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The romance of self-objectification: Does priming romantic relationships induce states of self-objectification among women?

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Author's Note

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### Abstract

Objectification theory suggests that women internalize an observer's perspective on the body (*self objectification*; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997); however, certain contexts and thoughts may make self-objectification more likely. Because the pursuit of relationships is tied to attractiveness, the present study examines whether women have an automatic link between self-objectification and romantic relationships. Using a U.S. undergraduate sample, women (N = 86) of different relationship statuses were either exposed to relationship-related or neutral words in a lexical decision making task. Following relationship priming, single women showed greater self-objectification and women in relationships showed less self-objectification. These findings are discussed in terms of self-objectification theory and the importance of attractiveness and beauty in the pursuit of relationships.

**KEYWORDS:** women; objectification; priming; romantic relationships; body image

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### Introduction

The frequent depiction of women as objects of male desire may cause women to prioritize their physical appearance and internalize an observer's perspective on the self (i.e., *self-objectify*; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). While the sexually objectifying male gaze is at the heart of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), the extent to which body image concerns come from, and are related to, the desire for male attention remains empirically understudied in the field. We believe that it is important to examine and identify the relational sources of women's self-objectification because self-objectification has been linked to numerous mental health and interpersonal costs including lower self-esteem, more symptoms of disordered eating, depression, more sexual problems and dysfunction, poorer performance on academic tasks, and greater shame and anxiety (see Thompson, 1996). The more that is known about the contexts that give rise to body concerns, the better educated the field will become about designing effective interventions and counseling techniques aimed at ameliorating body image issues.

Because the pursuit of relationships is so often paired with unrealistic images of female beauty, we believed that women, especially single women, may have an automatic link between thoughts of romantic relationships and self-objectification. The theory of contiguous activation argues that frequently paired knowledge structures (e.g., relationships and beauty) become automatized over time and eventually evolve to activate one another (Meyer & Schvaneveldt, 1971). Therefore, we believed that *relationship priming*, activating knowledge structures associated with relationships, would induce states of self-objectification. The use of priming

temporarily activates an individual's mental representations as a way of examining the automatic impact of these representations on various psychological phenomena. Importantly, priming effects do not depend on conscious processing, which affords the investigation of automatic effects on social perception and behavior (Bargh & Chartrand, 2000). Accordingly, in the present study, we examine whether priming romantic relationships causes single women to self-objectify. Moreover, we explore whether priming romantic relationships creates or reduces self-objectification for women in relationships (hereafter referred to as coupled women).

### *Self-Objectification*

Objectification theory details women's experiences of their bodies in a culture that sexually objectifies the human body, particularly the human female body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The theory posits self-objectification as a predictor of a variety of mental health risks that are more common among women than men. Empirical evidence suggests that greater self-objectification predicts unipolar depression (e.g., Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004), sexual dysfunction (e.g., Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007), disordered eating (e.g., Noll & Fredrickson, 1998) and other health behaviors such as smoking (Harrell, Fredrickson, Pomerleau, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2006).

Self-objectification stems from sexual objectification, or depicting the human female body as a commodity and an object of male desire (Bartky, 2003; Bordo, 1993). One of the processes through which sexual objectification occurs is gaze, or visual inspection of the body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). An objectifying male gaze is pervasive in the culture and evidenced in a variety of domains including actual interpersonal and social encounters, visual media that depict interpersonal and social encounters, and encounters with visual media that force viewers to adopt a sexualizing gaze (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Most women develop a male authority in their consciousness whose gaze and judgment are constant, a generalized male witness (Bartky, 2003).

Under the regulation of institutionalized heterosexuality, women must model themselves in the likeness of the ideal woman as defined by men (Bartky, 2003). Because attracting men is paramount, women must adhere to patriarchal cultural prescriptions for beauty such as “soft, supple skin,” “dewy complexions,” “mysterious eyes,” and “kissable lips” (Bartky, 1990, pgs. 72-73).

