

# My Eyes Are Up Here: The Nature of the Objectifying Gaze Toward Women

Sarah J. Gervais · Arianne M. Holland ·  
Michael D. Dodd

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**Abstract** Although objectification theory suggests that women frequently experience the objectifying gaze with many adverse consequences, there is scant research examining the nature and causes of the objectifying gaze for perceivers. The main purpose of this work was to examine the objectifying gaze toward women via eye tracking technology. A secondary purpose was to examine the impact of body shape on this objectifying gaze. To elicit the gaze, we asked participants (29 women, 36 men from a large Midwestern University in the U.S.), to focus on the appearance (vs. personality) of women and presented women with body shapes that fit cultural ideals of feminine attractiveness to varying degrees, including high ideal (i.e., hourglass-shaped women with large breasts and small waist-to-hip ratios), average ideal (with average breasts and average waist-to-hip ratios), and low ideal (i.e., with small breasts and large waist-to-hip ratios). Consistent with our main hypothesis, we found that participants focused on women's chests and waists more and faces less when they were appearance-focused (vs. personality-focused). Moreover, we found that this effect was particularly pronounced for women with high (vs. average and low) ideal body shapes in line with hypotheses. Finally, compared to female participants, male participants showed an increased tendency to initially exhibit the objectifying gaze and they regarded women with high (vs. average and low) ideal body shapes more positively, regardless of whether they were appearance-focused or personality-focused. Implications for objectification and person perception theories are discussed.

**Keywords** Sexual objectification · Male gaze · Objectifying gaze · Dehumanization · Person perception · Impression formation · Attractiveness · Eye tracking

S. J. Gervais (✉) · A. M. Holland · M. D. Dodd  
Department of Psychology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln,  
Lincoln, NE 68588-0308, USA  
e-mail: sgervais2@unl.edu

## Introduction

Sexual objectification occurs when people separate women's sexual body parts or functions from the entire person, reducing women to the status of mere instruments and regarding their bodies as capable of representing them (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Perhaps the most ubiquitous indicator of sexual objectification in Western cultures is the objectifying gaze (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). The objectifying gaze is conceptualized as visually inspecting or staring at a woman's body or sexual body parts (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Kaschak 1992; Mulvey 1975; Moradi and Huang 2008) and is often referred to as "ogling," "leering at" or "checking out" women (Henley 1977). Women are subject to the gaze in U.S. media when the camera lens focuses less on their faces and more on their sexual body parts (Archer et al. 1983). U.S. women also report experiencing objectifying gazes frequently during social interactions when other people stare at their sexual body parts (Kozee et al. 2007). Less focus on the face and more focus on the body is clearly objectifying according to feminist scholars (Bartky 1990) and not surprisingly, has several adverse consequences for women. The objectifying gaze causes social physique anxiety (Calogero 2004), decreased cognitive performance (Gervais et al. 2011), and self-silencing (Saguy et al. 2010) for U.S. women.

Despite the frequency with which women from Western cultures report being targeted by the objectifying gaze and the adverse consequences of the gaze, there is scant empirical evidence into the specific nature of the objectifying gaze and what causes people to exhibit it toward women in the first place. The purpose of the present research was to begin to fill this critical gap in the literature. Specifically, integrating objectification and person perception theories, we first suggested that a perceiver's appearance-focus would impact the degree to which people gazed more at women's body parts and less at their faces. We also explored whether body shape contributed