Self-Affirmation Intervention to Remove Negative Effects Due to Self-Objectification

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ABSTRACT. Prior studies have shown that self-objectification can negatively affect body image in both women and men. However, it is not yet fully understood how to remove or reduce these negative effects. One strategy that may be beneficial is self-affirmation. Self-affirmation tasks often boost mood and state self-esteem, which can potentially be negatively affected by self-objectification. To investigate this, 178 college students (125 women and 53 men) were randomly assigned to 1 of 6 conditions in a 2 (self-objectification condition: objectified vs. not objectified) x 3 (self-affirmation condition: self-affirmation vs. control affirmation vs. no affirmation) between-subjects design. The results did not demonstrate any statistically significant main effects of self-objectification or interactions between self-objectification condition and self-affirmation condition on either drive for thinness or drive for muscularity (all \( p \geq .08 \)). However, the results did demonstrate that focusing on nonappearance-related values might be useful in improving general body image because the affirmation intervention reduced participants’ drive for thinness, \( F(2, 175) = 3.90, p = .022, \eta^2 = .05 \), drive for muscularity, \( F(2, 175) = 3.47, p = .033, \eta^2 = .04 \), and feelings of self-objectification, \( F(2, 175) = 3.72, p = .026, \eta^2 = .04 \), regardless of the self-objectification condition.

It is well understood that Western culture promotes extreme thinness as the ideal female body, and this has contributed to the problem of negative body image in women (Stice, Mazotti, Weibel, & Agras, 2000). Although the body image issues of men have received less attention and are less well understood (Strother, Lemberg, Stanford, & Turberville, 2012), it is increasingly evident that men also have body image concerns (Muth & Cash, 1997). The issue of negative body image in both sexes is important because it is associated with reduced self-esteem and increased distress (Cohane & Pope, 2001). One factor that is thought to contribute to negative body image is self-objectification, which occurs when people begin to internalize an observer’s perspective of their own bodies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This can be problematic because internalization leads to habitual body monitoring, wherein individuals monitor their bodies as they believe observers do, and place a greater emphasis on how they look rather than on how they feel (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This in turn can lead to feelings of anxiety (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), body shame (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012), and is a risk factor for eating disorders (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Maine & Bunnell, 2010). Further, a recent study showed that self-objectification is even positively correlated with appearance fixing (i.e., trying to change outward appearance) and avoidance coping (i.e., disengaging in potential body image threat situations), two maladaptive behaviors that have been linked with lowered self-esteem, disordered eating behaviors, and lower quality of life related to body image (Bailey, Lamarch, Gammage, & Sullivan, 2016).

A recent study by Register, Katrevich, Arguete,
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and Edman (2015) aimed to determine whether self-objectification negatively affects body image in both men and women. This is one of the few studies that specifically aimed to manipulate self-objectification, rather than just measure it, as well as to study both men and women. Experimenters induced a state of self-objectification in college students with a writing task asking them to describe their bodies from an observer’s viewpoint. Compared to those in the control group, those who were self-objectified scored significantly higher on a questionnaire measuring self-reported eating pathology. This suggests that those who completed the self-objectification writing task had more negative eating attitudes compared to those who were not self-objectified. Eating pathology has been shown to be a predictor of body dissatisfaction (James, Phelps, & Bross, 2001; Lawler & Nixon, 2010). Therefore, it is possible that those who completed the self-objectification writing task also felt more negatively about their bodies. To measure self-reported eating pathology, Register et al. (2015) used the Drive for Thinness subscale of the Eating Disorder Inventory (Garner, 1991).

One goal of the current study was to replicate and extend the work of Register et al. (2015) with a more appropriate assessment of body image for men. To achieve this, we added a measure of body image that specifically assesses the more muscular body preferred by some men (Cohane & Pope, 2001) and thereby should allow a more accurate understanding of the effects of self-objectification.

The primary goal of the current study was to determine whether the effects of self-objectification might be removed via self-affirmation. To our knowledge, no other study in the self-objectification literature has aimed to experimentally determine how self-objectification effects can be removed or reduced. As mentioned above, it is important to discover methods of removing the effects of self-objectification because it may lead to body shame, anxiety, and is a risk factor for eating disorders. One possible way to do this is by boosting positive feelings about the self to try to counteract the negative feelings that occur due to self-objectification. Self-affirmation may be a method of removing or reducing the negative effects of self-objectification because it has been found to effectively boost self-integrity (Steele, 1988), mood (Koole, Smeets, Van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999), and sometimes self-esteem (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Sherman & Cohen, 2006)—all of which could potentially be negatively affected by self-objectification.