Accordingly, women learn very early on to be their first surveyors and to view themselves as others would by focusing on their physical appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). With the recognition that their physical appearance is vital, especially for drawing male attention, women have been socialized to monitor and enhance their physical appearance towards making themselves acceptable and desirable to men (i.e., institutionalized heterosexuality; Bartky, 2003). Women who do not live up to appearance and beauty ideals fear social repercussions, especially the loss of men’s interest and attraction (Bartky, 2003). The loss of male attention is an undesirable prospect for most women given that women and girls are socialized to highly value their romantic relationships and single women face stigmatization (DePaulo & Morris, 2006). At times, it appears that girls are obsessed with romantic relationships, focusing a good deal of time and energy on romantic relationships, sometimes at the sacrifice of their own career development and education (Holland, 1993). Furthermore, women evidence a greater drive to marry than men that may come at a cost to their own occupational aspirations (Blakemore, Lawton, & Vartanian, 2005).

The mass media plays an important role in reinforcing the idea that only the beautiful deserve and receive romantic love (Galacian, 2004). Analyses of the content of women’s and girls’ magazines reveal an overwhelming focus on two common themes: physical appearance and romantic relationships (Peirce, 1990; Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman, 1998; Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, & Kelly, 1986). The pairing of beauty and romantic relationships is no accident as

women are socialized to be acutely aware of the role of physical appearance in heterosexual relationships.

### *The Romance of Self-Objectification*

Living in a culture wherein women are inundated with media images and social interactions that focus primarily on women's physical appearance, women's greater tendency to self-objectify compared to men is hardly surprising (Fredrickson, et al., 1998; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). While media consumption certainly plays a role in women's self objectification, women also experience more social interactions that amplify appearance concerns such as greater appearance-related teasing from peers during adolescence (Cash, 1995), experiences of sexual harassment (Stockdale, 1996), and exposure to peers and social groups that prioritize physical appearance compared to men (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004).

The quest for romantic relationships among heterosexual women may be especially beset with appearance concerns because of the salience of physical appearance in this particular context. Feminist theorists have long argued that women are encouraged to accommodate male needs, understand themselves as others see them, and feel pleasure through their own bodily objectification, especially being looked at and identified as objects of male desire (Bartky, 2003). Thus, women's physical appearance concerns may be motivated to some extent by the desire for male acceptance.

Given the concern about losing male acknowledgement, heterosexual women's body image concerns may result, in part, from the desire for romantic relationships with men. Yet, very few studies have examined the connection between heterosexual women's desire for romantic relationships and body image concerns. Findings among a small set of studies utilizing adolescents and adults suggest that women and girls who indicate deriving self-worth from romantic

relationships with the other sex report the greatest endorsement of appearance ideals, higher symptoms of disordered eating and body shame (Sanchez & Kwang, 2007).

The association between valuing relationships and women's body concerns suggests that women may perceive relationship status as tied to physical appearance. To some extent, they may be correct. Some research has shown weight and body mass have been linked to relationship status. Overweight women were 20% less likely to marry than their normal weight peers in one study (Gaesser, 1996). Among teenage girls, increases in body mass predict decreases in the likelihood of being in a romantic relationship (Halpern, King, Oslak, & Udry, 2005). Although these findings were fairly consistent for both men and women, the findings were consistently stronger for women, suggesting that weight played a stronger role in women's relationship status than men's.

The greater importance of women's physical appearance to men can be explained by evolutionary theories of mate selection (Buss, 1989). As a biological organism, humans are driven to select mates who will give them the greatest likelihood of healthy, abundant offspring; thus, differential reproductive investment affords differential mating strategies. Because of women's greater investment in offspring, women are more selective in mate selection, prioritizing mates with financial security to a greater degree than men. Because men's reproductive role involves less investment in offspring, men prioritize physical attractiveness more than women because physical attractiveness is a sign of fertility and health (Buss, 1989).

