



Trappings of femininity: A test of the “beauty as currency” hypothesis in shaping college women’s gender activism



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether believing beauty is a primary currency for women operates as an antecedent force in the relation between self-objectification and gender activism. Ninety-four ethnically diverse women attending a small liberal arts college in the southeastern United States completed the study questionnaires online for course credit. Preliminary results demonstrated beauty as currency belief, self-objectification, and support for the gender status quo were negatively associated with gender activism. A serial mediation analysis revealed support for the proposed model: Beauty as currency belief was indirectly and inversely linked to gender activism through self-objectification and support for the gender status quo, offering initial evidence for our beauty as currency hypothesis. These findings suggest belief in the notion women will reap more benefits from their bodies than other attributes or pursuits may be an important legitimizing feature of feminine beauty ideology that works through self-objectification against gender social change.

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1. Introduction

In the objectification theory framework (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), recurrent encounters of the varieties of sexual objectification pervasive in everyday life foster appearance self-consciousness in girls and women, whereby sexual objectification becomes incorporated into their own mental sphere (Roberts, 2002), and regularly prompts girls and women to anticipate and stay vigilant of how they appear to others. This self-perspective is dubbed self-objectification. Consistent with Langton's (2009) reasoning, whereby the “self-objectifying attitude will be a matter of both seeing, and doing” (pp. 334–335), the two most commonly studied features of self-objectification are centrality of appearance to self-concept (a matter of seeing) and the habitual surveillance of appearance (a matter of doing). Girls and women with higher levels of self-objectification tend to regard appearance as central to self-concept, anticipate others' evaluations of their appearance, and

vigilantly police their looks (Calogero & Watson, 2009; McKinley & Hyde, 1996).

In the last two decades, scholars have garnered extensive empirical support for objectification theory's original aim of explaining specific patterns of women's mental health risk through a socio-cultural lens (Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 2011; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012). Specifically, self-objectification has been associated with increased opportunities for certain subjective experiences (i.e., body shame, appearance anxiety, disrupted flow, and reduced sensitivity to internal bodily cues), which consequently predict more symptoms of depression, sexual dysfunction, and eating disorders. The objectification theory literature has also identified other maladaptive correlates and consequences of self-objectification beyond those set out in the original objectification model (Roberts, Calogero, & Gervais, in press). Some research has shown wider consequences in the sphere of women's health and physicality (e.g., cosmetic surgery attitudes—Calogero, Pina, & Sutton, 2014; substance abuse—Carr & Szymanski, 2011), whereas other research has demonstrated negative relations with more general spheres of self-evaluation (e.g., self-efficacy—Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003; self-esteem—Choma et al., 2010) and behavior (e.g., cogni-

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tive performance—Gay & Castano, 2010; time spent talking—Saguy, Quinn, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2010). Some research has also shown more negative perceptions of the social environment in relation to higher self-objectification (e.g., fear of rape—Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; hostility toward women—Loya, Cowen, & Walters, 2006).

Further expanding the scope of objectification theory by integrating objectification and system justification theories (Calogero, 2013a, 2017; Calogero & Tylka, 2014), Calogero and Tylka (2014) scholars have investigated the potential role of gendered self-perspectives in women's political consciousness and gender collective action. It was reasoned that self-objectification, as a form of appearance consciousness and self-stereotyping as sex object, should be linked to viewing social arrangements between women and men (i.e., the gender status quo) as fair and just because this self-view is consistent with those arrangements, and thus be linked to less engagement in actions to alter those social arrangements.

Prior research has supported this reasoning. In experiments where women are reminded of sexist ideologies and unequal gender divisions in society, they reported more self-objectification and body shame (Calogero & Jost, 2011) and they engaged in more gender self-stereotyping by rating themselves as more communal than agentic (Laurin, Kay, & Shepherd, 2011). In a separate experiment, when women ostensibly conformed to communal stereotypes, they reported higher satisfaction with the societal status quo, compared to women who believed they conformed to agentic stereotypes (Laurin et al., 2011). Among women with higher trait levels of self-objectification or for whom self-objectification was situationally activated, support for the gender status quo was significantly higher and engagement in social activism on behalf of women was significantly lower, compared to women under conditions of lower self-objectification (Calogero, 2013b). These patterns suggest increased perceptions of the gender system's legitimacy may be facilitated by gendered self-views.

