

NEGOTIATING THE GAZE: SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION VS.
EMPOWERMENT IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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Abstract

The portrayal of women in media has historically fluctuated between sexual objectification and empowerment. Objectification reduces women to their physical appeal, disregarding agency, while empowerment narratives emphasize autonomy. This paper critically examines how contemporary media blurs these boundaries, often presenting empowerment through sexuality in ways that reinforce traditional gender norms. Drawing on the frameworks of Naomi Wolf and Angela McRobbie, the study analyses advertisements, television, and social media to illustrate how sexualized portrayals intersect with postfeminist ideologies. The paper further explores the psychological impact of self-surveillance and the intersectional disparities in how these narratives are consumed. Findings suggest that while media offers platforms for self-expression, "choice" remains constrained by structural expectations and narrow beauty standards. Ultimately, the paper argues that empowerment and objectification are not mutually exclusive but coexist within a continuum of social regulation.

INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of women in media has historically oscillated between two seemingly opposing paradigms: sexual objectification and empowerment. Sexual objectification refers to the reduction of women to their bodies or sexual appeal, often disregarding their personhood, intelligence, or agency (Fredrickson & Roberts,

1997). In contrast, empowerment narratives highlight autonomy, agency, and self-expression, presenting women as active subjects rather than passive objects. While these categories might appear distinct, contemporary media often blurs the boundary, presenting empowerment through

sexuality in ways that simultaneously reinforce and challenge traditional gender norms.

Scholars such as Naomi Wolf and Angela McRobbie provide crucial frameworks for understanding this dynamic. Wolf (1991) illustrates how cultural obsession with female beauty and sexuality operates as a form of social control, often under the guise of liberation. McRobbie (2004) examines postfeminist media discourse, highlighting how narratives of sexual empowerment are frequently framed as personal choice and self-expression while remaining embedded in structural and cultural constraints. This paper critically examines sexual objectification and empowerment in media, analysing how media narratives construct femininity and mediate the tension between agency and control.

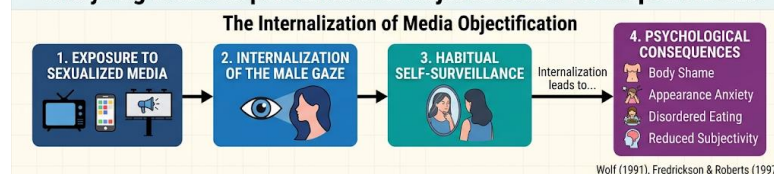
Sexual Objectification in Media

Sexual objectification is a pervasive feature of media representations of women, manifesting through visual imagery and marketing strategies. Wolf (1991) defines sexual objectification as the reduction of a woman to her physical appearance or the satisfaction of others' desires (Ramzan & Javaid, 2025). This is visible in advertisements that emphasize body parts while minimizing individuality and in music videos that portray women as accessories to male desire. In these contexts, sexuality becomes a commodity (Mulvey, 1975).

The psychological consequences are profound. Objectification theory suggests that repeated exposure fosters self-surveillance and body shame (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Social media platforms amplify these dynamics through feedback mechanisms like "likes," which reward conformity to idealized sexualized aesthetics. According to research by Szymanski et al. (2011), this constant surveillance leads to increased mental health risks, including depression and eating disorders (Nawaz et al., 2021).

The Process of Internalization

Analyzing Media Representations: Objectification vs. Empowerment.

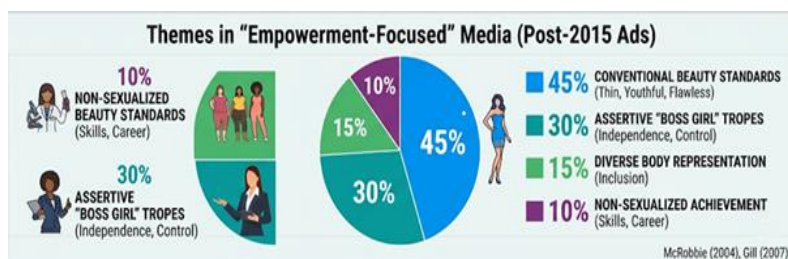


This flowchart visualizes **Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997)**. It demonstrates how external media imagery transitions into a physical and psychological state for the consumer.