Numerous studies have supported this conclusion by showing that men value attractiveness in mates to a greater degree than women (e.g., Smith, Waldorf, & Trembath, 1990). For example, Smith and colleagues (1990) gathered and coded men's and women's singles ads for content indicators of desirable qualities in romantic partners. They found that men seeking women were

more likely to indicate physical attractiveness and weight as criteria for potential partners than women seeking men. Heterosexual men value attractiveness in potential mates more than women (Buss, 1989). In addition, men objectify women to a greater degree than women objectify each other (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005). Women are also aware of the importance of physical appearance to men. When women are asked about the predictor of male sexual desire, the single most cited criterion was physical attractiveness (Regan & Berscheid, 1995). However, women believe that men desire thinner, lighter women than they actually do (Lamb, Jackson, Cassidy, & Priest, 1993) and underestimate the extent to which women, not just men, objectify other women (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005).

#### *Relationship Status*

One important moderator of the link between relationship priming and self-objectification may be relationship status. We expect relationship priming to elicit a state of self-objectification for single women because reminding them of their relationship status would increase relationship seeking strategies such as a focus on one's physical appearance. On the contrary, coupled women, under relationship priming might show less self-objectification because we have reminded them of their success in finding a relationship; thus, alleviating appearance pressure. Alternatively, priming relationships might activate relationship maintenance strategies. Coupled women who are primed to think about relationships may think about how to keep their relationships. Because maintaining relationships as well as seeking relationships seem tied to beauty, coupled women may show the same effects as single women under relationship priming. Thus, we test between these alternative predictions for coupled women.

*The Present Study*

Most experimental work on inducing states of self-objectification has involved the body (i.e., having women wear swimsuits, exposing women to idealized body types or appearance-related words; Aubrey, 2006; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Roberts & Gettman, 2004). However, it is unclear what other situations or knowledge structures that do not explicitly involve the body would also prime self-objectification

The present study utilized an experimental design to test whether relationship priming induces states of self-objectification. In the context of our study, we argue that women's relationship status and relationship success has been paired with their physical appearance; thus, we hypothesize that activating thoughts about romantic relationships will induce body concerns. Specifically, we hypothesized that relationship priming would predict greater self-objectification for single women (Hypothesis 1) because they may equate achieving relationships with beauty and attractiveness. For coupled women, we tested between two alternative theories: Hypothesis 2a) relationship priming would decrease self-objectification because coupled women would be reminded of their success in relationships and Hypothesis 2b) relationship priming would increase self-objectification because relationship priming would motivate relationship maintenance strategies. In addition, we controlled for social desirability, relationship satisfaction, and self-esteem in our analyses (Hypothesis 3). We expected our effects to be observed even when controlling for these constructs in the analyses. We controlled for socially desirable responding to ensure that our results remained unchanged if we accounted for participants' impression management. We controlled for relationship satisfaction because relationship priming may unintentionally prime the quality of one's past and present relationships. Moreover, relationship satisfaction has been linked to lower body shame for some women (Downs, James, & Cowan,

2006). Because we were unclear whether self-esteem would be conflated with relationship status (Long, 1988) and self-esteem is typically associated with self-objectification (Tolman, Impett, Tracy, & Michael, 2006), we also controlled for self-esteem.

## Method

### *Participants*

Because the purpose of this study was to examine heterosexual participants, 1 lesbian was excluded from the analyses. The remaining sample included 86 undergraduate women (mean age = 19.71,  $SD = 6.30$ ) from Rutgers University participated in the experimental session (38 Whites, 11 African-Americans, 7 Latino/Hispanics, 21 Asian-Americans, 8 Multiracials, and 1 unidentified). Participants were recruited from the undergraduate psychology subject pool and participated in exchange for credit towards fulfillment of a course requirement during the Fall 2005 and Winter 2006 semesters. Forty-nine women indicated that they were currently in romantic relationships, while 37 women indicated not being in a romantic relationship. Of those currently in relationships, the mean length of the relationship was 14 months ( $SD = 14.22$ ).

