# SEXUALISATION OF WOMEN IN THE MEDIA IN MALAYSIA

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## ABSTRACT

This is a conceptual paper to evaluate the sexualisation of women in media. Recently there has been a rise in sexually objectified portrayals of women in mainstream media. Women are reduced to their bodies and as such are viewed as having no personhood causing a female's worth to be dependent on her appearance (Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2010). The present research paper examines how women are affected by the reduction to objects to fulfil the sexual pleasures of men. Using the recent research available, a thorough analysis was conducted to understand how sexual objectification affects consumer culture, self-esteem in adolescents, and lastly the beauty standards in Malaysia. The results reveal how a patriarchal culture promotes the objectification of women to sell products, sometimes selling the actual objectified women. Additionally, this sexual objectification is internalized to self-objectification that undermines self-esteem and promotes self-hatred and sometimes self-harm. Research about sexual objectification in other countries like India and Pakistan was used to compare how different cultures use and reduce women to objects (Lepcha, 2018; Ullah & Khan, 2014). Finally, a comprehensive analysis on the limitations and gaps in this research field showcases how future research can improve and expand on objectification theory. Ultimately, understanding the sexual objectification of women in media can promote media literacy and improve self-confidence. Finally, lack of empirical evidence is recognised in this paper and several suggestions are made for future research and recommendation for enactment of a new law pertaining to sexualisation of women in media.

*Keywords: sexualisation, women, objectification*

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Any remaining errors or omissions rest solely with the author(s) of this paper.

## 1.        Introduction

The media has an enormous impact on eradicating or perpetuating gender disparities, which is a significant concern for human civilisation. The media industry's projection of a woman's body determines whether her social status is that of an "object" or that of an "individual." However, when it comes to presenting women in a dignified manner, the media has failed miserably. For decades, women's 'objectification' has been a major source of concern. It has been the subject of lengthy debates, arguments, and sloganeering in academic discourse. In the era of the digital revolution, the same media communication plays a dominant role in the socialisation process. The image of women in media, thus, can be a major precursor in creating, shaping, and structuring gender roles and society's perception towards women as a class. Social networking sites attach great emphasis to visualizations, including massive advertisements and images. These visual impressions idealized body shape which induces young people to objectify their bodies (Manago, A. M., Ward, L. M., Lemm, K. M., Reed, L., & Seabrook, R. 2015). According to

objectification theory by (Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. A. 1997) when women are frequently exposed to attractive and appearance-centric social media pictures, they are more physically dissatisfied than men.

Social media used greatly impacts self-identification and self- construction of gender, especially among female users (Blower, 2016). Online environments allow women to create their own image of self and construct their own idea of femininity. The role of sexuality in these online environments holds major influence in this self-construction. Sexuality discourses on social media are shaping women's experience with technology, their perceptions of themselves, and ultimately, their educational and career choices and goals (Ashcraft, 2015). Young women can actively participate in this sexual conversation via sexting and sexual messaging through apps like Snapchat. These experiences can shape a woman's gender construction and self-expectations of sexuality as early as 12 years old (Garcia-Gómez, 2017).

Despite the fact that many of these decisions are made in an online or virtual setting, the effects of those decisions are felt psychologically and physically in the actual world. More frequent use of image-based social media platforms like Instagram is linked to greater self-objectification, especially when the user engages with celebrity culture (Fardouly, Willburger, & Vartanian, 2018). However, this link also presents when the user engages with non-celebrities on social media as well. The use of social media to observe and monitor attractive peers, combined with exposure to increasingly sexualized mass media, stimulates self-objectification and critical self-surveillance over time (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2016). This self- objectification and self-surveillance can lead to a misunderstanding or misrepresentation idea of peer norms regarding sex. According to (Van Oosten, Peter, and Vandenbosch 2017) suggest this misrepresentation can lead to greater promiscuity among teenage users and even a willingness to engage in casual sex offline based on online perceptions of peer norms. Social media can perpetuate rape culture offline via online celebration of male sexual conquests, slut shaming, and sexualization of women (Sills et al., 2016).