To examine these issues, male and female college students were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 2 (self-objectification condition: objectified vs. not objectified) x 3 (self-affirmation condition: self-affirmation vs. control affirmation vs. no affirmation) between-subjects design. We hypothesized that women in the objectification condition who did not undergo self-affirmation would show a higher drive for thinness than those in the control condition. We also hypothesized that men in the objectification condition who did not undergo self-affirmation would report a higher drive for masculinity than those in the control condition. Further, we predicted that undergoing self-affirmation would remove the negative effects of self-objectification such that men and women in the self-affirmation condition would report a lower drive for thinness (women) and masculinity (men) than those who did not undergo self-affirmation.

Method

Participants

Participants were 125 female and 53 male undergraduates (M = 20.14 years, SD = 1.85). The ethnic/racial background of the sample was 41.6% Asian, 23% European American, 10.7% Latino-Hispanic, 1.7% African American, and 23% other or mixed ethnicity.

Measures

Body image. Body image was assessed with questions from the Drive for Thinness subscale of the Eating Disorder Inventory-2 (Garner, 1991) and the Drive for Muscularity Scale (McCreary, 2013). The Drive for Thinness subscale consists of seven items and the Drive for Muscularity Scale is composed of 15 items. An example of an item on The Drive for Thinness subscale is, “I am preoccupied with the desire to be thinner.” An example of an item from the Drive for Muscularity Scale is, “I think that I would feel more confident if I had more muscle mass.” Responses were rated on a 1 (never) to 6 (always) Likert-type scale for both measures. Cronbach’s α for the Drive for Thinness subscale was .92, and for the Drive for Muscularity Scale it was .88.

Self-Objectification Questionnaire. The Self-Objectification Questionnaire (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998) was used as a check of the self-objectification manipulation. This questionnaire asked participants to rank 10 attributes from most important to their self-concept to least important. Examples of attributes that were ranked were “weight,” “physical attractiveness,”...
and “health.” If the self-objectification task was successful, those who were in the self-objectification condition should score higher (i.e., because they have become more appearance focused) on this questionnaire than those in the no self-objectification condition.

**Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS).** The PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) was used as a check of the self-affirmation manipulation. The PANAS consists of 20 items (e.g., “upset,” “distressed,” “proud”), each rated on a 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely) Likert-type scale, and refers to how participants felt at that moment. Participants who were self-affirmed should report a more positive and less negative affect compared to those who did not undergo the self-affirmation manipulation. Cronbach’s α for the positive affect items was .88, and for negative affect it was .85, and thus they were combined into a positive and a negative affect index, respectively.

**State Self-Esteem Questionnaire.** The State Self-Esteem Questionnaire (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) served as an additional check of the self-affirmation manipulation. Examples of items on the State Self-Esteem Questionnaire are, “I feel confident about my abilities” and “I feel displeased with myself.” There were 20 items, each rated on a 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely) Likert-type scale, and participants were asked to rate how they felt at that moment. Participants who were self-affirmed should have a higher state self-esteem score compared to those who did not undergo the self-affirmation manipulation. Cronbach’s α for the 20 items was .93, and thus they were combined into a total state self-esteem index.

**Procedure**

After institutional review board approval was given by the University of California San Diego Human Research Protections Program (Protocol #151847S), participants were recruited through the Psychology Department Human Participant Pool online recruitment system and run individually by an experimenter wearing a lab coat that hid her silhouette. The lab coats were meant to reduce the likelihood that participants would compare their bodies to that of their experimenter. To avoid distraction and prevent social media use during the study, participants left their cell phones and laptops in a waiting area. After providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to either the self-objectification writing task (designed to focus their attention on their appearance) or a control writing task, each developed by Register et al. (2015). Specifically, in the self-objectification condition, participants were given 5 minutes to “look at yourself from someone else’s perspective. Try to mentally ‘gaze’ at your physical appearance through the eyes of someone else, as if your body were an object to behold. In the space below, explain how this other person sees you and compares your body to the ‘ideal’ body for your gender.” Those participants randomly assigned to the control condition were given 5 minutes to write down all the activities they had participated in during the past 24 hours in chronological order.