### *Materials*

*Lexical decision task.* All participants were invited to participate in a lexical decision task sorting nonwords from words in a computer task. Participants were randomly assigned to condition. We were unable to randomly assign by relationship status because asking about relationship status prior to the experiment may have inadvertently primed relationships. Thus, we had unequal cell sizes (see Table 1). The lexical decision task was administered using E-prime software developed by Psychological Software Tools (Schneider, Eschman, & Zuccolotto, 2002). During the lexical decision task, people in the experimental condition were exposed to target words associated with romantic relationships among other neutral words. Target words associated

with romantic relationships served as primes. Participants in the control condition were exposed only to neutral words. The words were selected based on a pretest in which a separate set of undergraduates ( $N = 18$ ) rated the strength of association of 29 words with romantic relationships using a 7-point rating scale that ranged from 1 (not at all associated with romantic relationships) to 7 (Extremely related to romantic relationships). We selected 8 words that were found to be strongly associated with romantic relationships ( $M > 4.0$ ): *partner, romantic, romance, relationship, wedding, date, marriage, commitment*. The mean rating of relationship association for *relationship* target words was 6.01 in the pretest.

Participants in both conditions experienced the following neutral words: *shoe, beam, wander, gate, farm, clock, computer, and letter*. In the neutral condition, an additional set of neutral words were seen: *sneaker, class, mint, cover, plane, light, under, jest, door, keys, hunt, rent, cabinet, window, flick, and bring*. Neutral words were selected from pretests and previous work to be relatively unassociated with romantic relationships ( $M < 4.0$ ; Sanchez, Kiefer, & Ybarra, 2006). The mean rating of relationship association for *neutral* target words was 2.09 in pretests. All participants received 10 practice trials followed by 56 trials sorting nonwords from words using E-prime software, 15 trials of which were non-words (e.g. wug, okger). In the experimental condition, 24 relationship primes served as target words during the task interspersed with neutral target words ( $N = 27$ ). In the neutral condition, all participants experienced 15 trials of nonwords interspersed with 51 neutral targets.

*Self-Objectification.* *Self-objectification* was assessed with the rank order measure developed by Noll and Fredrickson (1998). Participants were asked to rank the importance of 5 appearance aspects of the body (e.g., weight, facial features) and 5 competence-related aspects of the body (e.g., physical fitness and strength). Each characteristic was weighted by its ranking on a

scale from 9 (*most important*) to 0 (*least important*). Following Noll and Fredrickson (1998), we summed the appearance aspects of the body and the competence aspects of the body rankings separately and then subtracted the sum of the competence rankings from the sum of the appearance rankings. Thus, possible scores ranged from -25 to +25 with higher scores indicated greater levels of self-objectification. As instructed by Noll and Fredrickson (1998), we did not include 4 participants in the analyses who incorrectly or incompletely answered the self-objectification questionnaire.

*State Self-Esteem.* To ensure that our results were not a function of altered self-esteem, we measured participants' state level of self-esteem using the state version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) with 10 items ( $\alpha = .88$ ). Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with statements on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*; e.g. "At this moment, I am inclined to think I am a failure" reverse coded). Self-esteem scores represent the mean of their responses to the 10 items with higher scores indicating greater self-esteem.

*Relationship Satisfaction.* To explore whether relationship satisfaction played a role in the effect of relationship priming on state self-objectification, we measured relationship satisfaction among all participants. Participants indicated their agreement to 8 items created for the present study on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Example items included the following items: "Right now, I am very satisfied with my romantic relationship," "I feel very committed to my partner," "I feel that my partner loves me and accepts me unconditionally," "I am confident that my partner will always love me," "My partner loves me just as I am; he/she would not want to change me in any way," "Right now, I feel closer to my partner than to anyone else in my life," "My partner is less critical of my faults than I am," and "I feel unsatisfied with my romantic relationship (reverse-coded)." The scale was reliable ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Participants who were

not currently involved in relationships were asked to respond regarding past relationships. Relationship satisfaction scores represent the mean of their responses to the 8 items with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction.