## 2. Problem Statement

To grab attention, advertisements frequently cross the line into the unlawful (Shafiq, Haque, Abdullah, & Jan, 2017). Malaysia's government has changed the rigorous Malaysian Advertising Code of Ethics for Television and Radio to control the content of commercials and advertisements by prohibiting the use of sex to promote items and services (Advertising Standards Authority Malaysia, 2021). Scenes of models undressing are not permitted, and female models must be covered from the neckline to the legs. These requirements, however, fall far short of ethical and other standards of conduct, such as honesty (Ikonen, Luoma-aho,& Bowen, 2017), deceptive and unfair practices (Passarini, Cavicchi, Santini, & Mazzantini, 2017), sexual violence (Huhmann & Limbu, 2016) and exaggerated information (Huat, 2017; Lestari, 2020). Because of misleading and deceptive information in diverse advertising copy, customers' perception is adverse toward the organisation (Majedul Huq, 2016). As a result, conventional and branded businesses are unable to achieve consumer satisfaction and their ultimate goal.

Currently, numerous television advertising and women's magazines promote body care products to women, who are encouraged to maintain their appearance at all costs by utilising various cosmetic products (Najihah, 2020). Similarly, Singh &

Banerjee (2018) mentioned that women are frequently accompanied by brand ambassadors and endorsements in advertising that products, with the model typically being a well-known individual or celebrity. Thus, people will view commercials not just for good things but also for the image and person portrayed in the product. Recent evidence revealed that visuals in a television commercial, social media promotion, magazine advertisement, or any form of advertising excites consumers' attitudes and inspires customers to change their behaviour (Jain, 2018). The usage of fit, attractive women dressed in tiny suits in cosmetics advertising has drawn criticism from feminist and human rights organisations. On the other hand, advertisers continue to rely on the technique to promote their brands.

According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content Code (CMCF, 2004), advertising is considered misleading if it contains false, or deceptive material that is likely to influence the consumer to act in a way that they would not otherwise. Women as decorative objects in advertising are a near-classic, dating all the way back to advertising's inception. A woman as a sex symbol of visual attraction for a guy is an endless subject that continues to increase in popularity and has already become ingrained in popular culture. Woman objectification by definition means the action of degrading women personality and dignity by turning them into objects (Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020).

## 3. Literature Review

Images of the perfect body in social media often give the public a psychological hint that it is easy for people to become slim because the body is very malleable (Brownel, 1991). These are usually displayed in advertisements such as slimming and shaping body advertisements, and online social platforms such as Instagram, Tik Tok, Weibo. The media images are all beautified and edited to a large extent, so what is shown in front of the public is unrealistic (Monro, F., Huon, G. 2005). When people are consistently exposed to numerous perfect images, they begin to pursue this unreality. Moreover, this also leads to comparison and people use it as their own standard which forms body dissatisfaction and strives for perfection (Richins, M. L. 1991). However, advertisers and operators are looking at the public's attention and dissatisfaction with their own bodies, thus developing marketing strategies and catering to their ideas. When people see the slim image in the advertisement, it will persuade people to buy products and become the same as the people in the image. In other words, people may prefer the products to be exhibited in an idealistic or environment, and even attractive spokespersons may be more convincing.

It must be admitted that with the continuous and rapid development of mobile terminals, smartphone technology, and photo sharing have become more ubiquitous and inevitable. Users of mobile social networking can watch and comment on the posts of other users, who can be friends, strangers, or celebrities. Young people will understand the characteristics of attractive images by comparing their own visual self-portraits with those of their peers in the same environment (Manago, A. M., Ward, L. M., Lemm, K. M., Reed, L., & Seabrook, R. (2015). The likes, comments, and followers received by creators will be regarded by them as indicators of whether they are accepted and liked by society. Objectified body consciousness is an inclination to see oneself as an object that others can comment on and evaluate (Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. A.1997). Objectification theory is used to observe the consequences of women living in the sexual objectified environments. When women are in a social

environment that regards the female body as use and entertainment for a long time, they will internalize the observer's perspective to form self-objectification (Butkowski, C. P., Dixon, T. L., & Weeks, K.2019).