Next, participants randomly assigned to the self-affirmation condition completed a 10-minute writing task where they ranked 13 given values (e.g., relations with friends/family, creativity, religion/spirituality) from most important to least important, and wrote about why their most important value is significant to them. This task was based closely on the self-affirmation task designed by Harber (1995) and adapted by Cohen, Aronson, and Steele (2000). However, in the current study, the value “physical attractiveness” was considered to be too closely linked to appearance and was therefore removed. The values of “religion/spirituality” and “kindness” were added to maintain a similar task length and diversify the options available to increase the likelihood that participants would be able to find a “most important” value about which to write. In the control affirmation condition, participants wrote about their least important value, focusing on why this value might be significant to other individuals. In the no affirmation condition, participants did not complete either task and proceeded directly to the Drive for Muscularity and Drive for Thinness questionnaire. The self-affirmation task and control task have been used extensively in the self-affirmation literature, and previous research has generally found that self-affirmation effectively boosts self-integrity (Steele, 1988) and mood (Koole et al., 1999).

Participants were then asked to complete The Drive for Thinness subscale and Drive for Muscularity Scale, followed by the Self-Objectification Questionnaire, the PANAS, and the State Self-Esteem Questionnaire in a randomized order. Next,

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1 A filler task for the no affirmation condition was considered but ultimately not included because such a task might have distracted from the self-objectification manipulation. The benefit of nondistraction outweighed the small 10-minute difference in total experimental task time between the self-affirmation/control affirmation conditions and the no affirmation condition.
participants completed a questionnaire that asked for demographic information (e.g., age, sex, weight, height). Thereafter, all participants regardless of condition completed a different self-affirmation writing task adapted from a study by McGuire and McGuire (1996; Harris, Mayle, Mabbott, & Napper, 2007). This task asked participants to list as many of their strengths and positive qualities that they could think of in 3 minutes. The task was used to reinforce every participant’s self-value in order to combat a possible decrease in state self-esteem and/or mood due to the self-objectification task. Next, a postexperimental inquiry was conducted to discover if participants knew about the purpose of the study. Finally, participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results
Initially, 214 University of California San Diego undergraduates participated. However, seven participants were excluded from data analyses for not following task instructions. Nine participants were excluded because this study depended on an “ideal” image specific to the United States, and these participants spent their formative years (during which time an “ideal” image might be acquired) elsewhere (e.g., India, Philippines). Twenty participants were excluded due to underweight BMI (Body Mass Index) scores (below 18.5) as defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Those who are underweight are more likely to be closer to the “ideal” image promoted by Western society. Therefore, engaging in the self-objectification task would not likely produce the same feelings of not meeting the societal ideal as it would in people who are not already at the ideal weight. The mean Body Mass Index Score for the final sample of 178 participants was 23.20 (SD = 3.55).

Despite these exclusions, a power analysis suggests that analyses involving the main effects of the self-objectification manipulation (reported below) would have sufficient power. Specifically, given that it is the only previous published study that utilized the self-objectification manipulation employed in the present experiment, we utilized the Register et al. (2015) findings on the drive for thinness measure as the best available estimate of the likely effect size for the comparison between the self-objectification and no self-objectification conditions in the present experiment (d = .52). Using Cohen’s (1969) power tables with α set at .05, d at .52, and n at 81 (the lowest n of the two conditions in the present experiment), we found that the best available estimate of our power for the self-objectification main effect was greater than .88.

Unfortunately, given the fact that no previous published work appears to have examined the role of self-affirmation in mitigating the effects of self-objectification, it was not possible to derive an evidenced-based effect size for the self-affirmation analyses. However, if we assume that the true effect size is medium (e.g., .25), then the n of 58 obtained for each of the three self-objectification conditions in this experiment results in a power greater than .80. Of course, the tests of interaction effects between self-affirmation and self-objectification would have lower power and, particularly for male participants, would be underpowered and should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Manipulation Checks
Self-objectification. A 2 (self-objectification condition: objectified vs. not objectified) x 3 (affirmation condition: self-affirmation vs. control affirmation vs. no affirmation) x 2 (sex: men vs. women) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted on participants’ Self-Objectification Questionnaire scores. The results demonstrated a statistically significant main effect of affirmation condition, F(2, 175) = 3.72, p = .026, eta² = .04. Specifically, a post-hoc analysis using Fisher’s Least Significant Difference method revealed that those who completed the self-affirmation task (i.e., wrote about their highest ranked value) scored significantly lower on the Self-Objectification Questionnaire compared to those who completed the control affirmation task (i.e., wrote about their lowest ranked value; p = .024) or neither task (i.e., no affirmation condition; p = .006; see Figure 1).