In the current study, we advance this program of research by investigating the role of feminine beauty ideology in women's dampened gender activism pursuits. Feminine beauty ideology is a specific type of femininity ideology that communicates the paramount importance of physical attractiveness and appearance for women, and the imperative to pursue and attain the ideal standards of the day for feminine beauty. Feminine beauty ideology sets beauty work as a primary pursuit for women, work for women that is truly never done, because of the unrealistic, elusive, and changing nature of these ideals (Calogero, Boroughs, & Thompson, 2007; Wolf, 1991). Feminist scholars have long written about the oppressive nature of beauty ideals and mandates for women (Bartky, 1990; Dworkin, 1974; Jeffreys, 2005; Wollstonecraft, 1792), connecting feminine beauty ideology to the reproduction and maintenance of gender inequality. According to Dworkin (1974):

Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her mobility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. *They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom* (p. 12, emphasis in original).

Moreover, these appearance mandates appear to take root early in girls' gender socialization. We have evidence from the 1950s that adolescent girls were listing 'good looks' as a primary aspiration, when asked to write essays on the sort of person they would like to be when they grow up (Crane, 1956). Today, we have evidence that girls as young as 6 years-old are sexualized, have internalized feminine beauty ideals, and display features of self-objectification (Jongenelis, Byrne, & Pettigrew, 2014; Murnen & Smolak, 2000; Slater & Tiggemann, 2016; Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013).

Despite these cautionary observations, beauty continues to occupy a central role in the lives of many women (Bartky, 1990;

Calogero et al., 2007). We argue that feminine beauty ideology represents a piece of the cultural landscape that functions as another environmental 'gaze' on women's bodies, normalizing a view of themselves through an appearance-focused lens. As noted by Freedman (1986, p. 11), "women are aware that beauty counts heavily with men and they therefore work hard to achieve it." Thus, one way through which beauty ideology might operate as a subjugating force in women's lives is by legitimizing women's appearance consciousness and engagement in beauty work as a form of social currency for them (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jackman, 1994), thereby reinforcing the gender status quo. Put differently, belief in the notion that women will reap more benefits from their bodies than their skills or other pursuits may be a feature of feminine beauty ideology that works with self-objectification and against gender social change for those women who adopt it—a proposition we refer to as the beauty as currency hypothesis. When women believe that beauty is their primary social currency, we expect more self-objectification and more support for the system that sustains it, because these beliefs justify and legitimize the pursuit of beauty.

In sum, we hypothesized the belief in beauty as currency for women would be positively associated with self-objectification and support for the gender status quo and negatively associated with gender activism. We further predicted that self-objectification would be positively associated with support for the gender status quo, and that both of these variables would be negatively associated with gender activism. For the serial mediation model, we hypothesized that the belief in beauty as currency would be directly linked to self-objectification and support for the gender status quo, and self-objectification and support for the gender status quo would be directly linked to gender activism. Of primary interest, we hypothesized that the belief in beauty as currency would be linked to gender activism through self-objectification and support for the gender status quo.