The behavior of habitual body surveillance is a manifestation of self-objectification which can lead to potential mental health including shame and anxiety (Frederick, et. al 1997). Compared with other media such as paper media and television, the Internet and social network exposure result in a major role in the formation of self-objectification (Butkowski, C. P., Dixon, T. L., & Weeks, K. 2019). The reason why social media is so prominent as a feature of objectified body consciousness is because attractiveness has become a cultural advantage of social media. At the same time, it encourages people to have visual self-presentation while receiving self-evaluation, thus forming self-monitoring.

Ego threat is an umbrella term which refers to "an event that calls into question one's positive self-regard," (vanDellen, Campbell, Hoyle, & Bradfield, 2011). Although ego threat has been a frequently used construct in research, there have been concerns over the lack of specificity when researchers refer to the concept of ego threat. The word "ego," which comes from the Latin word for "I," has come to refer to a person's self- esteem (Leary, Terry, Batts Allen, & Tate, 2009). Leary and colleagues (2009) explain that although the term now has fewer psychodynamic connotations there are still pieces which harken back to the original conception of the ego. One such connotation is the discussion of defense mechanisms and the need to compensate for information one finds threatening (Silverman, 1964). However, the current psychological paradigm of cognitive and behavioral-based theories prompted the shift from the concept of the ego to that of self-esteem or self-image (Leary et al., 2009). Thus, for modern research purposes the term ego threat has been used to refer to a situation in which a person's positive self- esteem is perceived to be endangered such as by negative evaluation, either by others or by the self. Given that this definition of "ego threat" has become the most popular, it should come as no surprise that the most typical method of eliciting ego threat involves giving participants feedback "that called into question the extent to which they were intelligent, competent, likeable, or possessed other socially desirable attributes"(Leary et al., 2009).

Common methods of inducing threat involve both direct and indirect processes. For example, a direct threat would involve giving negative feedback about performance on a certain task. However, an indirect method which has been used involves having participants think about or read a possible ego-threatening situation or be exposed to numerous words which could elicit a negative response (e.g. inadequate, failure, etc.) (Leary et al., 2009). Further removed include the threats of a potential ego threat, such as telling participants they will be asked to give a public speech or undergo a job interview. Leary and colleagues (2009) have questioned the validity of using future ego-threatening conditions as an induction of ego threat due in part because certain studies have used the threat of an ego threat as their control condition (Chalus, 1976; Allen & Sherman, 2011). Thus, it appears the most direct ways to induce ego threat could be the most powerful and could provide the clearest information regarding its impact on people.

Another dimension researchers have used when inducing ego threat is to induce humiliation or embarrassment by decreasing the participants' public image (Chalus, 1976; Horton & Sedikides, 2009). Because ego threat has been more modernly defined as a threat to a person's self-esteem, having a threat that induces more than private self- esteem could be confounding. Indeed, Leary and colleagues (2009) expressed concerns over threats in which others provide feedback to the participants, which they note could be inducing not only self-esteem threat but also social evaluation concerns and concerns about their public image. Thus, although still occasionally studied in terms of self-esteem or ego threat, more recent researchers are beginning to use the term "social threat" for instances when other's judgments are the cause of the threatening situation. Therefore, social danger is a sort of self-esteem threat that incorporates unfavourable feedback, rejection, or ostracism from other individuals. Furthermore, Leary et al. (2009) questioned the confounding nature of the loss of control that may add confounding features and results to what is originally conceptualized as a threat to one's private self-esteem. The researchers caution that the lack of specificity of the processes researchers initially plan to induce or threaten can result in misinterpreted findings and confounding conclusions. Thus, it has been highly recommended researchers begin to specify what they are intending to threaten, rather than vaguely describing the manipulation "ego threat" (Leary et al., 2009). Indeed, the most recent research in threats to one's self-image have begun to use the term "self-esteem threat" or "social threat" rather than the currently outdated ego threat (vanDellen et al., 2011). Thus, when reviewing the following literature, the majority refers to the manipulation as ego threat. Additionally, because sexual aggression is mostly a social act it appears social threat would be the most important method of threat induction. Regardless, due to the relative recentness of social threat into the world of research, studies which included the broader terms of ego threat and social threat are outlined to provide context of likely responses to similar threatening situations.