The results also demonstrated a statistically significant main effect of sex, F(1,176) = 10.96, p < .001, eta² = .06. Specifically, women (M = -2.26, SD = 13.05) scored significantly higher on the Self-Objectification Questionnaire compared to men (M = -9.24, SD = 12.08). No other main effects or interaction effects were significant (all ps > .37; all eta² ≤ .06).

Negative and positive affect. Respective 2 (self-objectification condition: objectified vs. not objectified) x 3 (affirmation condition: self-affirmation vs. control affirmation vs. no affirmation) x 2 (sex: men vs. women) ANOVAs were conducted on participants’ negative affect scores and positive affect scores. The results did not demonstrate any differences in negative affect as a function
of condition (all ps > .51; eta^2 ≤ .01). For positive affect, the results demonstrated only a marginal interaction between self-objectification condition and sex, F(1, 176) = 3.73, p = .055, eta^2 = .02. Specifically, men who were not self-objectified reported a more positive affect (M = 27.92, SD = 7.12) than did women who were in the self-objectification condition (M = 26.00, SD = 7.68), whereas women who were not self-objectified reported less positive affect (M = 24.00, SD = 7.26) than did women in the self-objectification condition (M = 26.67, SD = 7.62).

**State self-esteem.** A 2 (self-objectification condition: objectified vs. not objectified) x 3 (affirmation condition: self-affirmation vs. control affirmation vs. no affirmation) x 2 (sex: men vs. women) ANOVA was conducted on participants’ state self-esteem scores. The results did not demonstrate any main effects or interactions (all ps > .10; all eta^2 ≤ .03).

**Dependent Measures**

**Drive for thinness.** A 2 (self-objectification condition: objectified vs. not objectified) x 3 (affirmation condition: self-affirmation vs. control affirmation vs. no affirmation) x 2 (sex: men vs. women) ANOVA was conducted on participants’ drive for thinness scores. The results demonstrated a statistically significant main effect of affirmation condition, F(2, 175) = 3.90, p = .022, eta^2 = .05. Specifically, a post-hoc analysis revealed that those who did not complete the affirmation task scored significantly higher on the Drive for Thinness subscale compared to those who wrote about their highest ranked value (p < .001) or lowest (p = .049) ranked values (see Figure 2). There was no significant difference in drive for thinness scores between those in the self-affirmation or control affirmation conditions (p > .16).

The results also demonstrated a statistically significant main effect of sex, F(1, 176) = 32.71, p < .001, eta^2 = .17. Specifically, women (M = 3.30, SD = 1.27) scored significantly higher than men (M = 2.22, SD = 0.94) on the Drive for Thinness subscale. No other main effects or interaction effects were significant (all ps > .28; eta^2 ≤ .01). See Table 1 for means and standard deviations of drive for thinness scores as a function of condition.

**Drive for muscularity.** A 2 (self-objectification condition: objectified vs. not objectified) x 3 (affirmation condition: self-affirmation vs. control affirmation vs. no affirmation) x 2 (sex: men vs. women) ANOVA was conducted on participants’ drive for muscularity scores. The results demonstrated a statistically significant main effect of affirmation condition, F(2, 175) = 3.47, p = .033, eta^2 = .04. Specifically, a post-hoc analysis revealed that those who did not complete the affirmation task scored marginally higher on the Drive for Muscularity Scale than did those who wrote about their highest ranked value (p = .077; see Figure 2).

The results also demonstrated a marginal main effect of self-objectification condition, F(1, 176) = 3.11, p = .08, eta^2 = .02. Specifically, those who were not self-objectified scored higher on the Drive for Muscularity Scale than did those who were self-objectified.

As was the case with Drive for Thinness, a statistically significant main effect of sex was also found, F(1, 176) = 43.29, p < .001, eta^2 = .21. Specifically, men (M = 2.74, SD = 0.84) scored significantly higher than women (M = 2.01, SD = 0.63) on the Drive for Muscularity Scale.

