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How Sexually Objectifying Others Undermines Connection and Collaboration

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Abstract

Sexual objectification is widely recognized as a driver of gender inequality, harming women by reducing them to bodies and undermining their agency. Yet psychological science has rarely asked a consequential question: Does sexual objectification also harm the individuals who objectify? In this theoretical article, we reframe objectification as not only oppressive but also self-undermining. Drawing from social, cognitive, organizational, and relationship science, we argue that objectifying others can compromise the capacity to form close relationships, collaborate effectively, and function well in social and professional life. These costs are traced to four mechanisms—cognitive load, face–body attentional trade-off, goal-based perception, and dehumanization. These mechanisms are proposed to operate as parallel, mutually reinforcing pathways that converge on social miscalibration. The framework further motivates a methodological agenda for studying objectification as a dynamic, dyadic process embedded in ongoing interaction. By foregrounding the objectifiers' costs, we extend existing theories and highlight objectification as a mode of social perception that degrades the very relationships and institutions on which objectifiers rely. Identifying these costs offers an additional reason to reduce objectification, one that complements rather than replaces concern for the harms it inflicts on targets.

Keywords

objectification, sexual objectification, social cognition, dehumanization, interpersonal relationships, workplace collaboration

"Objectification" broadly refers to perceiving or treating others as instruments or means to an end rather than as full human agents with thoughts, feelings, and intentions (Nussbaum, 1999; Papadaki, 2007). Sexual objectification is a pervasive form of this process, involving engagement with others primarily in terms of their physical attractiveness or sexual utility (Bartky, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Psychological science has developed a robust account of the harms sexual objectification inflicts on its targets, demonstrating consistent links to diminished well-being, agency, and opportunity (for a review, see Ward et al., 2023). Yet this literature has largely conceptualized objectification as a unidirectional process in which targets bear the costs and perpetrators escape any consequences.

In this article, we advance a theoretical reframing: Sexual objectification may be costly not only for targets but also for individuals who engage in it. Moving beyond a one-sided model of harm, the framework conceptualizes sexual objectification as a form of distorted social perception that can disrupt psychological processes essential for effective interpersonal functioning. By directing attention

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toward the body and away from an interaction partner's mind, sexual objectification may interfere with processes that support trust (Hancock et al., 2023), coordination (DeChurch & Mesmer-Magnus, 2010), and mutual understanding (J. A. Hall et al., 2015; Schmid Mast & Hall, 2018). These disruptions, in turn, may impair objectifiers' capacity for relational connection and reduce their effectiveness in social and professional settings. Specifically, four mechanisms—cognitive load, face–body attentional trade-off, goal-based perception, and dehumanization—are proposed to operate as parallel, mutually reinforcing pathways that lead objectifiers to social miscalibration: a reduced capacity to read and respond to others accurately (see work on interpersonal accuracy and responsiveness; e.g., J. A. Hall et al., 2015; Reis et al., 2004).

The argument focuses on sexual objectification in between-genders interactions in which structural inequality is paired with interdependence (Rudman & Glick, 2021). Unlike many intergroup hierarchies (Fiske, 2017), gendered prejudice emerges with high intergroup contact. Heterosexual relationships are sustained through repeated interactions that involve intimacy and coordination across personal, professional, and institutional settings (for a review, see Bareket & Fiske, 2023). In these interactions, social functioning depends on dynamic interdependence (S. M. Burns et al., 2025). In such arrangements, sexual objectification may not only disadvantage targets but also undermine perceivers' ability to navigate the relationships and collaborations on which they rely. In our analysis, we center on men's heterosexual objectification of women, which is the most prevalent, consequential, and extensively studied form (Roberts et al., 2018). We also recognize that objectifying perception varies across individuals and situations (Gervais et al., 2018; Hollett et al., 2022), reflecting ideological predispositions and situational affordances (see Antecedents and Motivations).

In the sections that follow, we first review dominant approaches to sexual objectification, then introduce a framework for the relational and professional costs borne by objectifiers, and finally, outline four mechanisms through which these costs may arise. For a visual road map of the full model and how the four mechanisms could produce social miscalibration, see Figure 1. We then consider theoretical, applied, and methodological implications; examine scope conditions and generalizability beyond heteronormative and sexual contexts; and conclude by integrating these claims into a broader conceptual framework.

Before turning to a review of sexual-objectification research, there are two caveats we emphasize: (a) Sexual objectification also occurs in other perpetrator-target configurations, including same-gender (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005), cross-gender (Fasoli et al., 2018), nonheterosexual, and noncisgender contexts (Kozak et al., 2009). Although the model is developed using men's objectification of women as a focal case, the underlying processes are expected to generalize to other perceivers whenever attention becomes organized around sexual, dominance, or instrumental goals. Scope and generalizability are considered later. (b) Identifying objectifiers' costs offers an additional reason to reduce objectification, not a substitute for target-centered, structural, and justice-based arguments (on advantaged-group motivations to confront sexism, see Drury & Kaiser, 2014; Kende et al., 2020), and these costs are not comparable with the primary harms borne by targets. This point recurs throughout, never as a justification for objectification or a reason to shift concern from individuals it harms.

Dominant Approaches to Sexual Objectification

Psychological research on sexual objectification emerged over the past 3 decades from feminist philosophy and gender scholarship. Dominant approaches have prioritized defining the phenomenon and documenting its consequences for women and given less attention to its antecedents, motivations, and broader psychological implications. In the sections below, we review these strands to highlight a common emphasis on targets rather than objectifiers, highlighting the value of assessing objectification's impacts on objectifiers.

Forms and expressions of sexual objectification

Sexual objectification has roots in philosophical concerns about treating persons as means rather than moral subjects. Kant (1775–1780/1963) cautioned that sexual desire risks reducing the desired person to "an object of appetite . . . a thing" rather than a bearer of autonomy and moral worth (p. 163). Feminist philosophers later elaborated this critique, conceptualizing objectification as the denial of autonomy, subjectivity, and moral standing (Nussbaum, 1999), often enacted through the reduction of a person to bodily function or appearance (Bartky, 1990; R. Langton, 2009). Radical feminist theorists (e.g., Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1989) emphasized the sexual and structural nature of this process, arguing that sexual objectification helps enact and normalize men's dominance in heterosexual relations and pornography. Building on this tradition, psychological research conceptualizes sexual objectification as a gendered form of sexism that disproportionately targets women and adolescent girls across interpersonal, cultural, and institutional contexts (for recent reviews of objectification literature, see Pecini et al., 2023; Roberts et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2023).

