

# The Relationship between Self-Objectification and Life Satisfaction: The Role of Rumination

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## **Abstract**

Self-objectification is known to predict low life satisfaction in young adult women. However, there is reason to assume that due to a difference in coping strategies, some women are more prone to the negative effects of self-objectification than others. In this regard, the present study investigated how self-objectification and ruminative coping are related to life satisfaction in young women. In a cross-sectional design, 127 Dutch young women completed an online survey measuring self-objectification, ruminative response style and life satisfaction. A multiple regression analysis was conducted with self-objectification, ruminative response style and the interaction term of self-objectification x ruminative response style as predictors and life satisfaction as outcome. Firstly, it was expected that self-objectification would have a negative relationship with life satisfaction. Furthermore, it was expected that the relationship between self-objectification and life satisfaction would be moderated by ruminative response style. Both hypotheses were confirmed. The results indicated that the negative relationship between self-objectification and life satisfaction is fully conditional on the tendency to ruminate in response to negative cognitions. Only if the tendency to cope with rumination is high, a negative relationship between self-objectification and life satisfaction is established. These findings have several implications to increase life satisfaction in women. In clinical practice, mindfulness interventions should be used to reduce ruminative coping and thereby the negative effects, self-objectification has on mental health. Furthermore, informing citizens about the effects of coping strategies may lead women from future generations to be more satisfied with their lives.

In western societies, women face a lot of pressure to hold up with the current beauty ideal. The sociocultural emphasis on women's outward appearance has never been greater (Grogan, 2016). Women's youthfulness and thinness are major elements of the beauty ideal in western societies. A symmetric face and a proper waist-to-hip ratio are also part of this ideal (Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005). According to Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory, this beauty ideal is enforced by *objectification*. Objectification refers to the treatment of women as bodies and not as individuals. When women are treated as bodies, they are devaluated to their usefulness to others. Objectification is primarily carried out through sexual gaze. Women are always exposed to objectifying gaze. When it comes to interpersonal encounters, women receive more gaze from men than they return (Hall, 1990). Furthermore, objectifying gaze is omnipresent in visual media. From advertisements over women's magazines to music videos: bodies and body parts of women get highlighted constantly. As a result, viewers themselves align a sexualizing gaze (Mulvey, 1975). In the framework of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), being exposed to sexual objectification for a longer time leads women to internalize objectification. Women's internalization of objectification is referred to as *self-objectification*. Self-objectification is manifested as habitual body monitoring and persistent consciousness of the body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Thus as a consequence of being objectified, women start seeing themselves as objects and evaluate themselves based on bodily appearances.

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) specified shame, anxiety, and a decreased awareness of internal bodily states as the most important psychological consequences of self-objectification. Further research on young adult women has deepened on these propositions. In an experiment of Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, and Twenge (1998), self-objectification was manipulated by dividing women and men in two conditions each, where they had either worn a swimsuit or a sweater while performing a math test. Because self-

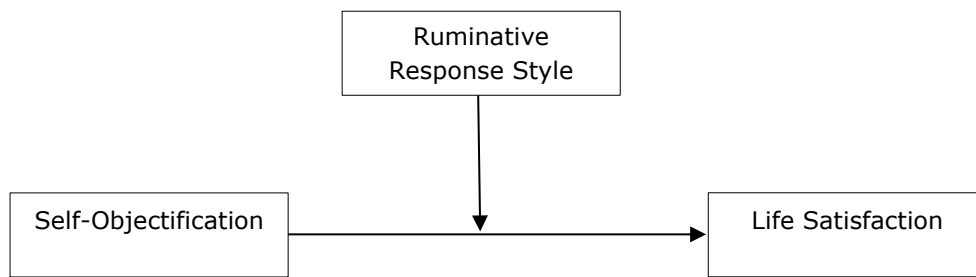
objectification disrupts attentional resources, women in swimsuits performed worse than women in sweaters did. This effect was not present in men. While men in swimsuits reported feeling somewhat bashful, women rather felt more disgusted and distasteful when conducting the experiment. Additionally, women in the swimsuit condition were more likely to feel ashamed of their own body. Study results from Roberts and Gettman (2004) support that self-objectification leads to feelings of disgust, anxiety about one's appearance, and shame about one's body. Body shame plays a special role, as it partly explains why self-objectification also lead to disordered eating (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). Woman who are ashamed of their own body have the urge to regain control over their body weight. Furthermore, the lack of internal awareness of self-objectification accounts for leads to depression in women. This makes self-objectification an important contributor in the development of mental disorders (Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002). Considering that self-objectification has very broad and rather negative consequences on women's cognitions and feelings, it is not surprising that self-objectification has been found to predict low satisfaction with life in young adult women (Mercurio & Landry, 2008).

