self-objectification, BASS = body (dis)satisfaction, SIBID-S = body image dysphoria

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to quantify the financial and temporal impact of appearance maintenance, like non-hygienic grooming, in connection to self-objectification and body image perceptions. Although previous research has connected appearance behaviors, such as makeup application, to experiences of objectification there was no direct measurement of the time or money invested in the behavior¹⁴. In a diverse sample of women, the current study indicates that self-objectification is connected to tendencies of more body dissatisfaction and more negative



perceptions of one's body. These results are consistent with previous research showing self-objectification's links to negative psychological outcomes¹⁵. In this sample, increased self-objectification was related to more frequent and costly grooming habits, which confirmed our hypotheses. It is of note that women with fewer body image disturbances spent less time and money on appearance.

While the findings of this research are noteworthy, there are some limitations that must be considered. Due to the research being based on participants' retrospective accounts of how much time and money they spent on appearance, it is possible that women in the sample overestimated or underestimated these habits. Research using experiential sampling that might target in-the-moment recording of when and how much money participants spend on appearance may provide more accurate data. Furthermore, the magnitude of effects was small. Thus, the practical impact of the findings must be tested using other externally valid measures.

Conclusions

As noted by previous research, women who are high in self-objectification may be more attentive to the evaluation of their appearance¹³. The results of this study suggest that women who are high in self-objectification are more likely to feel dissatisfied with their appearance and experience more frequent negative body image emotions. Overall, the current research indicates that objectification not only poses a psychological risk to women but also has an aggregate negative impact on their financial and temporal resources.

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