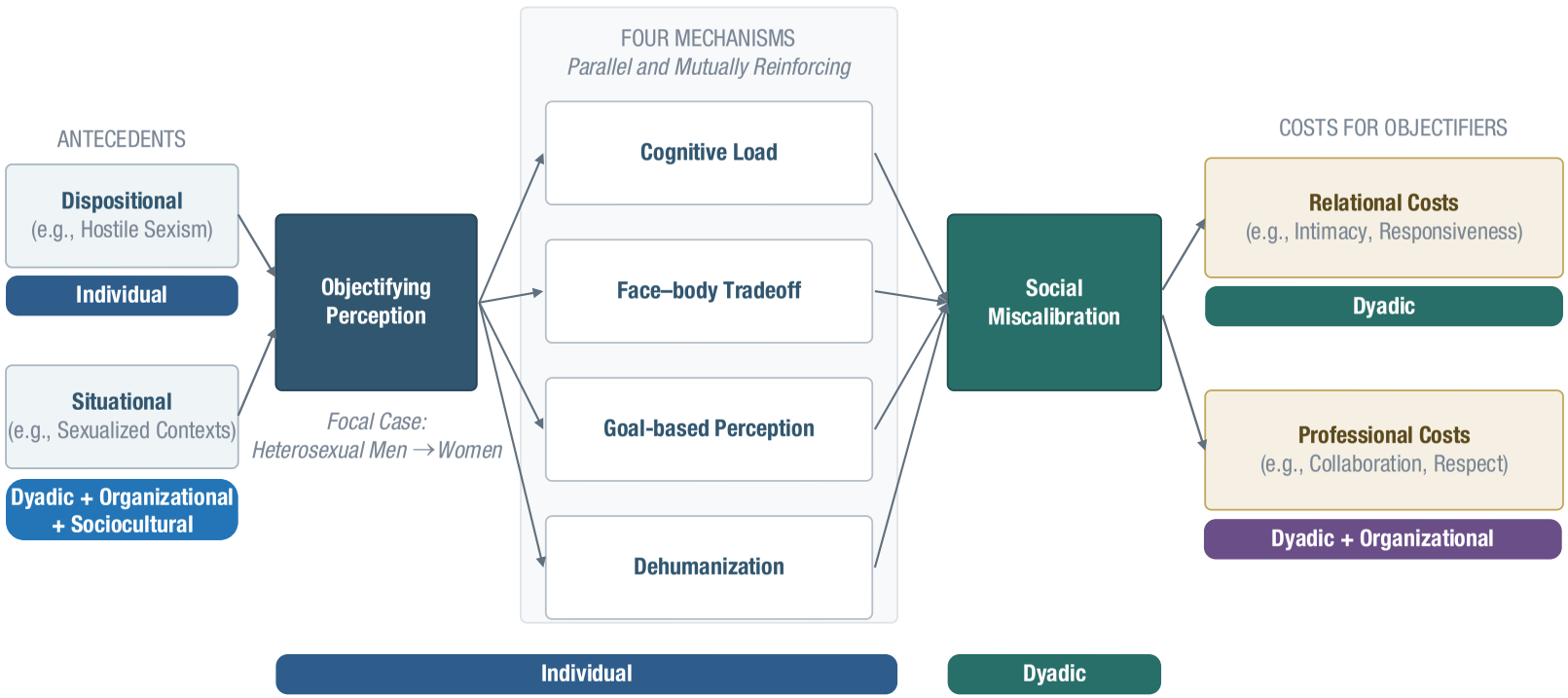


Fig. 1. A process model of the objectifier costs of sexually objectifying others. Dispositional and situational antecedents foster objectifying perception (focal case: heterosexual men objectifying women; see text for other configurations), which activates four, mutually reinforcing mechanisms—cognitive load, face–body attentional trade-off, goal-based perception, and dehumanization—that converge on social miscalibration and, in turn, relational and professional costs. Labels denote levels of analysis: The mechanisms operate at the individual level; antecedents extend to the dyadic (partners, friends, colleagues), organizational (teams, institutions), and sociocultural (norms, gender roles) levels; and costs extend to the dyadic and organizational levels. These labels mark where each component operates, not distinct organizational- or sociocultural-level mechanisms, which lie beyond the present scope (see Scope and Generalizability of Objectification Costs for Objectifiers).

Sexual objectification takes multiple forms across social life. It includes sexualized evaluations and appearance-based judgments (Kaschak, 1992) and more coercive practices, such as sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Rudman & Borgida, 1995) and assault (Abbey et al., 2011; Brownmiller, 1975). Objectifying behaviors may be overt or subtle (Loughnan & Pacilli, 2014), ranging from explicit sexual commentary (Swim et al., 2002) to ostensibly benign behaviors, such as appearance-based compliments (Kahalon et al., 2018a), that nonetheless prioritize women's bodies over their personhood.

Although often treated as a unitary construct, objectification encompasses at least two related forms.[1] Sexualized objectification focuses on women's sexual features and function, reflected in body-focused visual attention or sexually evaluative commentary about specific body regions (e.g., Bareket et al., 2019; Gervais et al., 2018). Appearance-focused objectification centers on attractiveness, beauty, and aesthetic evaluation, including compliments or judgments that prioritize attractiveness over competence (e.g., Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Kahalon et al., 2018a). These forms may support gender hierarchy through partially distinct mechanisms: One reduces women to sexual bodies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), and the other emphasizes appearance as a primary source of value (Ramati-Ziber et al., 2020; Wolf, 1991).

Consistent with this distinction, sexualized objectification elicits animalistic dehumanization (i.e., being unrefined and driven by instinct), whereas appearance-focused objectification produces mechanistic dehumanization (i.e., being cold, interchangeable, and lacking agency; Morris et al., 2018; for a review, see Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Recent theorizing further suggests that objectification varies in evaluative expression such that perceivers enact qualitatively distinct forms, such as approving attention, dismissive inattention, or derogatory treatment, depending on their motivations and evaluations of targets (Sáez et al., 2025).

Objectification also operates across levels of analysis. At the interpersonal level, it includes verbal and nonverbal behaviors, such as leering, body-focused comments, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual harassment (e.g., Gervais et al., 2018; Swim et al., 2002). A central manifestation is objectifying gaze, in which visual attention is directed disproportionately toward women's sexual body parts rather than their faces (Bareket et al., 2019; Gervais et al., 2013). At the cultural level, objectification is embedded in media representations that prioritize women's sexual appearance through revealing clothing, body-fragmenting camera angles, and narratives that reward attractiveness over competence (for a review, see Ward, 2016). These messages extend to digital and social media environments (for a meta-analysis, see Karsay et al., 2018), in which visual affordances and social feedback metrics can intensify appearance-based evaluation. At the institutional level, objectification may be embedded in organizational norms and practices, such as workplace-appearance expectations (Kahalon et al., 2022; Ramati-Ziber et al., 2020), hiring or evaluation processes that privilege attractiveness (Guillén et al., 2024; Rudman & Borgida, 1995), and occupational contexts that encourage sexualized presentation and objectifying work environments (Andrighetto et al., 2017; Szymanski & Feltman, 2015).

Taken together, sexual objectification spans multiple forms and levels of social life, from interpersonal behaviors to cultural representations and institutional practices. Mapping these expressions clarifies the phenomenon before turning to its psychological consequences.

Target-focused consequences

Psychological research on sexual objectification has converged on two complementary lines of inquiry, both centered on women as targets of objectification.

Self-objectification and intrapersonal consequences. The first examines effects on women's self-perception and behavior, drawing on objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This framework posits that cultural emphasis on women's bodies fosters *self-objectification*—the internalization of an observer's perspective that evaluates the self in terms of appearance and sexual attractiveness. Extensively studied in women, self-objectification is associated with adverse outcomes across multiple psychological and social domains (for reviews, see Calogero et al., 2011; Daniels et al., 2020; Kahalon et al., 2018b).

At the affective and clinical levels, self-objectification predicts negative emotional states (e.g., Koval et al., 2019), altered neural responses linked to emotional processing (Monachesi et al., 2024), body-related concerns (for a meta-analysis, see Saunders et al., 2024), and elevated risk for mental-health difficulties, including depression (for a review, see Jones & Griffiths, 2015), eating disorders (for a meta-analysis, see Schaefer & Thompson, 2018), sexuality-related dysfunctions (for a review, see Kahalon & Klein, 2025), and trauma symptoms (for a review, see Slodecki et al., 2025).

Self-objectification also undermines functioning in domains central to social power and agency. Experimental research has shown that it impairs cognitive performance (for a meta-analysis, see Winn & Cornelius, 2020), reduces verbal participation in mixed-gender settings (Saguy et al., 2010), and dampens resistance to gender-based inequities and collective action (Calogero, 2013; for a review, see Zurbriggen, 2013). Together, these findings illustrate how self-objectification reinforces women's subordinate status by tying their value to their bodies and appearance rather than competence or voice.

Perceptions and treatment of objectified women. A second line of research examines how sexually objectified targets are perceived and evaluated by others, a set of perceptual and representational processes often termed "literal objectification" (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2014). This work typically studies women depicted or perceived in appearance-focused, body-salient ways. Objectified women are attributed object-like qualities and denied full humanness (e.g., Loughnan et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2018). They are perceived as less competent, warm, moral, intelligent, and agentic (Heflick et al., 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010); less suitable for leadership (Gothreau et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2018); and more interchangeable (Gervais et al., 2012).

At cognitive and neural levels, objectified women are processed more like objects than persons (for a review, see Bernard, Gervais, & Klein, 2018). Evidence includes reduced configural processing, altered visual encoding (e.g., Bernard et al., 2012; Vaes et al., 2019), and diminished engagement of mentalizing networks (e.g., Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011). Linguistic and memory-based evidence has further shown that objectified women are represented as passive recipients of action and remembered more for their bodies than their identities (e.g., Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011; Gervais et al., 2012).