In addition, in order to provide a stronger test of the relations between the main study variables, we measured and controlled for two robust individual differences variables linked to self-objectification: self-esteem and self-efficacy. Both self-esteem and self-efficacy have been negatively associated with self-objectification (Choma et al., 2010; Gapinski et al., 2003; respectively); however, these variables have not been examined in the context of the self-objectification—gender activism link reported in prior research (e.g., Calogero, 2013b). Given the current research is an expansion of this prior work, we included these variables to determine whether the predicted pathways would hold after accounting for more general feelings of self-worth, purposefulness, and perceived capability.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 94 female undergraduates ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.86$, $SD = 6.44$) from a small liberal arts southeastern US college. Over half of the women identified as White non-Hispanic (60.7%); the remainder identified as African American (25.6%), Asian American (8.5%), and Hispanic (5.3%). Most of the women (90%) identified as heterosexual. The sample was generally split in terms of relationship status between single (44.7%) and in a dating relationship (45.7%), with an additional 8.5% engaged or married. Political affiliation was identified as follows: 18% Republican, 38% Democrat, 6.4% Independent, and 37.2% No Affiliation. Female participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes in exchange for course credit; the study was presented as an investigation of "college women's social wellness." Interested participants were given

a web link to complete the study online through Survey Monkey. Informed consent was obtained and a debriefing was delivered as part of the online survey. Measures were completed in counterbalanced order in the context of a larger survey on body image and well-being.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Beauty as currency ideology. This component of feminine beauty ideology was measured with five items reflecting the belief that beauty is a form of social currency for women. In order to assess our construct of primary theoretical interest, these items were selected purposefully from an existing scale that measured endorsement of Western beauty ideals and practices (Forbes, Collinsworth, Jobe, Braun, & Wise, 2007). Participants rated the following items from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): “It is more important for a woman to be pretty than to be smart.”; “The most important asset a woman can have is her looks.”; “A woman should not expect others to respect her unless she is slender.”; “If a woman can not do a good job of taking care of her appearance, she probably can not be trusted to do a good job at anything else.”; “In most situations, a woman will get further by being attractive than by being competent.” A principal axis factor analysis supported a single factor structure for these five items that accounted for 52.69% of the variance, and yielded an eigenvalue of 2.63 and factor loadings ranging between .40 and .83. Mean scores were calculated, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of this belief. For the original version of the scale, Forbes et al. (2007) demonstrated internal reliability for the scale items among women, as well as construct validity given the scale’s positive correlations with belief in the thin ideal and sexist hostility toward women. In the current study, the modified measure of beauty as currency also demonstrated reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .72$).

2.2.2. Self-objectification. The Surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinley & Hyde, 1996) assessed the doing component of self-objectification by measuring the degree to which individuals monitor how their bodies appear to others. Internal reliability ($\alpha = .89$) and construct validity have been demonstrated for this scale among women (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Participants rated eight items ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), such as “I rarely worry about how I look to other people” (reverse scored). Mean scores were calculated, with higher scores indicating more vigilant body monitoring and policing (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$).

2.2.3. Support for gender status quo. This form of system justification was measured with a shortened gender-specific version of the System Justification Scale (Jost & Kay, 2005), which has demonstrated reliable and valid scores in previous research with college women (Becker & Wright, 2011; Jost & Kay, 2005). In line with our theoretical reasoning, participants rated four items from the original scale (Items 1, 5, 6, and 8) that specifically pertained to the perceived overall fairness of the gender status quo, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*). The items were as follows: “In general, relations between men and women are fair.”; “Most policies relating to gender and the sexual division of labor serve the greater good.”; “Everyone (male or female) has a fair shot at wealth and happiness.”; “Society is set up so men and women usually get what they deserve.” A principal axis factor analysis supported a single factor structure for these four items that accounted for 61.95% of the variance, and yielded an eigenvalue of 2.48 and factor loadings ranging between .53 and .84. Mean scores were calculated, with higher scores indicating more support for the gender status quo (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .79$).

2.2.4. Gender activism. Engagement in gender activism was measured as the degree to which participants engaged in social activism on behalf of women during the preceding six months. Participants rated seven items representing gender-based social activism adapted from prior research (Calogero, 2013b; Stake et al., 1994), ranging from 1 (never)–7 (all the time), such as “Circulated a position (in person or online) related to a women’s rights cause and gender equality.” Mean scores were calculated, with higher scores indicating more frequent engagement in gender activism (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .85$).

