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Men’s partner-objectification vs women’s perceived partner-objectification in heterosexual couples: Outcomes for women’s self-objectification, sexual self-consciousness, and orgasm frequency

**Katie Read**

*Below I discuss my MSc in Health Psychology dissertation which explored partner-objectification in the context of heterosexual couples and received the 2024 DHP MSc Research Award.*

***Keywords:*** *partner-objectification, self-objectification, sexual self-consciousness, orgasm, heterosexual couples*

I am incredibly grateful to be granted this award and delighted to hear that the judges ‘were very impressed with my depth of knowledge in this important area of work, using robust methodology to provide novel insights that they were sure will make a significant contribution to health psychology research and practice’. As part of the award, I was invited to present my project at this year's Division of Health Psychology Annual Conference at the University of Stirling.

Although this wasn’t the first conference I had attended, it was the first I presented at – my nervousness was further elevated by the fact my presentation was scheduled to be one of the last talks! I put this to the back of my mind, as I enjoyed listening to a panel discussion with Professors Marie and Derek Johnston and later keynotes from Professors Angel Chater and Vivien Swanson. I enjoyed networking with other Health Psychology researchers in the area of Women’s Health and hearing recent research from researchers whose textbooks I had cited in my undergraduate degree and Master’s. Unlike the previous conference I attended, I felt everyone at the DHP conference had a shared language – we all knew what the TDF (Cane et al., 2012) and COM-B (Michie et al., 2011) were – and it certainly promoted this feeling of cohesion. After the first day, I managed to walk around the University of Stirling’s stunning campus and then joined the evening meal which was followed by Ceilidh dancing.

I was pleased to see many conference attendees join the room for my presentation and received such a warm welcome from Dr Caroline Brett who was chairing the session. The encouraging smiles around the room put me at ease when presenting my MSc project – I certainly appreciated their patience as I introduced each of the concepts that make up my title and analyses. The discussion following my presentation was invaluable as we picked apart the generalisability of my findings and potential future avenues for research in other populations – by the end we had pretty much co-produced a whole three-year PhD project! It was certainly an enjoyable experience and has made me look forward to presenting at future conferences.

Below, I discuss my MSc research, specifically reflecting on conducting research with couples and the interesting findings that emerged because of this.

**Partner Objectification in the Context of Heterosexual Couples**

When first considering my MSc project, I knew I wanted to use a quantitative design. At BSc level, I’d conducted qualitative interviews and so wanted to push my skills in quantitative data analysis. I knew I wanted to become a researcher and believed that with statistics, it’s a case of ‘use it or lose it’. Dr Verena Klein was predominately a quantitative researcher in sexual health. She described how she was keen to conduct couples research looking at objectification theory. Throughout my higher education, I always knew I had to have a passion for the topic I was exploring to truly do it justice and (after a quick Google search to clarify my understanding of objectification) I knew the topic was ideal!

Objectification theory proposes that in Western heteronormative culture, women are viewed merely as a body, valued for its use, pleasure and consumption by and for others, which manifests in women’s self-consciousness and habitual monitoring of their body’s outward appearance- a term referred to as self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Objectification theory research has looked at its correlates to depression, eating disorders and (comparatively less) sexual dysfunction (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Despite this, research has found associations between women’s self-objectification and orgasm, whereby sexual self-consciousness - self-focused attention on one's appearance during sex (Masters & Johnson, 1970) – mediates the relationship between self-objectification and sexual functioning, which includes orgasm.

Understandably, sexual activity with a romantic partner can create a context for objectification to occur, but this is scarcely reflected in current research (Woertman & Van den Brink, 2012). Recently, emerging research has begun to explore partner-objectification (e.g., Pecini et al., 2022) – monitoring of one’s partner’s outward appearance and evaluation of value based on this. Separately, others have explored perceived partner-objectification (Mahar et al., 2020), suggesting its greater importance in comparison. This research aimed to fill in these gaps: add to the emerging research on self-objectification and sexual functioning (specifically orgasm), build onto research using couples and explore both men’s self-reported and women’s perceived partner-objectification.

I made several simple correlation hypotheses as well as those relating to serial mediations: higher self-reported or perceived partner-objectification and lower orgasm frequency would be serially mediated by higher self-objectification and sexual self-consciousness. This was based on previous research, and these hypotheses made theoretical sense.

With the help of Prolific – an online research participation platform which has features designed to recruit couples - I carried out the lengthy process of screening and collecting data from couples, being vigilant to imposter participants pretending to sign up as a couple and following up with partners to ensure I had the data for both participants. Although tedious at the time, it was worth it! I managed to recruit full data from 160 eligible heterosexual couples.

A personal objective of my MSc project was to push myself beyond the statistics taught as part of my Master’s course. This inexperience was the first thing I turned to when one of my serial mediation analyses wasn’t significant (let’s be honest, we all want a significant result!). Contrary to hypotheses, my serial mediation analyses revealed men’s self-reported partner-objectification did not indirectly influence women’s orgasm frequency via self-objectification and sexual self-consciousness. However, women’s perception of higher partner-objectification *was* indirectly associated with their lower orgasm frequency via heightened self-objectification and sexual self-consciousness. *‘But what I’m predicting makes sense- it must be something I’ve done wrong!’* After quadruple checking and a reassuring phone call with Verena, I realised my findings were arguably more interesting than if they had been both significant.

*‘Why is there a difference? Are the two concepts not reporting on the same thing?’* Turning back to my correlations table, I was surprised to find women’s perceived partner-objectification and men’s self-reported partner-objectification were weakly correlated, meaning not all couples reported similar levels of partner-objectification taking place – some women reported higher perceived partner-objectification and their male partners reported lower perpetrations of partner-objectification and vice versa. This made me consider why there was a difference between women’s perceived partner-objectification and men’s self-reported partner-objectification, which would explain why one serial mediation was significant and the other was not. Past research has found men to be inaccurate in reporting, often underestimating (e.g., Rothgerber et al., 2021), whereas women have been found to overestimate, suggested as a form of protection against vulnerability in a relationship (e.g., Waddell & Overall, 2023). An alternative reason could be subjectivity related to objectification (e.g., Rothgerber et al., 2021). One item of the partner-objectification measures relates to clothing and feeling comfortable, which could draw on one’s perspectives of clothing for fashion instead of attempts to satisfy the male gaze.

All these potential explanations feed into why it was so crucial that objectification is explored in the context of heterosexual romantic relationships and for future research in this area to do so too. This research supports the notion that perhaps women’s perception of their male partner’s behaviour is of greater importance to their self-objectification and sexual outcomes (i.e., sexual self-consciousness and orgasm) than his account of his behaviour.

**Next Steps**

The MSc project and MSc course have provided me with confidence and skills as I pivot my feminist research interests and embark on completing a PhD, developing an intervention to enhance primary care practitioners' communication during consultations about menstrual problems.

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