Exposure to sexually objectifying portrayals of women also shapes attitudes and behaviors in ways that reinforce gender inequality, particularly among men. Such exposure increases endorsement of beliefs that frame women as sex objects and legitimize violence against women (Wright & Tokunaga, 2016), strengthens traditional masculine norms and tolerance of sexual harassment (e.g., Galdi et al., 2014), reduces moral concern for women while increasing victim blaming and tolerance for harm (e.g., Felig et al., 2024; Loughnan et al., 2013), promotes sexist behavior (Rudman & Borgida, 1995), and is associated with greater acceptance of sexual aggression (e.g., Vasquez et al., 2018). Collectively, this work shows that sexual objectification diminishes women's perceived agency and moral standing, reinforcing gender hierarchies that normalize subordination.

Antecedents and motivations

Not all people objectify others to the same degree. Stable individual differences predispose perceivers toward sexual objectification, whereas situational cues orient attention toward bodies and instrumental value. Rather than producing objectification directly, these factors shape the goals perceivers bring to an interaction. These goals, in turn, organize attention and interpretation in ways that promote objectifying construals.

Individual differences. Sexually objectifying perception is associated with several ideological predispositions. Ambivalent sexism appears central (for a review, see Bareket & Fiske, 2023). Hostile sexism (mostly in men) predicts the perpetration of sexual objectification, including dehumanizing responses to sexualized women (e.g., Adams et al., 2024; Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011), whereas benevolent sexism predicts greater acceptance and internalization of objectification (mostly in women), including tolerance of objectifying treatment and self-objectification (e.g., Gervais et al., 2016). Dominance motives also contribute: Men (but not women) higher in social-dominance orientation show greater sexual objectification of women (Bareket & Shnabel, 2020). Additional work links men's objectifying tendencies to traditional masculine norms and sexual scripts that frame women in sexual terms (Mikorski & Szymanski, 2017; Wong et al., 2017). Recent theorizing groups these tendencies under patriarchal ideologies, proposing that men who endorse them objectify women to maintain their group's position in the gender hierarchy (Sáez et al., 2025).

Situational cues. Objectifying perception is also shaped by cues that make bodies, sexuality, or status concerns salient. Threats to masculinity and gender hierarchy, for example, increase sexually objectifying responses (Bareket & Shnabel, 2020; Dahl et al., 2015). Other work has highlighted sexual and existential cues, including preferential attention to fertility-relevant bodily characteristics, such as waist–hip ratio (C. Hall et al., 2011; Riemer et al., 2018), and heightened objectification following mortality salience (Morris & Goldenberg, 2015). Cultural environments saturated with sexualized imagery may similarly cue objectifying perception: Exposure to sexually objectifying media alters men's treatment of women and increases sexist responding (e.g., Karsay et al., 2018).

Across these perspectives, objectification can be understood as a goal-directed mode of social perception (see Gervais et al., 2020; Pecini et al., 2023). Individual predispositions and situational affordances shape the goals perceivers bring to an interaction (e.g., maintaining patriarchy; Bareket & Shnabel, 2020), orienting attention toward bodily value or utility rather than psychological agency. As discussed later, this goal-based orientation may be one mechanism through which objectification may generate interpersonal costs.

Despite their theoretical diversity, however, studies of sexual objectification—across forms, antecedents, and consequences—converge in treating it as a source of harm to objectified women. Even when objectifiers are examined through gaze patterns, neural responses, or sexist beliefs, these processes are typically framed as mechanisms of bias, dehumanization, or aggression toward

targets rather than as psychologically consequential for the objectifier. Sexual objectification is thus typically modeled as a unidirectional process in which targets bear the psychological and social costs and objectifiers are presumed to remain largely unaffected. This emphasis is warranted given the substantial harms to targets, in line with target-focused perspectives on prejudice (Swim & Stangor, 1998). In the present account, we do not question that emphasis but ask in addition, whether sexual objectification also carries psychological and practical consequences for individuals who engage in it.

A Framework for the Costs of Objectifying Others

Despite extensive research documenting the harms of sexual objectification for women as targets, comparatively little attention has been given to whether objectification shapes the psychological functioning of individuals who engage in it. Sexual objectification, by construing others primarily in terms of bodily features (e.g., Bareket et al., 2019) or instrumental value (Orehek & Weaverling, 2017), is poorly aligned with the perceptual and regulatory demands of sustained social interaction. Objectification may compromise capacities central to social calibration, responsiveness, and coordination. Although direct evidence for these costs remains limited, converging findings across adjacent literatures support the plausibility of these pathways and motivate the framework advanced here.

Sexual objectification is thus expected to impair functioning in two domains that structure much of adult social life: close relationships and professional collaboration. These costs are outlined below, followed by an account of mechanisms proposed to produce them.

As Figure 1 shows, the framework locates its mechanisms within the perceiver: Because objectification is a mode of social perception, the processes that carry its costs are at the individual level, and their antecedents and consequences extend outward to the dyadic, organizational, and sociocultural levels at which relationships, teams, institutions, and cultural norms are involved.

Relational costs for objectifiers

Relational life depends on perceiving others as full psychological agents with intentions, emotions, and perspectives that invite interpretation and response (Fiske & Tamir, 2025). Intimacy, friendship, and commitment require sustained attention to partners' inner states, emotional attunement, and reciprocal responsiveness (Canevello & Crocker, 2011; Reis et al., 2004). Sexual objectification may conflict with these demands by prioritizing surface attributes over others' subjective experience.

Consistent with this account, heterosexual men's sexual objectification of women (both generally and in romantic relationships) is associated with lower sexual and relationship satisfaction, reduced intimacy, and greater conflict (Bareket et al., 2018; Kahalon et al., 2019; Sáez et al., 2019, 2022; Zurbriggen et al., 2011). Direct evidence on cross-gender friendships remains limited (see Kretschmer, 2024), but habitual objectification and playboy behavior, embedded in masculine norms that prioritize dominance and sexualization (Mikorski & Szymanski, 2017; Wong et al., 2017), likely undermine such ties. Experimental research further shows that objectifying behavior makes interactions less pleasant for women and prompts earlier disengagement (Sáez et al., 2021) and that sexualized perception reduces shared emotional representations and attenuates empathic responses (Cogoni et al., 2021).

Across romantic and nonromantic contexts (including friendships and other close ties), these dynamics may restrict access to supportive, mutually enriching relationships and communal ties central to psychological well-being and social integration (for reviews, see Bareket & Fiske, 2025; Croft et al., 2015). These costs may be especially pronounced for men, whose close relationships are often fewer and more concentrated in romantic partnerships (for a review, see Wahring et al., 2024; for a commentary applying a gendered lens, see Reggev & Bareket, 2026).

Professional costs for objectifiers

Effective professional functioning depends on perceiving colleagues as competent, intentional contributors, particularly in contexts that require coordination, interdependence, and shared decision-making (Bolton et al., 2021). Trust, openness to others' input, and mutual respect are foundational to team effectiveness (Harvey et al., 2022; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Research on collective intelligence similarly identifies interpersonal sensitivity and social perceptiveness as central to team performance (Woolley et al., 2010), especially in mixed-gender teams (Bear & Woolley, 2011). Yet such teams are often vulnerable to disruptions from gender bias and prejudiced dynamics (Chen & Houser, 2019). Objectifying perception may exacerbate these vulnerabilities by undermining the interpersonal processes on which collaboration depends.

Converging evidence suggests that sexualized or appearance-focused perceptions and objectifying work environments more broadly reduce women's interpersonal influence (Guillén et al., 2024), constrain comfort and willingness to speak up (Chevallereau et al., 2021; Saguy et al., 2010), and undermine workplace outcomes,

including satisfaction, anxiety, and commitment (Cabras et al., 2022). Over time, these dynamics may impose costs on objectifiers themselves by limiting their effectiveness as collaborators, leaders, and team members, particularly in cases in which success depends on coordination as much as individual expertise (for a recent perspective on workplace objectification, see Zhang et al., 2025).

Beyond impairing collaboration, objectifying perception may increase the likelihood of boundary violations and sexual misconduct (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Willness et al., 2007). Such behavior may expose objectifiers to professional and institutional consequences. Organizational research links sexual harassment to disciplinary action, reputational damage, stalled career advancement, job loss, and legal or financial sanctions alongside broader organizational costs through reduced morale, productivity, and retention (e.g., Bouzzine & Lueg, 2022; Maimone et al., 2025).