While there is empirical evidence that found self-objectification to be negatively associated with life satisfaction in young women (Mercurio & Landry, 2008), little research is done on factors affecting this relationship. However, there is reason to assume that due to a difference in coping strategies, some women are more prone to the negative effects of self-objectification than others. *Coping* refers to a response to negative emotions and cognitions (Snyder, 1999). According to the response style theory, which was originally formulated to describe the development and maintenance of depressive moods (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987), there are basically two manners to cope with negative cognitions. One is to actively distract oneself from negative thoughts. People who do that generally recover relatively fast from their negative thoughts. On the other hand, people who have a ruminative response style tend

to ruminate about the implications and causes of their moods. Rumination does not do any good in recovering from negative cognitions, since recalling negative thoughts and experiences rather lead to an increase of negative affect. When confronted with self-objectifying thoughts, women with a ruminative response style would probably tend to frequently recall thoughts like “I will never look as good as I want to.” and “I’m disgusted by myself.”. However, such a reaction is concerning as the findings of Calogero and Jost (2011) indicate that women who have the tendency to avoid cognitive closure to sexism do better in diminishing self-objectification. When confronted with sexism cues, women who avoid cognitive closure are less affected by self-objectification than women who do not avoid cognitive closure to these cues (Calogero & Jost, 2011). Therefore, high levels of rumination might increase the negative effect self-objectification has on life satisfaction.

#### *The present study*

The present study investigated associations of self-objectification and ruminative response style with life satisfaction in young adult women. Based on previous findings (Mercurio & Landry, 2008), it was expected that self-objectification would predict low satisfaction with life. Furthermore, previous studies indicated that self-objectification might have more severe effects with a greater tendency to ruminate in response to negative cognitions (Calogero & Jost, 2011). Therefore, ruminative response style was hypothesized to moderate the relationship between self-objectification and life satisfaction in young adult women. These proposed hypotheses are summarized schematically in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Ruminative Response Style moderates the relationship between Self-Objectification and Life Satisfaction

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

Participants were recruited via the social media platform ‘Facebook’ and via the social and behavioural sciences research participation system from Utrecht University. Women between 18 and 30 years old were invited to take part in an online study on "body image and sexual intimacy". A short description of the study and a link to the corresponding online questionnaire were given. Women who were interested could access the questionnaire via that link. After opening the link, participants had to complete an informed consent form, in which they were informed about anonymity and voluntary participation. All questions were mandatory to avoid missing data. After completing all questions, participants got the chance to note down their e-mail address to receive a debriefing and the results of the study later on. Social sciences students from Utrecht University received one course credit for participation while other participants did not receive compensation. On average, it took 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

A total of 127 women fully completed the questionnaire. However 48 participants (27.4 %) did not fully complete the questionnaire and therefore were excluded from further

analysis. The majority of valid participants were students (83.5 %,  $n = 106$ ). A total of 61 participants (48 %) received course credit for participation. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 30 years with a mean age of 22 years ( $SD = 2.34$ ). Furthermore, it is worth noting that the sample used in the present study lacks cultural diversity. Most participants (97.6 %,  $n = 124$ ) indicated their ethnicity as 'European' while the rest of the participants indicated other ethnicities (0.4%,  $n = 3$ ).

## **Measures**

All scales were translated from English to Dutch using the translate-retranslate method (re-translation by a native speaker), unless otherwise stated.

### *Self-Objectification*

The Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinley & Hyde, 1996) was used to measure self-objectification (e.g., "I really don't think I have much control over how my body looks."). This scale consists of 24 items. Items were scored on a 7-point Likert Scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Items were recoded if appropriate and added together so that higher scores indicate greater self-objectification. Previous research indicated good scale score reliability and validity (Greenleaf & McGreer, 2006; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Cronbach's alpha in the current study was .79.