- 1. Exposure to Sexualized Media:** This is the starting point. It represents the ambient, continuous flow of imagery that individuals consume daily. The icons (TV, smartphone, billboard) show that this exposure is omnipresent across digital, social, and physical environments.
- 2. Internalization of the "Male Gaze":** The concept of the "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1975) suggests that media constructs imagery through a default heterosexual male lens. When a viewer consumes these images, they don't just observe; they internalize this perspective, beginning to look at themselves and other women from the perspective of an external observer.
- 3. Habitual Self-Surveillance:** This is the critical psychological shift. The internalized "gaze" leads to an individual constantly monitoring their appearance. The diagram uses the mirror icon to show a woman looking critically at herself. She is not simply grooming; she is monitoring her body to check for perceived flaws against the internalized media standard.

- **4. Psychological Consequences:** This terminal box lists the mental health outcomes associated with chronic self-surveillance:
 - **Body Shame and Anxiety:** Occurs when the body cannot meet the extreme standards set by media.
 - **Disordered Eating:** The physical behaviour manifested by internalized pressure to achieve a certain look.
 - **Reduced Subjectivity:** The ultimate negative impact, where a woman begins to view herself primarily as an *object* to be looked at rather than a *subject* with agency.
- **Thematic Distribution of "Empowerment"**

This pie chart provides a content analysis of how contemporary media, which identifies itself as "empowering" or "feminist" (e.g., in



advertisements targeted at women), actually distributes its thematic representation. It synthesizes the data referenced in the paper.

- **1. Conventional Beauty Standards (45%):** This is the largest segment, using a blue colour-coordinate that matches the "Exposure" category in Figure 1. It demonstrates that despite the rhetoric of empowerment, nearly half of the analysed content still foregrounds

narrow, conventional aesthetics (e.g., thin, youthful, and conventionally attractive models). This supports McRobbie's (2004) argument that empowerment often remains tethered to external approval.

- **2. Assertive "Boss Girl" Tropes (30%):** This teal segment represents a newer, postfeminist form of representation. It shows women as active, professional, and career-driven. These are portrayals of "agency." However, as discussed in the paper, this is often packaged with a requirement to still be "conventionally polished."
- **3. Diverse Body Representation (15%):** This green segment represents efforts toward body positivity and inclusivity, showcasing different body sizes, ethnicities, and abilities. It is a critical slice, showing progress, though it remains smaller than the categories emphasizing aesthetics.
- **4. Non-Sexualized Achievement (10%):** This is the smallest segment. It is crucial because it represents portrayals of female success (e.g., skills, career milestone, mathematical achievement) where physical appearance or sexual appeal is *not* a factor. The small size of this slice highlights the core tension of the paper: even "empowering" media struggles to separate a woman's value from how she looks.

Sexual Empowerment in Media

Contrasting with objectification, sexual empowerment is framed as a mode of agency. McRobbie (2004) observes that postfeminist media recasts traditionally sexualized images as evidence of personal empowerment. This reframing suggests women exercise choice over their bodies. For example, contemporary

"femvertising" (feminist advertising) promotes bold femininity, linking sexualized appearance to strength and control (Bhutto & Ramzan, 2021; Gill, 2008).

Reality television and influencer culture provide arenas where women use sexuality strategically for personal branding. However, McRobbie (2004) emphasizes that this is often a "double entanglement," where the appearance of choice obscures the fact that the choice is limited to a very narrow, culturally sanctioned version of beauty.

Conclusion

Media representations of sexuality reflect a complex interplay between autonomy and regulation. While sexualized portrayals may ostensibly promote confidence, critical analysis reveals that such empowerment is often conditional. As Wolf (1991) and McRobbie (2004) suggest, objectification and empowerment coexist, shaping women's self-perception in the 21st century. Understanding these dynamics requires an intersectional lens that recognizes how power and identity are negotiated on the digital and physical screen.

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