*Social desirability.* To ensure that our results were not altered by social desirability concerns, we measured socially desirable responding with the Marlowe-Crowne social desirability scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) which consists of 33 true-false statements. We coded true as 0 and false as 1. Example items included, “Before voting, I thoroughly investigate the qualifications of all the candidates” and “My table manners at home are as good as when I eat out in a restaurant.” Social desirability scores represent a sum of their responses to the 33 items with higher scores indicating greater socially desirable responding. Satisfactory construct validity has been demonstrated in previous work (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960).

*Demographic/additional information.* We also included questions regarding participants’ gender, race, age, relationship status, sexual orientation, relationship length (if currently involved in a relationship), weight/height to calculate body mass, and age they hoped to marry. We asked about body mass because elevated body concerns could be a result of weight problems. To isolate the effects of relationship priming, we included questions about height/weight to calculate and include BMI as a covariate if it was a significant predictor of self-objectification. We asked about intention to marry because many of our primes may have primed marriage as well as relationships and thus, we wanted to confirm that all of our participants intended to marry someday, which they did. The mean intended age of marriage was 25.47 ( $SD = 2.06$ ) for the total sample.

*Procedure.* The procedure for the lexical decision task was modeled after Sanchez et al. (2006). Up to 6 participants took part in each experimental session. Upon arrival, participants were greeted by a female experimenter and seated at computer terminals in separate cubicles. The

experimenter randomly assigned participants to one of the two experimental conditions by coin toss. Participants were told that they were involved in a “Decision Making and Personality Study” and received instructions orally from the experimenter as well as on the computer screen. Participants completed the lexical decision task administered by E-prime software. They were told that they would classify words as being either actual words or nonsense letter strings using different keys on the keyboard, as a measure of verbal ability and decision making. They were further instructed to keep both hands on the keyboard at all times and to respond as quickly as possible without sacrificing accuracy.

At the beginning of each trial, a fixation point was presented in the center of the computer screen. Relationship, neutral, or nonword targets were presented at the center of the screen and remained in view until one of the designated response keys was pressed. A total of 66 trials were presented during the task. We recorded participants’ accuracy deciphering words from non-words during the computer task. After the lexical decision task, participants were given a written questionnaire containing the self-objectification measure, self-esteem, social desirability, and demographic questions. After completing the questionnaire, participants were also asked to indicate their best guess at the purpose of the study and recall words used in the task. We asked participants what the study was about to ensure that were unable to connect the computer task to the written questionnaire. Along with recording accuracy for nonwords and words during the computer task, we asked participants’ to recall words from the computer task to ensure that participants were paying attention during the task. Finally, participants were thoroughly debriefed, thanked, and given course credit for their participation.

## Results

### *Manipulation Checks*

Participants indicated no understanding of the experimental hypotheses as evidenced by their inability to connect the computer task to the subsequent questionnaire. None of the subjects accurately connected the computer task with the written questionnaires. Participants beliefs about what the study was about ranged from comments like “Decision making and body image”, “how your brain remembers words while thinking about personal things,” “my body and physical attractiveness,” to “self-image and relationships.” All of the participants who were asked to recall prime words recalled at least 1 prime word from the computer task at the end of the survey. On mean, participants showed a 93% hit rate for deciphering words from non-words, suggesting that they were paying attention to the prime words.

### *Main Analyses*

Table 1 shows the means and correlations for the variables of interest. To determine whether relationship priming caused changes in self-objectification for single and coupled women, we conducted a 2 (relationship status: single or in relationship) x 2 (prime type: relationship or neutral prime) ANOVA on self-objectification. We found a significant effect for prime type x relationship status among women ( $F(1,81) = 14.56, p < .001$ ). Consistent with Hypothesis 1, we found the predicted effect of prime among single women: single women primed with relationships showed greater self-objectification than single women in the neutral priming condition (see Table 1). Consistent with Hypothesis 2a, we found that coupled women who were primed with relationships indicated significantly lower self-objectification than coupled women in the neutral condition (see Table 2). Thus, contrary to Hypothesis 2b, thoughts of relationships diminished objectification for coupled women. Because of our unequal cell sizes, the group with the largest cell size (i.e., coupled women in the relationship prime condition) might be overrepresented in the interaction terms. As an additional precaution, the ANOVA analysis reported in the results section

was conducted again with a randomly selected sub-sample of 20 coupled women in the prime condition. The same interactions were significant as those currently reported.