Sexual objectification is a well-established precursor to sexual harassment and coercive behavior (e.g., Vasquez et al., 2018), suggesting a pathway through which sexualized attention can escalate into conduct with concrete tangible consequences for objectifiers. As organizations increasingly frame sexual misconduct as a governance, compliance, and reputational risk (Hemel & Lund, 2018), objectification may undermine professional standing via heightened exposure to institutional sanction.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that sexual objectification carries costs not only for targets but also for objectifiers. Across relational and professional domains, objectification is associated with diminished relationship quality (e.g., Sáez et al., 2019), weakened collaboration (e.g., Cabras et al., 2022), and reduced access to social resources that support well-being (e.g., Wong et al., 2017). Identifying these costs is not meant to equate them with or divert attention from the far greater harms experienced by targets; it instead points to an additional reason objectification is costly. In the next section, we delineate four psychological mechanisms through which these costs may arise.

Mechanisms of Harm for Objectifiers

Sexual objectification is proposed to impose costs for individuals who engage in it through four psychological processes: (a) cognitive load, (b) attentional trade-offs between face and body, (c) goal-based perceptual distortions, and (d) dehumanization. These mechanisms represent complementary pathways through which objectification may disrupt social-information processing.

Although analytically separable, they are expected to operate as parallel, mutually reinforcing pathways rather than as a fixed causal sequence (for a review, see Fiske & Taylor, 2024). Each may independently degrade social calibration and could therefore be tested as independent mediators, and their mutual reinforcement may also produce interactive effects that accumulate over the course of an interaction. Together, the four are proposed to converge on a common functional outcome: social miscalibration (see Fig. 1). For a summary of the mechanisms and their cognitive, interpersonal, and downstream consequences, see Table 1.

Cognitive load

Interpersonal interaction is cognitively demanding. Effective engagement requires attending to relevant cues, interpreting facial expressions, integrating social information, and responding appropriately in real time. Sexual objectification may further increase these demands by allocating attention to ongoing evaluation of another person's body (e.g., Bareket et al., 2019). Such monitoring draws on limited-capacity cognitive resources[2] and competes with the demands of social exchange. Classic work on cognitive load demonstrates that maintaining secondary evaluative goals taxes executive processes essential for comprehension, inference, and flexible responding, particularly under divided attention (for a review, see Fiske & Taylor, 2024).

These demands are consequential during live interaction, in which effective engagement depends on integrating verbal content, nonverbal cues, and situational context while continuously adjusting to partners' responses (J. A. Hall et al., 2015). When attention is partially allocated to sexual or appearance-based appraisal, fewer resources may remain available for listening, perspective-taking, and updating impressions (Epley et al., 2004; J. A. Hall et al., 2009; Ickes, 1993). This attentional competition may degrade interaction quality through disengagement, delayed responsiveness, and misattunement to others' needs and have downstream consequences for coordination and trust. Consistent with this account, affective attunement declines under cognitive load (Kraus et al., 2010; Zaki et al., 2008), suggesting that even modest increases in evaluative demands can impair interaction.

Research on self-objectification provides indirect support for this argument. Appearance-focused self-construals impair performance on tasks requiring working memory, attention, and executive control even when the specific role of appearance monitoring remains unclear (see Winn & Cornelius, 2020). Although this work focuses on targets rather than objectifiers, it illustrates a general principle relevant here: Appearance-focused evaluation can compromise concurrent cognitive performance. Converging evidence from interactive virtual contexts further links objectification-related attentional states to reduced recall accuracy during social interaction (Kononov & Bareket, 2022) and poorer collaborative

Table 1. Mechanisms Through Which Sexual Objectification May Impair Objectifiers' Social Functioning

Mechanism	Core process	Cognitive/perceptual effects	Immediate interpersonal effects	Longer-term outcomes
Cognitive load	Ongoing evaluation of others' bodies takes cognitive resources	Fewer attentional resources for social-information processing	Reduced listening accuracy; slower responses; weaker attunement	Lower interaction quality; reduced trust and coordination
Face–body attentional trade-off	Attention shifts from faces to bodies	Limited access to facial cues (emotion, intention, feedback)	Reduced empathic accuracy; less precise impression formation	Misinterpretation of others; reduced interpersonal sensitivity
Goal-based perception	Perception guided by instrumental and/or sexual goals	Attention prioritizes goal-relevant cues; interpretation and memory become biased	Misreading intentions (e.g., overperceiving interest); continued engagement despite misalignment	Poor judgment; boundary violations; reduced collaboration
Dehumanization	Reduced attribution of mind, agency, and moral standing	Weaker mental-state inference; reduced empathic engagement	Reduced responsiveness to others' needs and signals	Lower relationship quality; weaker cooperation; increased risk of unethical behavior

Note: The mechanisms and effects summarized here are analytically separable but likely to co-occur, overlap, and interact dynamically during social interaction. In this table, we distinguish cognitive/perceptual effects, immediate interpersonal effects, and longer-term outcomes; the examples listed are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Across mechanisms, these effects are proposed to converge on social miscalibration, a reduced capacity to read and respond to others accurately, which links them to the longer-term outcomes shown here. As discussed in the text, support for these pathways draws from both sexual-objectification research and adjacent literatures, and direct tests of the integrated processes proposed here remain limited.

performance (Savage & Couture Bue, 2023). Findings linking cognitive load to reduced interpersonal synchrony (Vacharkulksemsuk & Fredrickson, 2012) and conversational responsiveness (Bavelas & Chovil, 2000) further support the claim that attentional competition interferes with social coordination.

An alternative possibility is that objectification becomes relatively automatic once learned and routinized. Consistent with this view, inhibiting objectification may require more cognitive resources than allowing it to occur (for a resource-depletion account, see Tyler et al., 2017), and exposure to sexualized imagery of women can yield null effects on gender-role beliefs under cognitive load (Read et al., 2018). However, these findings primarily concern the initiation of objectifying judgments (e.g., sexually objectifying women avatars in a video game while trying to maintain many items in memory; Read et al., 2018). The present argument concerns the costs of sustaining sexual or appearance-focused attention during ongoing interaction. Even if objectification is relatively automatic, maintaining evaluative monitoring while simultaneously engaging in social exchange may still impose attentional competition and coordination costs. This prediction follows from limited-capacity and multitasking models of attention (Kahneman, 1973; Pashler, 1994). Dual-process models (Fazio, 1990; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006) likewise suggest that automatic evaluations recruit controlled monitoring to align behavior with situational goals, which may increase cognitive demands during interaction.

Evidence from adjacent literatures supports this possibility. Research on prejudice regulation, drawn from racial interactions, shows that enacting and managing biased responses impose cognitive and self-regulatory costs, impairing executive functioning and attentional control in socially demanding contexts (for a review, see Shelton & Richeson, 2006). Although sexual objectification may often operate automatically or be culturally normative, sustaining sexual or appearance-focused evaluation during live interaction may similarly tax the resources required to monitor social cues, regulate behavior, and maintain conversational flow. Objectification may thus compromise objectifiers' functioning not only through inhibition (e.g., Tyler et al., 2017) but also through the attentional and regulatory demands of interaction itself—a self-undermining dynamic whereby it harms targets while also eroding objectifiers' cognitive efficiency and interpersonal competence.

Face–body attentional trade-off

Sexual objectification is associated with a systematic shift of visual attention away from faces and toward bodies (especially among heterosexual men viewing women), reflecting a trade-off between appearance-relevant bodily

features (e.g., hips, pelvis, chest) and facial information (e.g., Bareket et al., 2019; Riemer et al., 2018). Although often treated as an indicator of objectification, the focus here is on its perceptual consequences. Specifically, diverting attention from faces limits access to socially diagnostic information during interaction.

Bodies convey meaningful social cues (e.g., posture and gesture; Aviezer et al., 2012; Blythe et al., 2023), but faces are central to social communication (Lamer et al., 2026; Todorov et al., 2015). Facial signals provide key information about emotions, intentions, mental states, and responsiveness (Ekman, 1993; Knapp et al., 2013). When attention shifts from faces to bodies, less information is available for accurate person perception, impression formation, and interpersonal coordination (Berry, 1991; Brewer, 1988).