Additionally, the results demonstrated a marginal interaction between affirmation condition and sex, F(2,175) = 2.43, p = .091, eta^2 = .03. Specifically,
men who did not complete the affirmation task scored higher on the Drive for Muscularity Scale compared to those who wrote about their lowest or highest ranked value, whereas affirmation condition did not affect women’s scores. No other interaction effects were significant (all $p \geq .17$, $\eta^2 \leq .03$). See Table 1 for means and standard deviations of drive for muscularity scores as a function of condition.

**Discussion**

We evaluated whether a values-based self-affirmation intervention could remove or reduce the negative effects of self-objectification by first attempting to induce self-objectification and then introducing a self-affirmation intervention. Moreover, we hypothesized that performing a self-objectification task (versus a control task) would result in a higher drive for thinness for women and a higher drive for muscularity for men among those participants who did not also perform a self-affirmation task, but that there would be no difference in drive for thinness or muscularity among those who were self-affirmed. Contrary to our prediction, we did not find any statistically significant main effects of self-objectification or interactions between self-objectification condition and self-affirmation condition on either Drive for Thinness or Drive for Muscularity.

Although the self-objectification manipulation did not produce the significant effects that were predicted, the results of this study are still informative for understanding the role that self-affirmation could have in improving body image. That is, although the self-objectification manipulation does not appear to have altered levels of self-objectification (at least as assessed via The Self-Objectification Questionnaire; Fredrickson et al., 1998), given that participants were randomly assigned to self-affirmation condition, participants across the three self-affirmation conditions should have begun that task with similar levels of self-objectification as well as drive for thinness and muscularity. Thus, any self-affirmation condition differences in self-objectification, drive for thinness, and drive for muscularity scores should be due to the effects of the self-affirmation manipulation. Given that those who had been randomly assigned to complete the self-affirmation task subsequently scored marginally lower on the Drive for Muscularity Scale, as well as the Drive for Thinness subscale, and significantly lower on the Self-Objectification Questionnaire compared to those who did not engage in self-affirmation. Overall these results suggest that focusing on nonappearance-related values might be a promising strategy for improving general body image.

It is important to note that, although Drive for Thinness, Drive for Muscularity, and Self-Objectification scores were reduced in some way by our affirmation task, it is unknown how long this effect might have lasted. In fact, we would argue that it is unlikely that one 10-minute intervention would be able to keep self-objectification, drive for thinness, and drive for muscularity low, due to the constant exposure to and comparison with media images of seemingly perfect individuals. Future studies might benefit from multiple follow-ups to determine how long the effects of self-affirmation last. From a theoretical standpoint, it will also be important for future work to determine the mechanisms through which self-affirmation may produce beneficial effects on self-objectification and drive for thinness/muscularity. Because previous studies have found that self-affirmation tasks can alter mood and/or improve state self-esteem (Koole et al., 1999; Sherman & Cohen, 2006), we expected that performing our self-affirmation task might remove the effects of self-objectification by decreasing negative affect and/or improving state self-esteem. However, we found no evidence of differences in mood or state self-esteem scores as a function of self-affirmation condition.

There were a few marginal effects involving the self-objectification manipulation that should be briefly mentioned. One of these findings was that those who were self-objectified scored marginally lower on the Drive for Muscularity Scale than