2.2.5. General self-esteem. General self-esteem was assessed with the well-validated Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Participants rated 10 items, such as “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself,” from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*). Mean scores were calculated, with higher scores indicating higher levels of trait self-esteem (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$).

2.2.6. General self-efficacy. General self-efficacy was assessed with the well-validated Self-Efficacy Scale (Sherer et al., 1982). Participants rated 17 items from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), such as “I feel insecure about my ability to do things” (reverse scored). Mean scores were calculated, with higher scores indicating higher general self-efficacy (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .81$).

3. Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the study variables. Individual missing data points were minimal, missing completely at random, and thus were handled via mean substitution. Data screening revealed no outliers or violations of normality. Correlational analyses demonstrated positive and moderately sized associations between beauty as currency belief and both self-objectification and support for the gender status quo, and a negative and moderately sized association with gender activism. Self-objectification was positively and moderately associated with support for the gender status quo, and both of these variables were negatively and moderately associated with gender activism. Notably, general self-esteem and general self-efficacy were not significantly associated with self-objectification or gender activism, but they were negatively and moderately associated with beauty as currency belief. Also, support for the gender status quo was unrelated to self-efficacy, but showed a small, positive association with self-esteem.

For the main analysis, we tested a serial mediation model using PROCESS (Model 6; Hayes, 2013) to examine the direct and indirect effect of beauty as currency belief on gender activism through self-objectification and support for the gender status quo. Beauty as currency belief was entered as the predictor (X), gender activism was entered as the criterion (Y), self-objectification (M1) and support for the gender status quo (M2) were entered as the mediating variables, and self-esteem and self-efficacy were entered as covariates. Controlling for general levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy did not alter the results, and therefore we excluded them as covariates for parsimony.

Significance of indirect paths was assessed using 95% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals with 10000 bootstrap resamples. Results revealed patterns consistent with the hypothesized model (see Fig. 1). The full regression model predicted 22% of the variance in gender activism from beauty as currency belief, self-objectification, and support for the gender status quo, $F(5, 88) = 5.46, p < .001$. Belief in beauty as currency was indirectly linked to lower gender activism through higher self-objectification (indirect $\beta = -.14, SE = .08, 95\% CI [-.40, -.09]$) and through higher support for the gender status quo (indirect $\beta = -.06, SE = .04, 95\% CI [-.17, -.01]$). Beauty as currency was also

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for study variables.

Measure	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Beauty as currency	2.01	0.81	–					
2. Self-objectification	4.23	0.94	.41**	–				
3. Gender status quo	3.82	1.40	.30**	.33**	–			
4. Gender activism	1.84	1.00	–.35**	–.40**	–.35**	–		
5. Self-esteem	3.43	0.46	–.30**	–.15	–.26*	.06	–	
6. Self-efficacy	3.78	0.43	–.33**	–.17	–.17	–.01	.40**	–

Note. $N = 94$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

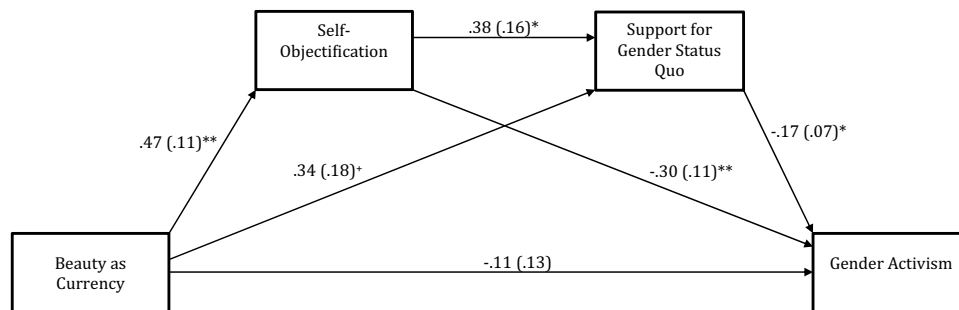


Fig. 1. Standardized beta coefficients (and standard errors) for serial mediation model linking beauty as currency ideology to gender activism through self-objectification and support for the gender status quo. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; + $p < .07$.

linked to lower gender activism indirectly through higher self-objectification and then higher support for the gender status quo (indirect $\beta = -.03$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI $[-.10, -.02]$). The direct effect of beauty as currency belief on gender activism was not significant after accounting for these mediators (direct $\beta = -.17$, $SE = .13$, 95% CI $[-.44, .10]$).