Research across social cognition underscores the importance of face processing. Facial cues guide judgments of trustworthiness, competence, and approachability (Willis & Todorov, 2006); reveal dishonesty (ten Brinke & Porter, 2012); regulate conversational flow and contingent responding (S. R. H. Langton et al., 2000); and support empathic engagement by conveying affective states and intentions (Todorov, 2012). Diverting attention from faces is therefore likely to weaken these inferential processes.

Consistent with this account, eye-tracking and recognition studies show that objectifying attention patterns are associated with reduced face fixation, poorer face recognition, and greater reliance on featural rather than configural processing (Elbich & Scherf, 2017; Royer et al., 2018). Relatedly, perceivers remember sexualized women's bodies more readily than their faces, suggesting reduced individuation of targets (Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011), a perceptual profile commonly associated with object-like processing.

Taken together, the face–body trade-off limits the social information perceivers can extract during interaction and has downstream costs for empathic accuracy (Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011) and interpersonal effectiveness (Strelan & Pagoudis, 2018)—costs borne not only by targets but also by objectifiers themselves.

Goal-based perception

Objectification often reflects goal-directed social perception. When perceivers pursue sexual-, dominance-, or status-related goals, attention and interpretation prioritize a target's instrumentality for goal attainment while other information receives less weight. A "people-as-means" perspective formalizes this idea: People are evaluated in terms of their relevance to the current goal, and instrumentality becomes a dominant organizing principle of judgment (Orehek et al., 2018; Orehek & Weaverling, 2017). Theorizing on objectifying exchanges similarly emphasizes that sexual objectification is not merely a static representation but also a goal-structured interpersonal process that shapes how cues are interpreted and responded to in real time (Gervais et al., 2020).

This goal-based framing also distinguishes objectification from ordinary sexual interest. Sexual attraction does not inevitably produce objectification. Attraction can orient attention toward socially diagnostic information relevant to evaluating and engaging with a potential partner, including facial cues and signals of responsiveness (Karremans & Verwijmeren, 2008; Maner et al., 2007). Objectification, by contrast, shifts attention away from psychological agency and toward bodily or instrumental value, reducing the weight given to socially diagnostic cues (see Bernard, Gervais, & Klein, 2018). It is especially likely when sexual motivation is organized around instrumental goal pursuit rather than interpersonal connection (Orehek & Weaverling, 2017). Consistent with this instrumental organization, although anyone can objectify others (Ward et al., 2023), objectification is particularly common among men who associate sex with aggression, endorse rape myths, and report using body-focused gaze when viewing women (Hollett et al., 2022, 2024). In such cases, perception becomes structured around a target's utility, prioritizing cues that signal sexual availability or goal relevance while discounting other diagnostic information.

Goal-based organization becomes particularly influential when multiple motives compete. Under these conditions, sexual goals can crowd out accuracy-oriented, professional, or egalitarian goals (Higgins & Molden, 2005; Scholer & Higgins, 2010), especially in contexts that render appearance-based appraisal permissible (Bareket & Shnabel, 2020; Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011). Judgments become guided less by informational value than by goal congruence: Cues signaling utility are amplified, and cues that are irrelevant, mixed, or inconvenient receive less weight.

These weighting processes can produce real-time miscalibration. When interpretation is structured around sexual utility, ambiguous behaviors are more likely to be construed as sexually motivated even in the absence of signals of interest (Abbey, 1987; Maner et al., 2005). Motivated inference, including wishful thinking, makes goal-consistent interpretations feel warranted, inflating perceived benefits and muting anticipated costs in ways that increase approach tendencies despite uncertain reciprocity or consent (Gervais et al., 2020; Orehek & Weaverling, 2017). Engagement may therefore persist not because the interaction is mutually calibrated but because it appears conducive to the perceiver's goals.

Goal-driven distortions extend beyond interpretation to encoding and memory. Active goals shape how social information is interpreted and later reconstructed,

producing confident but biased accounts of interactional dynamics (Klein & Hodges, 2001). Consistent with this framework, motivational states bias attention, face memory, and recall of interpersonal exchanges in goal-consistent directions (Neel et al., 2023; Weisbuch et al., 2017). Applied to objectifying contexts, signals of disinterest or interpersonal boundaries may be ignored, discounted, or reinterpreted after the fact, preserving a coherent narrative that fits the perceiver's goal-based construal.

These processes are consequential in contexts requiring accurate interpretation for coordination and evaluation. Anticipating romantic interaction in contexts in which it is irrelevant to the task can reduce sensitivity to cues of competence, shifting judgments toward goal-relevant interpersonal information at the expense of accurate assessment (Goodwin et al., 2002). More broadly, empathic accuracy declines when perceivers rely on goal-consistent assumptions rather than attending to others' perspectives (J. A. Hall et al., 2009; Klein & Hodges, 2001). Together, these dynamics help explain how objectification can undermine professional, educational, and organizational interactions by promoting misinterpretations of others' intentions and capacities and increasing the likelihood of boundary violations and biased evaluations (Fiske, 1998; Rudman & Borgida, 1995).

Although goal-based perception often operates automatically, it is not immutable (Freeman & Ambady, 2011). Making accuracy or fairness goals salient can attenuate bias through regulatory effort and metacognitive awareness (Gervais et al., 2020). Conceptualizing objectification as goal-based thus clarifies both its cognitive origins and its potential points of intervention.

Dehumanization

Objectification not only limits access to social information but also alters target construal. Objectified targets are dehumanized, receiving attenuated attributions of agency and autonomy (e.g., Gray et al., 2011), mental depth (e.g., Vaes et al., 2011), intentionality, and moral standing (e.g., Loughnan et al., 2010). Correspondingly, objectification is associated with object-like visual processing (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2014). Diminished attention to faces alters engagement of neural systems implicated in social perception (Itier & Batty, 2009), and objectifying processing has been linked to reduced activation in face processing and social cognition (Bernard, Gervais, & Klein, 2018).

Although the scope of everyday dehumanization remains debated (Over, 2021), the more specific claim here is well supported: Directing attention toward women's appearance or sexuality reduces attribution of core mental capacities and moral concern. These effects emerge early in impression formation: Attention to appearance leads perceivers to judge women as lower in warmth, competence, and morality (e.g., Heflick et al., 2011), dimensions central to perceiving others as intentional, norm-governed agents (Abele et al., 2020).

Dehumanizing construal also bears on an objectifier's own functioning. Targets construed as less agentic and mentally complex are processed less in terms of intentions, goals, and internal states, weakening perspective-taking and reducing sensitivity to the psychological meaning of others' behavior (Harris & Fiske, 2006; Waytz et al., 2010). Social signals become less informative and less motivating, constraining the objectifier's ability to track feedback, detect norm violations, and adjust behavior in real time. In work contexts, dehumanization may also encourage dismissal of targets' ideas and contributions.

Consistent with this account, objectified targets elicit attenuated empathic responding. Sexualized (vs. nonsexualized) women evoke less activation in neural systems implicated in mentalizing and affective resonance (Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011; Harris & Fiske, 2009). Behavioral studies similarly link appearance-focused construals to lower empathic concern and diminished responsiveness to others' discomfort and emotional cues (Cogoni et al., 2018). These patterns resemble instrumental modes of social cognition observed in competitive or hierarchical contexts (Fiske, 2018). For objectifiers, reduced empathic engagement may diminish sensitivity to distress, interpersonal boundaries, and other relational signals that support trust, coordination, and relationship maintenance.

These effects may extend beyond isolated interactions. Although most evidence examines objectification in discrete encounters, theory and adjacent research suggest that repeated objectifying perception may foster more stable patterns of social construal resembling broader forms of dehumanization and infrahumanization (Haslam, 2006; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Leyens et al., 2001, 2003). Endorsing beliefs that portray women's objectification as inevitable or functional (e.g., sexual-economics accounts of heterosexual relationships; Baumeister & Vohs, 2004) may normalize reduced social attunement and increase tolerance for objectification even in the absence of explicit hostility (e.g., Fetterolf & Rudman, 2017). More broadly, reductions in perceived humanity are linked to diminished moral concern and greater instrumental treatment of others (Loughnan et al., 2013), processes that may undermine interactional accuracy, reciprocity, and mutual regulation across contexts.

