Out-of-Body Image
Self-objectification—seeing ourselves through others’ eyes—impairs women’s body image, mental health, motor skills and even sex lives

By Caroline Heldman

(Out-of-Body Image)

GIRLS ARE TAUGHT: YOUR BODY IS A PROJECT THAT NEEDS WORK BEFORE YOU CAN ATTRACT OTHERS.

BOYS ARE TAUGHT: YOUR BODY IS A TOOL TO MASTER THE ENVIRONMENT.

(Out-of-Body Image)

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On a typical day, you might see ads featuring a naked woman’s body tempting viewers to buy an electronic organizer, partially exposed women’s breasts being used to sell fishing line, and a woman’s rear—wearing only a thong—being used to pitch a new running shoe. Meanwhile, on every newsstand, impossibly slim (and digitally airbrushed) cover “girls” adorn a slew of magazines. With each image, you’re hit with a simple, subliminal message: Girls’ and women’s bodies are objects for others to visually consume.

If such images seem more ubiquitous than ever, it’s because U.S. residents are now exposed to 3,000 advertisements a day—as many per year as those living a half century ago would have seen in a lifetime. The Internet accounts for much of this growth, and young people are particularly exposed to advertising: 70 percent of 15- to 34-year-olds use social networking technologies such as MySpace and Facebook, which allow advertisers to infiltrate previously private communication space.

A steady diet of exploitative, sexually provocative depictions of women feeds a poisonous trend in women’s and girl’s perceptions of their bodies, one that has recently been recognized by social scientists as self-objectification—viewing one’s body as a sex object to be consumed by the male gaze. Like W.E.B. DuBois’ famous description of the experience of black Americans, self-objectification is a state of “double consciousness … a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”

Researchers have learned a lot about self-objectification since the term was coined in 1997 by
University of Michigan psychology professor Barbara Fredrickson and Colorado College psychology professor Tomi-Ann Roberts. Numerous studies since then have shown that girls and women who self-objectify are more prone to depression and low self-esteem and have less faith in their own capabilities, which can lead to diminished success in life. They are more likely to engage in “habitual body monitoring”—constantly thinking about how their bodies appear to the outside world—which puts them at higher risk for eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia.

Self-objectification has also been repeatedly shown to sap cognitive functioning, because of all the attention devoted to body monitoring. For instance, a recent study by Yale psychologists asked two groups of women to take a math exam—one group in swimsuits, the other in sweaters. The swimsuit-wearers, distracted by body concerns, performed significantly worse than their peers in sweaters.

Fredrickson, along with Michigan communications professor Kristen Harrison (both work within the university’s Institute for Research on Women and Gender), recently discovered that self-objectification actually impairs girls’ motor skills. Their study of 202 girls, ages 10 to 17, found that self-objectification impeded girls’ ability to throw a softball, even after differences in age and prior experience were factored out. Self-objectification forced girls to split their attention between how their bodies looked and what they wanted them to do, resulting in less forceful throws and worse aim.

One of the more stunning effects of self-objectification is its impact on sex. One young woman I interviewed described sex as being an “out of body” experience during which she viewed herself through the eyes of her lover, and, sometimes, through the imaginary lens of a camera shooting a porn film. As a constant critic of her body, she couldn’t focus on her own sexual pleasure.

Self-objectification isn’t going anywhere anytime soon. So what can we do about it? First, we can recognize how our everyday actions feed the larger beast, and realize that we are not powerless. Mass media, the primary peddler of female bodies, can be assailed with millions of little consumer swords. We can boycott companies and engage in other forms of consumer activism, such as socially conscious investments and shareholder actions. We can also contact companies directly to voice our concerns and refuse to patronize businesses that overtly depict women as sex objects.

What would disappear from our lives if we stopped seeing ourselves as objects? Painful high heels? Body hatred? Constant dieting? Liposuction? It’s hard to know. Perhaps the most striking outcome of self-objectification is the difficulty women have in imagining identities and sexualities truly our own. In solidarity, we can start on this path, however confusing and difficult it may be.

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