The previous analyses support our hypotheses that relationship priming would cause self-objectification in single women (Hypothesis 1) and lower self-objectification in coupled women (Hypothesis 2a). We also hypothesized that these findings would persist even when covarying out the possible effects of relationship satisfaction, self-esteem, and social desirability (Hypothesis 3). To test Hypothesis 3, we conducted a 2 x 2 ANCOVA on self-objectification including these variables as covariates. The two-way interactions between relationship status and priming condition was still significant ( $F(1, 81) = 11.43, p = .001$ ). These additional analyses suggest that state self-esteem differences, social desirability, and relationship satisfaction cannot account for the effect of relationship priming on women's self-objectification. In addition, we did not find any differences in state self-esteem, BMI, socially desirable responding across conditions or relationship status. This suggests that pre-existing differences between the single and coupled women could not explain the effect relationship on self objectification.

### Discussion

Overall, findings supported our prediction for single women. Relationship priming induced self-objectification among single women. We also found that relationship priming caused less self-objectification among coupled women. This is the first study to demonstrate an automatic link between relationships and self-objectification that is moderated by relationship status. This study contributes to prior work by demonstrating that contexts other than those that are body-focused can give rise to self-objectification. Additionally, the research supports a fundamental proposition of objectification theory, which is that the male gaze adversely impacts women by contributing to sexual objectification and subsequent self-objectification. It is important to note that the present

study extends previous work by showing that anticipation of the male gaze within the context of romantic relationships functions automatically when primed with relationships. The use of priming within this study was essential to demonstrate what was posited to be a chronic, automatic pairing of romance and relationships with self-objectification.

#### *Relationships Prime Self Objectification for Single Women*

The present study findings highlight the importance of examining body concerns from a relational aspect. A growing amount of research suggests that appearance concerns may be related to the desire and motivation for romantic relationships, especially among young women (Sanchez & Kwang, 2007). Relative to older women, younger women report more body monitoring, anxiety about appearance, and dieting to lose weight (Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). Perhaps these differences are due, in part, to the association between physical appearance and relationship status such that younger (i.e., unmarried) women experience increased levels of motivation to respond to their appearance concerns in order to secure a romantic partner than older (i.e., married) women. In our study, both coupled and single women showed changes in self-objectification following relationship priming, suggesting that an automatic link between romantic relationships and beauty may exist. The frequent juxtaposition of male-female relationships with physical beauty (Johnson, 2007) may forge a link between knowledge structures about relationships and body image concerns. However, the link holds different consequences for single women and coupled women.

The present study suggests that for single women, priming relationships, in this case, mere exposure to relationship-related words, was sufficient to cause greater self-objectification.

It is possible that priming relationships may have reminded single women of their relationship status and increased their tendency to view themselves through the male gaze. For single women, thoughts about relationships may increase the likelihood of behavior directed towards

relationships. Self-objectification, in a sense, may be a relationship seeking behavior as heterosexual women are acutely aware of the importance of physical appearance in attracting male partners. We demonstrated increased relationship seeking behavior in the appearance domain (higher levels of self-objectification), but future studies could examine relationship seeking behavior in other domains. For example, women may also believe that men value women who have positive personality traits or characteristically feminine personalities. Single women under relationship priming might be more likely to indicate or emphasize possessing these traits. Moreover, women who maintain more traditional views of romance and gender relations may also show less interest in their own personal power and career goals following relationship priming as they may see romance and career aspirations at odds (Rudman & Heppen, 2003).