Mechanisms converge on social miscalibration

Across relational and professional domains, the costs of sexual objectification converge on a common outcome: social miscalibration. Effective social functioning requires accurately detecting, interpreting, and responding to others' emotions, intentions, boundaries, and contributions

(J. A. Hall et al., 2009; Klein & Hodges, 2001). Miscalibration is consequential in contexts that require responsiveness and mutual adjustment, including intimacy, teamwork, leadership, and conflict management. In institutional settings, perceptual errors can accumulate, reinforcing power asymmetries and biasing evaluation, coordination, and decision-making processes (Crone et al., 2021; Gruenfeld et al., 2008). Framing objectification as a source of social miscalibration clarifies how it generates personal, relational, and organizational costs for objectifiers themselves.

The four mechanisms are proposed to disrupt calibration through distinct pathways. Objectifying attention consumes cognitive resources needed to track social cues in real time (Mechanism 1). Prioritizing bodies over faces limits access to information critical for mental-state inference (Mechanism 2). Goal-based construals bias interpretation toward instrumental relevance, amplifying goal-congruent cues while discounting cues that signal disinterest, discomfort, or interpersonal limits (Mechanism 3). Dehumanization further reduces the perceived relevance of others' thoughts, feelings, and intentions, weakening responsiveness and behavioral adjustment (Mechanism 4).

Although analytically separable, these mechanisms are not proposed to operate in isolation. Rather than a fixed causal sequence, the framework treats them as mutually reinforcing processes that can operate simultaneously during social interaction (see Fiske & Taylor, 2024). Interactions among the mechanisms may also generate local cascades whereby attentional or motivational biases increase the likelihood of downstream processes, such as dehumanization. For example, increased cognitive load could prompt any of the three other mechanisms: leading an objectifier to choose between attending to the face and the body given fewer cognitive resources (e.g., Itier & Batty, 2009); draw skewed, insufficiently adjusted impressions (Gilbert et al., 1988), for instance, construing friendly behavior as sexual interest (Maner et al., 2005); or oversimplify a target into a few salient traits (e.g., Loughnan et al., 2010). Alternatively, each mechanism could arise independently and then feed off the others. For example, paying less attention to the face means that perceptual information about the target's face will be more degraded and ambiguous; under these circumstances, visual biases, such as goal-based perception, are especially likely to occur (Mihalache et al., 2021). The central claim is therefore functional rather than temporal: Regardless of their sequence, the mechanisms are expected to converge on social miscalibration.

Broader Implications of Objectification for Social Functioning

The framework advanced here reframes sexual objectification as more than a source of harm to women as targets. By foregrounding its consequences for objectifiers, it positions objectification as a self-undermining mode of social engagement with implications for theory, intervention, and future research. Because gender structures many of the dimensions through which people perceive and evaluate others (Martin & Slepian, 2021), distortions in gendered perception may carry broader consequences for social functioning. Sexual objectification represents one pathway through which attention to bodies and appearance can disrupt the psychological processes that support effective interaction.

In the section that follows, we consider how attending to objectifiers' costs extends existing theory, informs efforts to reduce objectification, and motivates methodological approaches for studying objectification as a dynamic social process.

Theoretical implications: beyond unidirectional harm

Conceptualizing sexual objectification as costly for objectifiers extends dominant models that treat objectification primarily as a source of harm to women. Although extensive research has documented its consequences for women's well-being, agency, and social standing (Ward et al., 2023), comparatively little attention has been paid to how objectifying perception shapes the functioning of individuals who enact it. With the present framework, we address this asymmetry by conceptualizing objectification as a form of distorted social perception that carries costs for objectifiers themselves.

This perspective aligns with research showing that inequality and dominance can impose psychological and relational costs on advantaged groups. Masculine norms constrain men's emotional functioning and social connectedness (Wong et al., 2017), and broader forms of inequality have similarly been linked to adverse outcomes for men (Li et al., 2021). By identifying sexual objectification as an interpersonal practice through which such costs may arise, this framework extends accounts of gender prejudice as self-undermining (for a recent perspective, see Bareket & Fiske, 2025). Just as racial prejudice carries cognitive (for a review, see Shelton & Richeson, 2006) and health-related (for a review, see Homan, 2021) costs for perpetrators, objectifying may incur costs on objectifiers. In this sense, objectification is not only a moral or political problem (e.g., Bartky, 1990; Nussbaum, 1999) but also a psychological one: a mode of social perception that compromises relational insight, coordination, and effectiveness.

Situating objectification in the distinctive interdependence of gender relations further strengthens this account. Unlike many intergroup hierarchies maintained through distance or avoidance, relations between women and men involve frequent contact, shared outcomes, and

ongoing coordination (Rudman & Glick, 2021). In such contexts, effective functioning depends on accurately perceiving and responding to others' intentions and needs. Objectification therefore not only disadvantages targets but also may undermine the relational and functional outcomes on which perceivers themselves depend.

A further implication concerns the persistence of sexual objectification despite the costs proposed here. One possibility is that sexual objectification reflects, in part, a functionally efficient mode of perception that prioritizes rapid assessment of physical or sexual cues, such as mate selection or short-term sexual pursuit (Buss & Schmitt, 2017; Lykins et al., 2006; Rupp & Wallen, 2008). Directing attention to bodily features may facilitate goal-relevant evaluation under such conditions (Maner et al., 2007; Orehek & Weaverling, 2017). With the present framework, we suggest, however, that any such benefits may come at the cost of reduced accuracy and responsiveness in contexts that require mutual understanding, coordination, and sustained interaction (J. A. Hall et al., 2009; Reis et al., 2004; Schmid Mast & Hall, 2018).

One explanation lies in a misalignment between short-term incentives and long-term costs. Objectifying perception can yield immediate benefits, including perceived sexual opportunity (Kellie et al., 2019), affirmation of dominance or masculinity (Bareket & Shnabel, 2020; Dahl et al., 2015), and peer approval (Mikorski & Szymanski, 2017). Because objectification is closely tied to sexual motivation and reward-oriented attention (Lykins et al., 2006; Rupp & Wallen, 2008), interactions may also feel enjoyable or successful even when responsiveness to the partner's thoughts or feelings is diminished (Goodwin et al., 2000; Klein & Hodges, 2001). These proximal benefits are immediate and salient, whereas the relational and organizational costs theorized here are delayed, cumulative, and diffuse. Such temporal asymmetries often sustain behaviors that are locally reinforcing but ultimately self-defeating (Baumeister et al., 2007; Hofmann et al., 2012), particularly when social norms tolerate or reward them (Gelfand et al., 2017).

Applied implications: consequences for relationships and work

By foregrounding objectifiers' costs, with this framework, we identify new avenues for intervention. Emphasizing these costs may offer a potent incentive for individuals and organizations to reduce objectifying practices, particularly in cases in which moral appeals have limited traction (e.g., Drury & Kaiser, 2014; Kende et al., 2020). Framing objectification as counterproductive to men's own relational and professional goals may increase receptivity among audiences who might otherwise resist gender-equity messages (e.g., Dover et al., 2016) while also challenging practices that reinforce women's subordinate social status.

These implications are relevant for men's well-being. Communal engagement supports psychological functioning (e.g., Le et al., 2018), health, and longevity (e.g., Puterman et al., 2020), yet gender norms discourage men from relationally engaged and emotionally attuned roles (Bareket & Fiske, 2025; Croft et al., 2015). To the extent that objectification undermines intimacy, responsiveness, and mutual understanding, it may further restrict access to supportive relationships and exacerbate patterns of social disconnection, particularly for men, whose close ties are often fewer and more concentrated in romantic relationships (see Wahring et al., 2024).