### *Life Satisfaction*

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was used to measure life satisfaction (e.g., "I am satisfied with my life."). This scale consists of 5 items. Items were scored on a 7-point Likert-Scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Items were added together so that higher scores indicate greater life satisfaction. In their review, Pavot and Diener (1993) found good scale score reliability ( $\alpha = .79 - .89$ ) and validity. Cronbach's alpha in the current study was .88.

### *Ruminative Response Style*

The Dutch version (Raes, Hermans, & Eelen, 2003) of the Ruminative Response Style Questionnaire was used to measure ruminative response style (e.g., “think about how sad you feel.”). This scale consists of 26 items. For answering each item, participants had to indicate their answers via a 4-point Likert-Scale from 1 = almost never to 4 = almost always. Items were added together so that higher scores indicate a greater tendency to ruminate in response to negative cognitions. Findings of Raes et al., (2003) supported the reliability and psychometric validity of the scale. Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was .94.

### **Data Analysis**

IBM SPSS Statistics 23 was used to analyze the data. For testing the first hypothesis, a Pearson correlation analysis was performed to assess the individual link between self-objectification and life satisfaction. For testing the second hypothesis, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. For conducting the regression analysis, Model 1 of Hayes’ (2012) macro ‘PROCESS’ was used with self-objectification as independent variable, ruminative response style as moderator, and life satisfaction as dependent variable. Before conducting the analysis, the means of the study variables were centred to avoid multicollinearity (Robinson & Schumacker, 2009).

### **Results**

The Pearson correlations between the study variables are presented in Table 1. In line with the first hypothesis, self-objectification was negatively associated with life satisfaction. Furthermore, rumination was positively related to self-objectification and negatively related to life satisfaction.



Table 1.

*Correlations between self-objectification, life satisfaction, and ruminative response style*

<b>Variable</b>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>
1. Self-Objectification	102.21	14.68	-	-
2. Ruminative Response Style	46.72	12.98	.24*	-
3. Life Satisfaction	23.52	6.39	-.23*	-.50**

*Note* \* $p < .05.$ , \*\* $p < .001$

The results of the conducted multiple regression analysis are presented in Table 2. In the model used, the proportion of variance explained is significantly greater than 0 ( $F(3,123) = 17,59, p < .000$ ). Self-objectification, ruminative response style, and the interaction of self-objectification and ruminative response style explained 30% of the variance of life satisfaction. Of that explained variance, 4% was due to inclusion of the interaction term. Self-objectification was no significant predictor of life satisfaction ( $p = .256$ ). However, a more ruminative response style did significantly predict lower life satisfaction ( $p < .000$ ). In line with the second hypothesis, the interaction term self-objectification x ruminative response style was significant ( $p = .011$ ). Therefore, the conditional effects of self-objectification on life satisfaction at values of ruminative response style were investigated (Table 3). Note that the terms ‘low’, ‘average’, and ‘high’ refer to the level of ruminative response style in comparison with the current sample. For a low tendency to ruminate, there was no relationship between self-objectification and life satisfaction ( $p = .407$ ). For an average tendency to ruminate, there was also no relationship between self-objectification and life satisfaction ( $p = .256$ ). However, there was a negative relationship between self-objectification and life satisfaction when the tendency to ruminate was high ( $p = .006$ ).

Table 2.

*Self-objectification and ruminative response style as predictors of life satisfaction*

<b>Model</b>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Self-Objectification	-.04	.03	-1.14
Ruminative Response Style	-.20**	.04	-4.83
Self-Objectification x Ruminative Response Style	-.01*	.00	-2.60

*Note.* \* $p < .05.$ , \*\* $p < .001.$ , Means centered for products

Table 3.

*Conditional effects of self-objectification on life satisfaction at values of ruminative response style*

Life Satisfaction				
<b>Moderator</b>	<i>Level</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Ruminative Response Style	Low	.04	.05	.83
	Average	-.04	.03	-1.14
	High	-.12*	.04	-2.77

*Note.* \* $p < .05.$ , \*\* $p < .001.$ , Means centered for products

## Discussion

Because women internalize psychological mechanisms of sexist ideology (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), the present study investigated how self-objectification and life satisfaction were related to each other in young women. Herein, the tendency to ruminate in response to negative cognitions were taken into account. The first expectation of this study was that self-objectification would have a negative relationship with life satisfaction. The

second expectation of this study was that the relationship between self-objectification and life satisfaction would be moderated by ruminative response style.