![Table 1: Means (and Standard Deviations) of Drive for Thinness and Muscularity Scores by Condition](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Affirmation Condition</th>
<th>Men (Standard Deviation)</th>
<th>Women (Standard Deviation)</th>
<th>Men (Standard Deviation)</th>
<th>Women (Standard Deviation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thinness</td>
<td>1.96 (0.83)</td>
<td>3.02 (1.20)</td>
<td>2.16 (0.77)</td>
<td>2.71 (1.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscularity</td>
<td>2.19 (0.52)</td>
<td>2.03 (0.57)</td>
<td>2.81 (1.15)</td>
<td>1.91 (0.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>2.14 (0.85)</td>
<td>3.29 (1.30)</td>
<td>2.04 (0.68)</td>
<td>3.38 (1.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinness</td>
<td>2.65 (0.69)</td>
<td>1.99 (0.62)</td>
<td>2.61 (0.76)</td>
<td>2.03 (0.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscularity</td>
<td>2.99 (1.41)</td>
<td>3.77 (1.32)</td>
<td>2.01 (0.69)</td>
<td>3.65 (1.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No affirmation</td>
<td>2.89 (0.56)</td>
<td>1.93 (0.91)</td>
<td>3.38 (0.99)</td>
<td>2.15 (0.49)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
those who were not self-objectified. We suspect that this marginal difference may be a function of particularly female participants (who were the largest proportion of our sample), who had been self-objectified, being less willing to endorse drive for masculinity items because masculinity is not part of the “thin ideal” in society. The second marginal effect involving the self-objectification manipulation was that women who were not self-objectified reported less positive affect than did women in the self-objectification condition. It is possible that this marginal difference may be due to participants in the no self-objectification condition feeling somewhat less positive as a function of spending 5 minutes listing the activities they had accomplished over the past 24 hours (i.e., perhaps the activities the typical college student accomplishes in a 24-hour period are not particularly positive or inspiring, etc.). It is important to note that both effects were only marginal and neither had been predicted. Thus, the effects should be interpreted very cautiously, and these speculations should be considered highly tentative.

Sex Differences
It is also worth discussing the multiple sex differences that emerged in our results, although these should be interpreted with caution due to the small number of men who participated. In our sample, men had a higher drive to be muscular compared to women, and women had a higher drive to be thin compared to men. This provides further evidence that the U.S. female ideal is thin and the U.S. male ideal is muscular (Register et al., 2015). Furthermore, regardless of self-objectification condition, women scored significantly higher on the self-objectification manipulation check than did men. Because a higher score on the Self-Objectification Questionnaire indicates being more appearance focused rather than competence focused, this might suggest that women are naturally more appearance focused. This could be due to the unrelenting media images and advertisements pushing women to obtain beauty (Stice et al., 2000), which is appearance related.

Interestingly, we found that men who were not self-objectified reported a more positive affect than did women who were not self-objectified. This is consistent with the literature on sex differences in affect because women are generally more prone to depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001) and report less positive affect than men (Bojanowska & Zalewska, 2016; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998).

Methodological Issues
This experiment had several methodological strengths including that experimenters were kept blind to condition and wore long lab coats to hide their silhouettes, thereby reducing the likelihood that participants would compare their bodies to that of their experimenter. Additionally, we eliminated distractors, social media, and Internet use during the study by having participants store their belongings (e.g., cell phones and laptops) outside of the study room. According to Derenne and Beresin (2006), mass media plays a significant role in increased body dissatisfaction among men and women. Thus, it was important for us to control for Internet and media use during the study to prevent participants from experiencing additional self-objectification or body dissatisfaction. Given that participants were randomly assigned, it is unlikely that day-to-day social media use differed reliably across conditions. However, it could be beneficial for future work to assess individual differences in social media use and statistically control for any such differences in the analyses. Another methodological strength of this study was that, unlike much of the previous self-objectification literature, we made an effort to experimentally manipulate self-objectification using a task that had been successful in a previous experiment (Register et al., 2015). Unfortunately, the manipulation does not appear to have been successful in this experiment in that those in the self-objectification condition did not score reliably higher on the self-objectification manipulation check than those who were in the no objectification condition (which could explain why there were no differences in drive for thinness and masculinity as a function of self-objectification condition). It is difficult to say why the task was not successful in altering self-objectification scores in the present experiment. One possibility concerns the fact that the average BMI for our participants was in the “healthy” range as defined by the CDC, whereas the average BMI for Register et al.’s (2015) study was in the “overweight” range. This might suggest that participants who have lower or “healthier” BMIs are closer to the ideal image promoted by Western society and therefore do not become as easily self-objectified when comparing their bodies to an ideal. Future work might examine this possibility by recruiting participants who are classified as having “healthy” and “overweight” BMIs to directly compare how these two groups are affected by the self-objectification task, as well as how much their body image scores improve with
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the self-affirmation task. This would give us a better understanding of the types of interventions that might be beneficial for different body types. The same type of comparison could also be done with body fat composition data obtained with a body composition handheld device. Comparing those classified as having “healthy” and “unhealthy” body fat percentages may be more useful than comparing BMI groups because BMI has increasingly been argued to be an inaccurate measure of health (Tomiyama, Hunger, Nguyen-Cuu, & Wells, 2016).