In organizational settings, the costs of objectification may extend beyond individual relationships to collective outcomes. As workplaces increasingly strive for gender parity in representation and decision-making power (Raj et al., 2020; Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015), effective interaction across gender lines becomes essential for collaboration, leadership, and performance. Objectifying perceptions may disrupt these processes by impairing coordination, trust, and information exchange (Andrighetto et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2025), particularly in mixed-gender teams (Bear & Woolley, 2011), environments in which sexualizing comments or objectifying interactions occur (Kahalon et al., 2022; Shepherd et al., 2023; Szymanski & Feltman, 2015), and cultures that reward dominance and devaluation of femininity (Berdahl et al., 2018). If objectification degrades dyadic or team functioning, downstream consequences may include reduced productivity, lower job satisfaction, increased turnover, and broader organizational costs. From this perspective, reducing objectification not only addresses individual well-being but also serves pragmatic concerns for organizational functioning and sustainability.

Sexual objectification may also function as a latent organizational risk factor, much as sexual harassment has been conceptualized in organizational research (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). Sexualized and appearance-focused perceptions can normalize climates that increase boundary violations, complaints, and costly interventions, exposing organizations to legal, financial, and reputational harm (e.g., Burrell et al., 2024; Hemel & Lund, 2018). Reducing objectification may therefore improve collaboration and inclusion while mitigating risks associated with misconduct, turnover, and climate deterioration (see Tricco et al., 2024).

These costs suggest two levers. Objectification may be discouraged by making its instrumental costs salient (diminished relationships, collaboration, and effectiveness; see Baldissarri et al., 2022) and its social and reputational costs salient (disapproval, confrontation, and institutional sanction; e.g., Crandall & Eshleman, 2003;

Hildebrand et al., 2024). Even though objectification often operates outside awareness (Bareket et al., 2019; Hollett et al., 2024), as do other subtle prejudices (Pearson et al., 2009), making these costs salient can motivate change by engaging objectifiers' own interests.

The model also points to interventions beyond persuasion, each targeting a specific mechanism and drawing on established bias-reduction paradigms. To counter the face–body trade-off, evaluation and selection procedures can be structured to limit appearance cues and anchor judgments in explicit, performance-based criteria, as comparative (joint) evaluation does for other appearance- and gender-based biases (Bohnet et al., 2016); media- and visual-literacy training that builds appraisal of sexualizing imagery offers a complementary route (Ward, 2016). To counter goal-based and dehumanizing construals, cooperative tasks organized around shared goals and individuating information about colleagues' expertise and intentions can shift perception from appearance- and category-based processing toward person-based processing (Fiske & Tamir, 2025); soliciting others' own accounts of their views rather than inferring them may further improve accuracy (Eyal et al., 2018). These examples are intended as illustrative, testable hypotheses rather than an exhaustive intervention agenda. Because objectification operates through multiple, partially independent mechanisms, intervention opportunities are likely to emerge as those mechanisms become better understood.

Research implications: capturing objectification as a dynamic interactional process

These theoretical and applied claims highlight limitations in dominant empirical approaches and motivate a shift in how sexual objectification is studied. Most research relies on static judgments or self-report measures, capturing either how observers evaluate objectified targets (i.e., literal objectification; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2014; Pecini et al., 2023) or how women internalize objectifying messages (i.e., self-objectification; Calogero et al., 2011; Daniels et al., 2020). More recent approaches have incorporated tools from cognitive psychology and social neuroscience, including eye tracking (e.g., Bareket et al., 2019; Hollett et al., 2022), neural measures (e.g., Monachesi et al., 2024; Vaes et al., 2019), and experimental attention paradigms (e.g., Andrighetto et al., 2019; Bernard, Gervais, & Klein, 2018). However well these methods isolate objectifying perception under controlled conditions, they capture it largely outside ongoing interaction and therefore overlook the dynamic and interdependent processes through which social outcomes emerge (S. M. Burns et al., 2025).

Recent perspectives have moved in a more interactional direction. Objectification has been conceptualized as a goal-driven interpersonal process shaped by sexual motivation and structural power (Gervais et al., 2020), an evaluative process rooted in perceivers' power-relevant concerns (Sáez et al., 2025), and treating others as means to one's goals (Orehek et al., 2018; Orehek & Weaverling, 2017). These approaches shift attention toward interpersonal and motivational conditions under which objectification unfolds.

In the present framework, we build on these perspectives but shift the focus. Rather than centering on antecedents or interactional dynamics that produce objectification, we conceptualize objectification as a perceptual distortion embedded in gendered power relations. The central question is not only why objectification occurs but also how objectification alters perception during interaction and, in turn, affects relational accuracy and effectiveness.

Initial dyadic evidence illustrates the value of this perspective. In mixed-gender conversations, men's appearance-focused attention toward women increased women's state self-objectification, which predicted lower comfort and authenticity during the interaction. Reduced authenticity was associated with lower relationship agency and career aspirations and poorer cognitive performance (Garcia et al., 2016). These findings suggest that objectification can restructure interaction dynamics in ways that undermine relational functioning and joint outcomes. Yet research has largely overlooked its downstream cognitive and relational consequences for objectifiers themselves.

More broadly, paradigms based on static images, retrospective judgments, or recalled behavior cannot determine whether objectification is episodic or sustained, deliberate or automatic, and responsive or insensitive to partners' signals. This limitation is notable given evidence that social perception and behavior unfold dynamically over time and in response to interaction partners (S. M. Burns et al., 2025; Patterson, 2019). Objectification may therefore be mischaracterized as a stable perceptual bias rather than a dynamically regulated interactional mode whose consequences depend on how it unfolds across an exchange.

Addressing these questions requires methods that capture perception and responsiveness as they develop during interaction (Gray & Wegner, 2013). Behavioral paradigms assessing mutual perception, responsiveness, and nonverbal coordination during live interaction (J. A. Hall et al., 2005; Sprecher, 2021) are particularly well suited to this task. Eye tracking, video-based coding, cross-partner reports, and longitudinal designs can illuminate how objectifying attention shapes real-time processing, interaction quality, and later behavior. For example, dyadic designs combining eye tracking and

empathic-accuracy measures could test whether body-focused attention predicts reduced accuracy in tracking partners' emotions and intentions. Experimental manipulations of objectifying attention during live interaction can further examine downstream effects on coordination, responsiveness, and joint performance.

Such approaches also allow researchers to assess how accurately objectifiers track partners' emotions, intentions, and feedback over time (Schmid Mast & Hall, 2018; Sened et al., 2017). Systematic inaccuracies in this tracking may represent a key pathway through which objectification degrades coordination, empathy, and effectiveness yet remains largely invisible in noninteractive paradigms. Relatedly, research on interpersonal synchrony has shown that temporal alignment in gaze, affect, posture, and speech supports affiliation, trust, and cooperation (for reviews, see daSilva & Wood, 2025; Gordon et al., 2025) and may also regulate gendered interactional inequalities (A. Burns et al., 2025). By redirecting attention and constraining responsiveness, sexual objectification may disrupt synchrony and reinforce asymmetric interactional roles.

Scope and Generalizability of Objectification Costs for Objectifiers

Objectification does not operate in a single social ecology; its costs for objectifiers are shaped by relational, normative, and structural conditions. In the sections that follow, we examine how these costs vary across configurations of gender, sexuality, and power; situate sexual objectification within a broader class of instrumentalized social perceptions; and identify conditions under which they are most likely to emerge.

Variation in sexual objectification and its costs across social configurations

With the present framework, we center men's sexually motivated objectification of women given its prevalence and well-documented consequences (Roberts et al., 2018). However, the proposed mechanisms concern the redirection of attention away from psychological agency and toward bodies or appearance rather than any particular perpetrator-target configuration. They should therefore extend across diverse configurations of gender, sexuality, and target identity. Although research beyond heterosexual men objectifying women remains limited, similar attentional and inferential shifts may occur. To the extent that they do, comparable costs to objectifiers may follow even as the social meaning, normative grounding, and severity of objectification vary across settings.

A related question is whether these processes emerge when the target is not a potential sexual partner. Evidence suggests they may. For example, gay men objectify women, often more than they objectify men, a pattern linked to exposure to cultural portrayals that sexualize women (Ruzzante et al., 2025). The attentional and inferential shifts associated with objectification should operate whenever a target is construed in objectifying terms. However, some consequences, such as misinterpreting social cues as signals of sexual interest (e.g., Abbey, 1987), may be less likely when the target is not a plausible sexual partner.

