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The Role of Dress in Objectification Research: An Opportunity for Dress Researchers

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Introduction. Dress consists of all modifications and supplements to the body (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Sexual objectification (hereafter *objectification*) of a person occurs when a person is reduced to the status of an object for others' sexual use, rather than seen as an independent decision-maker (APA, 2007). Objectification has received growing scholarly interest as evidenced by the number of research articles published in refereed journals. Our focus is on relationships between these two concepts: dress and objectification. In this paper we demonstrate that dress plays a crucial role in objectification research because it is identified as either evidence of objectification or it is manipulated as a cue that evokes self- and other-objectification.

Theoretical Framework. Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) proposes that girls and women living in media-saturated Western cultures are gazed at, evaluated, and potentially objectified by others. Objectification is experienced in multiple ways including during social interaction (e.g., visual inspection), in media depictions of social interactions, and in media depictions of women as mere bodies and body parts. When women and girls are objectified by others (other-objectification), they may self-objectify; that is, they may internalize an outsider's perspective and see themselves as objects to be evaluated for their physical attributes (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005; Lindner, Tantleff-Dunn, & Jentsch, 2012). Fredrickson and Roberts note that self-objectification may explain why women are disproportionately affected by detrimental mental health risks such as depression and eating disorders. Most research on objectification has focused on self-objectification (Budesheim, 2011).

Self-objectification can be assessed in two ways: trait self-objectification and state self-objectification. Trait self-objectification is an enduring "tendency to view one's own body through an objectified lens across situations" (Calogero, 2011, p. 35), while state self-objectification is context dependent and refers to temporarily viewing oneself as an object due to situation-specific cues in the environment (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) including dress. In what follows we document that dress has been used in objectification research to both evoke and to document objectification and that the importance of dress in these processes has seldom been acknowledged with the exception of Tiggemann and her colleagues (e.g., Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005; Tiggemann & Andrew, 2012).

Evidence that dress evokes self-objectification. In an early test of Objectification Theory, Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, and Twenge (1998) evoked self-objectification in women by using a dress manipulation (swimsuit vs. sweater). Reichart Smith (2016) evoked self-objectification by exposing participants to images of female athletes varying in type of clothing and body pose (e.g., in competition vs non-competitive setting vs. provocative/sexual).

Evidence that dress evokes other-objectification. Researchers have also used revealing dress to evoke other-objectification. Gurung and Chrouser (2007) found that female athletes wearing revealing clothing were more likely to be objectified by research participants than female athletes wearing nonrevealing clothing. Gervais, Vescio, and Allen (2012) studied other-objectification as a function of body type of the stimulus person and found that stimulus persons whose bodies were closely aligned with the cultural ideal body type (i.e., thin women, muscular men) were objectified by participants.

Evidence that dress has been used to document objectification. In media research dress is utilized as evidence of objectification (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). For example, Aubrey and Frisby coded both body movement and dress to document objectification in music videos. Bazzini, Pepper, Swofford, and Cochran (2015) content analyzed health magazine covers and used women's clothing and the prevalence of beauty phrases (i.e., phrases that focus on body parts considered important to the cultural ideal of beauty) on the covers as evidence of objectification.

Whether using a revealing dress manipulation or a manipulation of the body, the result is that the manipulation focuses participants on their bodies. The focus on the body may be what evokes self- and other-objectification. This process could also explain why exposure to objectifying media images evokes self- and other-objectification (Aubrey & Gerding, 2015; Nezlek, Krohn, Wilson, & Maruskin, 2015).

The Opportunity. An opportunity exists for dress researchers to weigh in on the objectification literature. In some of the studies there is no manipulation check or pilot study to test manipulations used to evoke self-objectification. In others, no rationale is provided for choice of dress stimuli to elicit other-objectification. In addition, numerous terms are often used to describe dress manipulations (e.g., sexy dress, provocative dress), without providing a clear rationale for their use.

In addition, topics of interest to dress researchers such as sexual harassment/assault, trying on clothes and evaluating oneself in a full-length mirror, and undergoing body scanning may be seen as sexually objectifying experiences by those involved; thus research hypotheses and results can be informed by extant objectification literature. Also due to using the two-pronged definition of dress (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992) dress researchers can bring new structure/organization to objectification research. A potential research model follows.
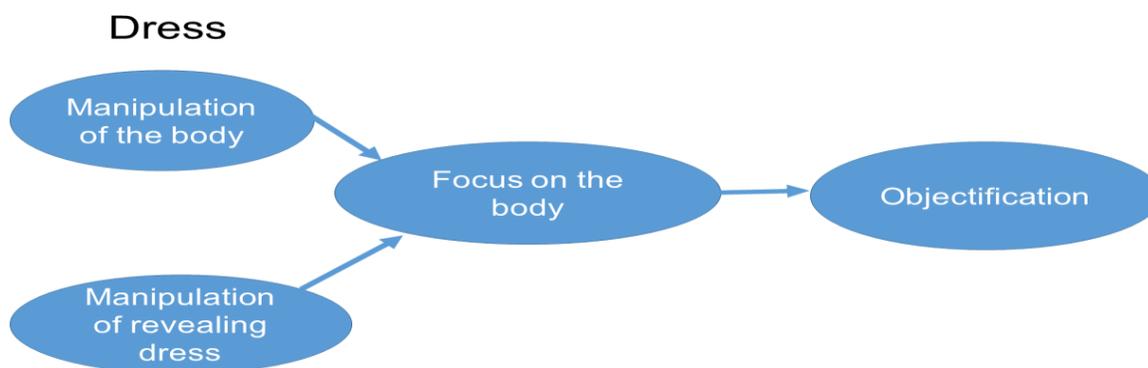
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