Another possible reason that the task was not successful in altering self-objectification scores in the present experiment concerns the different ethnic breakdown of our sample versus that used by Register et al. (2015). It is possible that a sample with a different distribution of ethnicities may produce different results because different ethnicities could have different body ideals and levels of body image disturbance. For example, the sample used by Register et al. (2015) had a much higher African American (32% vs. 1.7%) and a much lower Asian (15% vs. 41.6%) composition than did our sample. Altabe (1998) found several differences in body image disturbance between different ethnic groups (i.e., White and Hispanic-Americans showed more weight-related body image disturbance than African Americans and Asian Americans). Thus, it is possible that the different distribution in ethnicities was a factor contributing to the differing results between the present study compared to that of Register et al. (2015).

Another potential reason the task was not successful in significantly altering self-objectification scores concerns the possibility that the control self-objectification task focused participants on themselves by having them list their activities over the past 24 hours, inadvertently producing self-objectification scores similar to those in the self-objectification condition. It seems unlikely that a task that requires individuals to simply list their activities would produce self-objectification (i.e., internalization of an observer’s perspective of one’s body). Nevertheless, future studies might benefit from using a self-objectification control task that does not require writing about anything remotely related to the self.

To our knowledge, this is the first study that has attempted to replicate the effects of the self-objectification task designed by Register et al. (2015). In some respects, it is surprising that Register et al. (2015) found that their 5-minute self-objectification writing task actually produced differences on the self-objectification and drive for thinness measures given that those scales assess more enduring values and behaviors. Thus, it is possible that the task is simply not strong enough to produce reliable differences in self-objectification. Relatedly, it should be noted that most participants in the present experiment completed several tasks/questionnaires in between the self-objectification task and the manipulation check. This does not appear to have been the case in the Register et al. (2015) study. Thus, perhaps this particular self-objectification manipulation is not strong enough to withstand such distractions, and/or the particular self-objectification manipulation check measure used is not sufficiently sensitive to detect differences that remain following such distractions. Future studies may benefit from strengthening the self-objectification manipulation and using different/additional measures to assess the efficacy of the self-objectification manipulation, such as the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinley & Hyde, 1996).

An additional limitation is the impact of having participants whose ethnic/racial background is not representative of the general population. Although the ethnic breakdown of the sample utilized in our study closely resembles the ethnic makeup of students enrolled at the university where the study was conducted, this does mean the generalizability of our results to the rest of the U.S. population may be a concern. As stated previously, it is possible that a sample with a different distribution of ethnicities may produce different results. Future studies might benefit from recruiting a sample that is more ethnically representative of the United States as a whole. However, an attempt was made to have our sample represent the general “ideals” of the U.S. population by excluding participants who did not spend their formative years in the United States. These participants were excluded because this study depended on an “ideal” image specific to the United States, and these participants spent their formative years (during which time an “ideal” image might be acquired) elsewhere.

Another limitation concerns those participants who were excluded due to underweight BMIs. Of those excluded, only 3 were men and 17 were women. It is possible that the underweight men who were excluded viewed themselves as further away from the ideal, if that ideal was a heavier, more muscular one. Although including these three men in the analyses likely would not have resulted in significantly different results, future
studies should consider including underweight men in their analyses.

Future work should also attempt to recruit more men in order to gain a better understanding of the role of self-objectification in male body image issues. In addition, given that much of the body image work has utilized college student samples, it is important that future work examine the efficacy of self-affirmation for reducing self-objectification in noncollege student samples (although there is no a priori reason to expect that the body image issues of college students differ from those of the general population).

Practical Implications and Conclusions
This study demonstrated that a values-based affirmation intervention has the potential to positively influence body image because writing about nonappearance-related values reduced participants’ drive for thinness, drive for muscularity, and self-objectification. Such a task might be a useful exercise to implement in positive body image programs, which aim to reduce negative feelings about appearance and promote body acceptance. Further, the study also reinforced the idea that women in Western culture prefer a thin ideal image and may be more appearance focused, and men prefer a muscular ideal image and are less appearance focused than women. Future studies implementing follow-ups are needed to determine the longevity and practical significance of the self-affirmation intervention. Furthermore, determining whether a self-affirmation task would also be beneficial for those who are considered overweight would be valuable.

References


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