

the sum
of your



A red circular graphic with a textured, slightly irregular edge, representing the letter 'O'.



parts

(Reducing women
to sex objects: how it
happens and how it
hurts us)

“People see you as an object, not as a person, and they project a set of expectations onto you. People who don’t have it think beauty is a blessing, but actually it sets you apart.” Candice Bergen, actress

“Beauty is within the soul and shows through by calmness, kindness and peace.” Gillian Laub, photographer

EVER THOUGHT you just weren’t pretty or ‘hot’ enough? Were you ever devastated by a single pimple or cold sore? Did you ever feel that everyone was watching and judging you? You might have been painfully self-conscious, spending hours scrutinising face, body and hair in the mirror.

Many teenagers and women can experience crippling feelings of inadequacy. They struggle to appreciate their worth.

Popular culture might have the public believing that this is a normal and acceptable existence for a teenage girl and even for women throughout their lives. But historical evidence and current research suggest otherwise.

Brumberg writes that for modern girls, the body has become an all-encompassing project:

The process of sexual maturation is more difficult for girls today than it was a century ago because of a set of historical changes that have resulted in a peculiar mismatch between girls’ biology and today’s culture... Every girl suffers some kind of adolescent angst about her body; it is the historical moment that defines how she reacts to her changing flesh.¹

Brumberg identifies several causes of girls’ growing obsession with their bodies. One is the loosening of the mother-daughter connection, especially regarding sexuality. Another

is how doctors and marketers have come to replace the role which female relatives and mentors once had in educating girls about their bodies and sexuality.

Both Brumberg and Ariel Levy – author of *Female Chauvinist Pigs* – argue that girls and young women are today *objectified* as never before. Their physical appearance – especially their sexual attributes – are portrayed as their most important assets. This is presented to us as liberating and empowering.

Objectification: when a woman’s body, parts of her body, or sexual capabilities are seen as her whole self, ignoring any other attributes.

Sexual conformity

Levy argues strongly that today’s popular culture has an extremely narrow view of ‘sexuality’. She says that exhibitionism, raunch and objectification have become the only accepted ways to be sexual, and the prime source of empowerment for women.

Her book explains why this view of sexuality has become particularly

disempowering for women. Instead it has become a monoculture, and an expectation to conform.²

“Shape shopping: flaunt your best features with these cuts, styles and accessories to suit every body type. [for a big bust] Choose low necklines, like V-necks or scoop necks, that show a bit of cleavage (but not too much). ...Wear miniskirts or short shorts to play up your legs.”³

Making objects of ourselves

Objectification exists when a woman is treated as a body to be looked at and used by others.

Objectification is, at present, an academic theory. But research continues to show that it is grounded in the real, everyday experiences of girls and women. It is directly related to the sexualised images of women that are all around us.

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Pornography is an obvious example.

But so is the relentless use of women to sell products, especially when the woman in the advertisement is merely decorative, made to look perfect and sexy and not actually doing anything. When ads and articles suggest that we must improve our appearance in some way to be happy, they inadvertently make objects of women.

But women are sexual...

It could be argued that any sexual material is OK for adult women, because women are by nature sexual beings. So

here it's important to recognise how sexualisation and sexual objectification are different from healthy sexuality...

The American Psychological Association explains that inappropriate sexualisation can happen when any of the following occur:⁴

- * A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics.
- * A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy.
- * A person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making.
- * Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.

Psychologists identify serious outcomes from self-objectification. Body shame, anxiety, lack of awareness of body sensations, and decreased motivation are some potential consequences.⁶ Women learn to equate their own self-worth with their appearance. Given that women can never look like an airbrushed model in a magazine, this is a terrifying prospect.

“A stealth moose is a girl who looks good from far away, but bad up close” – male editor of Picture magazine.”⁵

It is normal to wonder what others think of us, but there are varying degrees to which we internalise, or really *believe*, the way others see us.⁷ A self-view based on what others think of us might reflect prejudices and be wrong. When we adopt the view of ourselves that is projected through advertising and pop culture, we take on an unreal image with unattainable expectations. It's an image mainly designed to sell products.

Is it natural, or even simply a matter of choice, for girls and women to pay excessive attention and attribute enormous importance to their appearance? Fre-

drickson and her colleagues explained why it might *seem* normal, yet it isn't.⁸

When society constantly shows us images and concepts that sexually objectify women, we learn that we will be judged by how we look, therefore determining our social and economic life outcomes.

So being obsessed with one's appearance might be seen as an 'adaptive strategy' rather than vanity. It becomes a way of coping and trying to succeed in

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today's popular culture. Some women may not realise that they have a choice *not* to imitate the current ideal of sexiness or raunch.

Maybe we expect that most women throughout history have been anxious and ashamed about their appearance, and that women will always be primarily judged by how they look.

OK, so physical appearance has been and will always be of some importance, partly because it's our first impression of a person we meet. But today it has gone one step further. Closer analysis of a modern woman's experiences reveals that it's now a cultural phenomenon.

Cultural differences are made obvious in the results of a study that compared the opinions of French and American teenagers about their bodies. Consider this:

Almost three quarters of the U.S. sample as compared with less than one quarter of the French, believe that they would be

much happier and find life easier if they had a flawless body – that they would be more popular among their peers, that they would be immediately accepted, admired, and loved by others. Three quarters of the U.S. girls strongly believe that their personal worth is assessed by the way they look. As a result, they admit that they would do almost anything to attain what they consider the ideal of physical perfection.

It is also interesting to note that the pain of having difficulty being loved and accepted by others because of one's physical appearance is more widespread in the U.S. sample; two U.S. adolescents in ten mentioned that there are times when they felt they were excluded from a group of peers because they did not fit in physically, while less than one French adolescent in ten reported having experienced the same kind of rejection. According to U.S. adolescents, this perception may be at least partially shared by their parents, who reportedly consider their children's physical appearance as likely to be or become one of their essential social assets.⁹

To the extent that Australian culture is influenced by American culture, our teenagers may feel the same way.

Get ready to be disappointed

When women view themselves as an object and constantly evaluate themselves against an internalised or a cultural ideal, most will fail to meet these standards since current beauty standards are impossible to attain.

Only one in thousands of women is a supermodel – even then her photographs have to be digitally altered. Women are primed for disappointment, and for the experience of being ashamed of their bodies. This experience becomes normalised, so that it is acceptable and expected that women and girls will constantly judge themselves in the mirror, down to the tiniest flaw, yet never be happy.

The challenge is to recognize the threat posed to women...women are compromised emotionally and cognitively for most of their lives. This is not only a loss on the individual level, but is a grave loss for society as a whole that one half of its members are unable to contribute to the full extent possible the richness of positive emotional experience, motivation, and thought.¹⁰