In line with the first hypothesis, self-objectification was negatively related to life satisfaction. This finding supports earlier evidence for the negative relationship between self-objectification and life satisfaction (Mercurio & Landry, 2008). Besides of triggering negative affect (Fredrickson et al., 1998; Roberts & Gettman, 2004) and disrupting women's attentional resources (Fredrickson et al., 1998), self-objectification has shown to be a relevant contributor in the development of several mental health problems (Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998).

The second hypothesis was also confirmed. The relationship between self-objectification and life satisfaction was found to be moderated by ruminative response style. The findings of the present study indicate that the negative relationship between self-objectification and life satisfaction is fully conditional on the tendency to ruminate in response to negative cognitions. A high tendency to cope with rumination makes self-objectification establish a negative relationship with life satisfaction whereas an average and a low tendency do not. These findings support the theory that the avoidance of cognitive closure to sexism cues is effective in diminishing self-objectification while a cognitive approach to these cues is not (Calogero & Jost, 2011). The tendency to repeatedly think about one's subsistence as sexual object makes women suffer from self-objectification. Therefore women are better off when they avoid cognitive confrontation with their objectifying thoughts. When they do not ruminate about objectifying thoughts, self-objectification does not affect their satisfaction with life. Self-objectification might still trigger instantaneous negative affect but without continuous recall of this negative affect, self-objectification has no impact on women's satisfaction with life as a whole. This assumption is in line with the finding that people with a low tendency to ruminate can buffer negative affect by recalling

positive life events (Joormann & Siemer, 2004). This ability is impaired in ruminators and therefore, negative affect which comes with self-objectification might have more severe effects on them.

The findings of the present study have clinical implications. To reduce the negative effects of self-objectification, the tendency to cope with rumination should be addressed. Mindfulness based stress reduction training has shown to be effective in decreasing rumination (Deyo, Wilson, Ong, & Koopman, 2009). In mindfulness, one has to perceive all feelings that come along and accept them. Based on this simple allegory, mindfulness brings ones attention back to the present moment. Mindfulness meditation interventions should be used to reduce the effects of self-objectification. This implication is relevant for clinical practice as self-objectification has shown to predict several mental health problems (Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). Furthermore the implementation of social programs are recommended to prevent the development of a ruminative response style in women. According to Nolen-Hoeksema and Jackson (2001), women have more difficulties with controlling negative emotions because they were not socialized to use active coping strategies during childhood as much as men were. Therefore women tend to belief that they cannot cope with negative emotions and rely on rumination. Thus, on a societal level, parents should be informed that adopting an active coping strategy is relevant for their children to cope with negative cognitions they face later in life. Informing citizens about the effects of coping strategies may lead women from future generations to be more satisfied with their lives.

The results of this study must be considered in light of study limitations. Firstly, the attrition rate in the present study is high. It is possible that people who were affected the most by self-objectification did not fill out the whole questionnaire as some of the questions were too confronting for them. This assumption gets more plausible as there is evidence that self-

objectifying cues instantaneously trigger negative affect (Fredrickson et al., 1998; Roberts & Gettman, 2004). Therefore people who suffer the most of self-objectification might have stopped filling in the questionnaire, which could have affected the results. Furthermore, all data of the present study are correlational. Therefore, it not possible to draw any causal conclusions between self-objectification and life satisfaction. Longitudinal studies are needed to further address these issues. Additionally, the cultural background of the present sample lacks diversity. Almost all participants indicated their ethnicity as 'European'. Therefore, the cross-cultural generalizability of the present findings is questionable (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010). For instance in China, gender roles are more conservative than they are in the United Kingdom (Higgins, Zheng, Liu, & Sun, 2002), and therefore women in China may perceive objectification differently than Westerners. Hence, replicating the present study in a more diverse sample is advised to prove the findings of the present study to hold up in different cultural backgrounds.

Despite its limitations, the present study has revealed new insights with regards to life satisfaction in young adult women. For young adult women a higher tendency to cope with self-objectification with rumination is accompanied by a greater risk of getting unsatisfied with life. In the context of contemporary media culture, where women are continuously exposed to objectification (Grogan, 2016), these insights can be used to improve women's satisfaction with life.

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