Social threats are rarely defined but have become more frequently studied within the past ten years. One of the most specific definitions given is still extremely vague in that it states, "social threat is the potential harm that is likely to be caused by oneself or to oneself" (Huang, Xu, & Chan, 2011, p. 2). Within the research, social threatening stimuli included negative emotional facial expressions and negative feedback, being ignored or rejected by others, or being in a situation which could elicit negative evaluation from others (Huang et al., 2011; Schu, 2007; Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015, respectively). Stress from social situations is thought to be one of the largest promoters of aggression (Bertsch, Bohnke, Kruk, Richter, & Naumann, 2011). One of the most common experiences of social stress is being excluded or ignored by others. Indeed, it has been found that most people are excluded or ignored at least once per day (Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins & Holgate, 1997). Although the manipulation is relatively brief, the effect it has had on participants has been strong. Certainly, being ostracized has been shown to have far-reaching effects on people. Interpersonally, these short experiences with exclusion have led to lower mood (Lustenberger & Jagacinski, 2010). As is described further below, lowered mood or self- views is the key factor to describe an ego threat.

## 4. Methodology

Design and Data Collection

The study has followed a qualitative research design to discover literature from authentic past studies regarding the sexualization of women in the media. The qualitative literature also provided insights to develop ideas potentially useful for the aim of research (Camic, Rhodes & Yardley 2003). To formulate results, content-based analysis was applied to interpret the gathered qualitative information and help in finding the underlying reasons and facts to deduce results. Content analysis has been considered as a widely used qualitative technique for summarizing the main point derived from various studies, to provide meaningful conclusions to the study (Forman & Damschroder 2008). Moreover, this qualitative content analysis is based on deductive approach as the structure of the research was based on previous studies. The data has been gathered from various remarkable sources that entails past studies related to the sexualization and objectification of women within the context of Malaysia. It includes electronic sources such as Emerald insight, Science Direct, SAGE, and Springer that helped in accumulating authentic information.

## 5. Discussion

Whilst self-objectification and body dissatisfaction brought on by social media are unavoidable for women, developing a more optimistic and objective outlook may lessen the psychological harm. First, it is a useful method for developing diverse self-values and appreciating one's value from many angles. The body is not only used to being admired or judged by others; it is also an excellent way to learn to disentangle the mind from the physical features of the body and watch once more. When you think back on the wonderful things you've accomplished in the past, they might not have anything to do with your appearance, physique, or weight. Although having a good physique and feeling superior to others may be appealing, these are not the only qualities one might aspire to. By expanding their self-possibilities, people might learn to evaluate themselves from a variety of perspectives rather than just their outward look and physical attributes. Furthermore, the practice of social comparison can be eliminated by viewing the content and adverts on social networking sites with more objectivity and reason. Each person is a singular being with intrinsic value who is regarded and esteemed by others. Importantly, learn to develop a positive self-perception and refrain from attacking and criticizing yourself for not succeeding in the same ways as others. Blaming the media is insufficient because there are non-specific rules gaps in the guidelines such as using the representation of explicit body gestures, impolite facial expression, alluring eye contact, and inappropriate visual framing on body parts. The grey gap in the guidelines caused confusion to advertisers and marketers on adhering to the regulation. Reviewing the regulation requires more specific measurements among policy makers and government bodies involved, aiming at the standardisation of the local culture and sensitivity. Government bodies should strengthen the enforcement of the new guidelines to ensure that visual production adheres to advertising ethical standards.

## 6. Conclusion

In general, the unrealistic and flawless images in all forms of internet media will harm women's mental health and potentially result in body anxiety and other issues with their physical well-being. Individual differences, however, are not a concern in this study. Every woman sees the world differently and perceives things differently. The degree of personal internalization will not

be equal while dealing with the objectification and comparison of others, and some persons may be more sensitive. Additionally, diverse affects and outcomes may be brought about by age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, living situation, and personal experience. The results of the analysis are not completely confirmed due to a lack of diversity. Through more thorough surveys and statistical models, these constraints could be investigated in greater detail. This work offers a fresh viewpoint on despite these limitations.

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