Contrary to our findings for single women, coupled women were significantly less likely to self-objectify under relationship priming compared to neutral priming. These findings suggest that reminding coupled women of their relationships may have diminished the perceived importance of their outward physical appearance. This is particularly noteworthy because coupled women in the neutral condition showed even greater self-objectification than single women. This suggests that relationship priming reduces appearance oriented relationship maintenance strategies among coupled women. Perhaps, relationship priming reminded women of their success finding a relationship and thus, relieved appearance pressure. Future research should examine the mechanisms through which relationship priming reduced self-objectification among coupled women. For example, did relationship priming affirm coupled women's feelings of attractiveness by increasing thoughts about one's current partner, reducing self-objectification?

The unexpected finding that coupled women self-objectify or value their physical appearance to a greater degree than single women in the neutral conditions should also be explored

further. This finding may at first appear at odds with research suggesting that coupled college women show greater satisfaction with their bodies and global self-esteem than single college women (Sanchez & Kwang, 2007; Wiederman & Hurst, 1998). One possible explanation may be that women who self-objectify more may have greater success, or commitment to, finding steady romantic partners. Because women who self-objectify more give greater priority to their physical appearance and potentially the male gaze, they may be most committed to romantic relationships and may even derive self-worth from having romantic relationships. For example, in a recent study, women with greater objectified body consciousness also indicated feeling greater urgency to find romantic partners (Sanchez, Good, Kwang, & Saltzman, 2008).

The results of the present study also point to the possibility of examining the extent to which women may implicitly link romance and beauty. Using slight modifications of the methods presented here, future studies could examine the extent to which women's reaction times to body-related words increase following subliminal relationship primes (i.e., implicit romance-beauty links). Perhaps, coupled women have less implicit romance-beauty links. Having stronger implicit romance-beauty links may be associated with greater appearance rejection sensitivity (the tendency to anxiously anticipate rejection from peers based on one's physical appearance; Park, 2007) because romance is implicitly tied to relational success. Moreover, implicit romance-beauty links may predict more traditional gender role beliefs and greater interest in physical appearance aspects of potential partners. In addition, women with eating disorders may have greater implicit beauty-romance links, which interventions could minimize. Moreover, the automatic links between beauty and romance may vary by age and exposure to media, with younger women and those exposed to greater gendered media having stronger romance-beauty links. For example, longitudinal studies with different age groups could be used to explore the developmental

trajectory of automatic links between beauty and romance as well as the causal direction of the relationship between media exposure and automatic associations between beauty and romance. Lastly, experimental studies exposing women to gendered media followed by assessment of reactions times to appearance-related words primed with romance would also be useful in understanding the development of romance-beauty links.

Surprisingly, the relationship priming effect on self-objectification did not extend to self-esteem, although self-esteem was negatively correlated with women's self-objectification (see Table 2) as in previous research (e.g., Tolman, et al., 2006). Self-objectification measures the extent to which appearance related attributes are ranked as more important than competence related attributes of the body (Noll & Fredrickson, 1997); however, this conceptualization and measurement of self-objectification precludes distinctions between people who prioritize their physical appearance from those who are dissatisfied with their physical appearance. Priming may not have affected self-esteem because priming relationships did not necessarily make women feel negatively about their body, per se, but rather heightened the focus on, and importance of, their body and physical appearance. Thus future studies should examine body satisfaction after relationship priming to examine whether these findings are unique to state self-objectification.

### *Limitations*

The present study reports on college-age, predominantly White heterosexual women and thus, may not apply to older populations, more racially diverse populations or women who are same-sex attracted. Because relationship status varies considerably more in younger populations and romantic relationships are a primary focus in early and late adolescents (Holland, 1993), this study was appropriately conducted on college age students. However, it is unclear whether these findings would extend to older and married populations. Furthermore, some of our comparisons

were made with small and sometimes unequal comparison groups. For example, we had 15 participants in two of the cells. Future studies should include larger, more representative samples of both men and women including adolescent and adult samples. It is important to note; however, that our effect sizes were large (above .8) suggesting that relationship priming had a powerful effect on self-objectification (see Cohen, 1988). While our sample size may limit confidence in our findings, the effect sizes suggest otherwise.