4. Discussion

To our knowledge, this study provides the first empirical evidence linking the belief in beauty as women's social currency to higher self-objectification and lower support for gender social change in women, which we referred to as the beauty as currency hypothesis. Although preliminary, these findings align with the theoretical reasoning put forward, which suggests if women believe beauty is their primary social currency, then women will be more likely to support an environment where this currency is accepted and worth the effort. The gender status quo in American society heavily scrutinizes, but also rewards, women's appearance and physicality, and thus provides such an environment. Future research should investigate whether perceived and actual rewards for complying with the beauty demands of westernized and feminized appearance ideals do actually provide women with the ideological fuel to bolster the gender status quo, even when compliance with it ultimately does not serve their actual welfare or interests (Calogero, 2017; Wolf, 1991).

While this study provides initial evidence for the beauty as currency hypothesis, we are aware of several limitations. We tested a model that implied causal pathways from beauty as currency belief to gender activism through self-objectification and support for the gender status quo, but confirmation of these pathways as causally determined is warranted. Also, participants were recruited from a convenience sample of young adult women without any noticeable disfigurement, limiting the generalizability of the findings to women across the age spectrum and who may find themselves outside of or differentially situated under the objectification limelight. Particular features of feminine beauty ideology also vary as a func-

tion of ethnicity, although we would argue the specific components of feminine beauty ideals might be less important than the currency of those ideals for operating in the gender status quo.

We did not assess men in this study because we would not expect the model of gender activism proposed here to operate the same way for this gender group. Moreover, despite the growing cultural emphasis on men's appearance and the concomitant negative impact on men's body image (Thompson & Cafri, 2007), we would not expect to uncover strong beliefs in beauty operating as a primary social currency for men among either gender group. On the whole, experiencing distress in the face of increased appearance pressures is not equivalent to having one's social mobility, standing, and power tied to one's appearance. Future research should try to clarify these different social realities empirically, and also identify those components of masculinity ideology that may operate as social currency for men and support the gender system.

Although sexual objectification of women and feminine beauty ideology are deeply entrenched in Westernized cultures, we do not view these beliefs and practices as inevitable (Calogero & Tylka, 2014). Indeed, women do vary in their conceptualizations of beauty, and conceptualizing beauty more broadly seems to serve them well. For example, a broader conceptualization of beauty among women is positively associated with self-compassion, body appreciation, and body image quality of life, and negatively associated with self-surveillance, disordered eating, anti-fat attitudes, thin-ideal internalization, and consideration of cosmetic surgery (Tylka & Iannantuono, 2016). Future research should examine the possibility that broadening women's conceptualizations of beauty might bolster more challenges to the gender status quo and potentially motivate action toward gender social change.

In conclusion, despite long-standing gender inequalities, the gender status quo is largely preserved: Around the globe, women earn less money, hold fewer government and decision-making positions, have less access to education and legal protections, are significantly more often the victims of intimate partner violence and rape, and complete the bulk of all domestic labor, compared to men (United Nations, 1995, 2000). A multitude of complex fac-

tors perpetuate and contribute to these gross imbalances. However, scholars agree that collective action on behalf of the ingroup is the most effective way to bring about social change and social justice for the betterment of the ingroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wright et al., 1990). The present research suggests the beauty as currency hypothesis may offer further psychological insight into how gendered ideologies about women's bodies impede women's engagement in collective action on their own behalf. For this reason, we hope that our findings inspire further refinement of the beauty as currency construct, in terms of its ideological contents, assessment, and connections to women's body image, overall wellness, and social action motivations and pursuits.

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