Men's body image is becoming an increasingly important area of research as men have come under escalating pressure to conform to a lean, muscular ideal and cases of disordered eating among adolescent boys and men grow (see Frith & Gleeson, 2004, for a review). Future studies should examine relationship seeking behavior that may be more relevant to men seeking women. To the extent that evolutionary theories regarding women's tendency to desire stability and status in men are true (Buss, 1989), relationship priming may engage relationship seeking behavior focused on appealing to traits that women desire such as dominance and financial security. Specifically, relationship priming may alter men's desire to appear career-oriented or focused on high status jobs if they perceive women as drawn to professional success. Other contexts and situations may also prime self-objectification in men. For example, exposure to idealized images of male physical beauty increased men's dissatisfaction with their bodies (e.g., Aubrey, 2006). It is possible that priming sex may also increase body concerns as sexual contexts may make appearance concerns particularly salient. Given the rise of body concerns among men, future research that identifies what contexts affect men's self-objectification is needed.

Finally, self-objectification was our primary, single dependent variable of interest. Future studies should examine other body image measures including body dissatisfaction, shame, and surveillance, and also examine eating behavior followed by relationship priming to see whether

similar results would occur. In addition, it is important to point out that our results suggest that thoughts of relationship and thus, perhaps the pursuit of relationships may be an important factor that is automatically tied to self-objectification. However, relationship is but one context, not the only context that gives rise to body concerns.

### *Conclusions*

This project uniquely highlights the automatic link between romance and self-objectification, adding to a rather small but compelling line of research that emphasizes the romance of self-objectification, that is, the understudied link between self-objectification and the desire to appear attractive to potential romantic partners. Given that self-objectification theory rests in part on women being depicted as objects of male desire, it is surprising that so few studies examine the extent to which heterosexual women's prioritization of their physical appearance and drive for thinness is connected to the desire for male acknowledgement. Women are inundated with messages that beauty equals success in finding and maintaining relationships with men. Smith et al.'s (1990) findings suggest that women need only glance at single ads to form the impression that men prioritize physical attractiveness. Thus, it may be difficult to disengage the self from beauty ideals when the cost seems to be relationship attainment, especially when the pressure for women to have romantic relationships and get married is so strong (Blakemore, et al., 2005).

The tendency to equate beauty and romance does a disservice to women, especially single women, by suggesting that finding relationships hinges primarily on physical attractiveness rather than personality attributes. A healthier perspective on romantic relationships would include viewing mate selection as based on less superficial qualities. Moreover, the automatic link between romance and beauty puts single women at unique risk to self-objectify and potentially to the many negative psychological effects that come with self-objectification. Thus, future studies and

interventions related to body image should focus on single college-age women as this may be the population of women who is at greatest risk.

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Table 1. Zero-Order Correlations Between Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Self Objectification	-1.85	13.39	--				
2. BMI	23.42	4.45	.13	--			
3. Social Desirability	15.94	2.96	-.30**	-.07	--		
4. Relationship Satisfaction	5.47	1.39	-.23*	-.18	.20	--	
5. Self-Esteem	5.24	1.03	-.22*	-.40***	.33**	.41***	--

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , BMI = Body mass index. Highest possible score for self-objectification is 25, social desirability is 33, relationship satisfaction is 7, and self-esteem is 7.

Table 2. Self-Objectification Scores by Relationship Status, and Condition.

	<u>Relationship Prime</u>		<u>Neutral Prime</u>		<u><i>t</i></u>	<u><i>df</i></u>	<u>Cohen's <i>d</i></u>
	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>			
Single Women	15	4.60 (9.95)	20	-7.70 (14.59)	2.81**	45	.98
Coupled Women	32	-4.56 (13.10)	15	5.27 (10.28)	-2.56*	33	-.83

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . Highest possible score for self-objectification is 25. Four people were dropped from the analyses because they did not complete the self-objectification questionnaire correctly.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Self-Objectification by Prime Type and Relationship Status. Possible scores on self-objectification range from +25 to -25 with higher scores indicating greater self-objectification.