Same-gender interactions. Sexual objectification also occurs in same-gender interactions. Among women, objectification of other women is linked to appearance norms and social-comparison processes (Kellie et al., 2019; Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005), which encourage perceivers to construe sexualized women as diminished in agency and moral standing (see Heflick & Goldenberg, 2014). Because appearance standards are often directed toward both others and the self, objectification may impose not only the interpersonal costs outlined above but also additional cognitive costs associated with self-monitoring.

Similar dynamics operate among gay men. Appearance-focused norms are more strongly associated with body surveillance and body shame than among heterosexual men (Kozak et al., 2009; Martins et al., 2007), and self-objectification is elevated among individuals attracted to men (Kahalon et al., 2025). To the extent that appearance standards are applied to both self and others, objectifying other men may incur similar interpersonal costs while also increasing self-monitoring and appearance-based concerns.

Men as targets of objectification. Objectification does not operate symmetrically across genders in either prevalence or consequences. Although research on men as targets of objectification remains limited, available evidence suggests that men are objectified less frequently (e.g., Vaes et al., 2020) and are less consistently perceived in object-like ways when sexualized (for a review, see Bernard, Gervais, & Klein, 2018).

When men are objectified, some of the same attentional processes emerge but appear attenuated. Increasing appearance focus shifts gaze toward men's bodies and away from their faces (Bernard, Gervais, Holland, & Dodd, 2018), mirroring the objectifying gaze pattern documented for women (Gervais et al., 2013). However, object-like perceptual encoding is weaker for sexualized men than for sexualized women (Bernard et al., 2012), suggesting more person-like (i.e., configural) processing.

Differences are also evident at the level of social inference. Although sexualization leads both women and men to be explicitly categorized as sexual objects, it has different evaluative consequences: It increases perceived

sexiness for women but decreases perceived masculinity for men (Fasoli et al., 2018). Sexualization therefore does not uniformly enhance desirability and may instead impose status-related costs on men.

Together, these findings suggest that gender norms shape not only who is objectified but also the strength of objectifying processes and their consequences. For the present framework, this asymmetry is potentially informative: Weaker perceptual distortions and different inferences toward men may imply that the cognitive and relational costs incurred by objectifiers are attenuated or qualitatively distinct.

Transgender and nonbinary people as targets of objectification. Transgender and nonbinary individuals are often targets of fetishization and gender policing that focus attention on sexualized or gender-marked aspects of their bodies (e.g., Anzani et al., 2021; Wakelin & Long, 2003). Relatedly, individuals described without gender indicators are perceived as less human, less relatable, and more socially distant (Martin & Mason, 2022). These dynamics prioritize appearance while reducing attention to identity, intentions, and agency, a pattern consistent with the mechanisms proposed here.

Race as a context for objectification. Intersecting racial and gender identities may further shape objectification and its consequences. Racialized objectification embeds appearance-based evaluation in long-standing stereotypes that bias attention and narrow moral concern (Goff et al., 2008; Mosley, 2025), potentially altering how perceivers interpret and respond to targets during interaction (Flores et al., 2018). In the United States, for example, the Jezebel stereotype portrays Black women as hypersexual, reflecting histories of slavery and dehumanization (e.g., Holmes, 2016). Such stereotypes contribute to Black women being objectified more strongly than White women (Anderson et al., 2018) and may shift objectification costs toward dehumanization, although this possibility remains untested and may interact with stereotypes proscribing members of certain groups from expressing agency (Livingston et al., 2012; Xiao et al., 2023). By contrast, Asian men have historically been desexualized through racialized gender stereotypes (Johnson et al., 2012) and legal barriers to occupational attainment (Chong & Kim, 2022). Although some evidence suggests these stereotypes are changing (Chong & Kim, 2022), desexualized group representations may reduce the frequency or intensity of sexual objectification toward that group.

Across these configurations, the general pattern is likely to emerge, although the relative importance of specific mechanisms may vary across objectifiers and targets. Objectification redirects attention from mind to body, and when this occurs in contexts that require coordination and mutual understanding, it may impose costs on objectifiers. What varies is less the underlying process than its social embedding (see Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021): the norms that permit objectification, the power relations that shape its consequences, and the extent to which objectifiers are themselves subject to the evaluative standards they apply to others. These variations help specify when and how objectification disrupts social cognition, consistent with the view that its costs are context-dependent rather than uniform.

Objectification costs beyond sexual contexts

The variation observed in sexual objectification raises a broader question: whether objectification, understood as construing others primarily in terms of instrumental value rather than psychological agency (e.g., Loughnan et al., 2010), constitutes a more general mode of social perception with comparable costs beyond sexual contexts. Objectification has long been theorized in this broader sense, encompassing forms of instrumentalized perception that extend beyond sexuality (Nussbaum, 1999).

From this perspective, sexual objectification represents one consequential instantiation of a broader process through which instrumentalized perception constrains attention to others' inner states, narrows mental-state inference, and prioritizes utility over subjectivity. To the extent that objectification redirects attention away from others' minds and toward goal relevance (Gervais et al., 2020), similar relational and functional costs may emerge across contexts, targets, and social hierarchies. At the same time, heterosexual objectification remains a theoretically central case because it unfolds in structurally unequal yet highly interdependent relationships that require ongoing coordination and mutual responsiveness (Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Rudman & Glick, 2021).

The proposed mechanisms are also likely to vary in scope. Cognitive load and goal-based perception should generalize to other forms of instrumentalized perception in which others are construed primarily in terms of their utility (e.g., Baldissarri et al., 2022; Gruenfeld et al., 2008). The face–body attentional trade-off is likely more specific to sexual and appearance-based objectification, in which evaluation is organized around the body (Bernard, Gervais, & Klein, 2018; Gervais et al., 2012). Dehumanization is expected to operate across both sexual and nonsexual forms, albeit through potentially partly distinct routes (e.g., animalistic vs. mechanistic dehumanization; Haslam, 2006).

Consistent with this view, perceiving others as competitors, resources, subordinates, or means to organizational ends is associated with reduced perspective-taking, diminished moral consideration, and poorer coordination

and leadership, imposing costs on both perceivers and targets (for reviews, see Baldissarri et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2025). Although research on objectification outside sexual contexts remains limited, adjacent work on dehumanization documents similar processes whereby reduced attention to others' mental states undermines moral concern and social coordination (for reviews, see Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Kteily & Landry, 2022). Although distinct constructs, objectification and dehumanization both attenuate agency attribution, potentially producing similar downstream consequences for social engagement (see Haslam, 2022).

A boundary of the present framework concerns the organizational and sociocultural levels. As Figure 1 indicates, we treat organizational/sociocultural factors as context (antecedents and costs) rather than as mechanisms. Objectification can also be generated by organizational- and sociocultural-level processes, such as power relations, status systems, and climates that normalize sexualized evaluation (Berdahl et al., 2018; Cortina & Areguin, 2021); these operate through distinct mechanisms that lie beyond our scope and call for a fuller multilevel account in future work.

Moderators of objectification costs

Objectifiers' costs likely vary across motivational, relational, and structural contexts. As noted in the discussion of goal-based perception, sexual attraction is not equivalent to objectification. Sexual interest can coexist with accurate mental-state inference, responsiveness, and mutual regulation (J. A. Hall et al., 2015; Reis et al., 2004). Sexual interactions may also shape basic social-cognitive processes (Markovitch et al., 2024), and heterosexual men show transient cognitive deficits following interactions with women (Karremans et al., 2009; Nauts et al., 2012). With the present framework, we propose that objectification amplifies these effects when attention and interpretation become organized around bodily or instrumental value (Gervais et al., 2020; Nussbaum, 1999). Accordingly, the costs identified here arise not from attraction itself but from objectifying construals that displace socially diagnostic information.

Not all situations will incur the same costs to objectifiers either. Contextual and structural conditions likely moderate both the emergence and consequences of objectification. Higher-power perceivers may experience attenuated immediate cognitive or interpersonal costs because they rely less on others' input and possess broader attentional scope (Guinote, 2007; Weisbuch et al., 2017), although potentially at the expense of interpersonal sensitivity. Conversely, appearance-salient or sexualized environments may normalize objectifying attention such that sexualizing comments are sometimes perceived positively even as they undermine coordination and trust (Kahalon et al., 2022; Shepherd et al., 2023). In such settings, objectification may incur fewer immediate penalties, allowing it to persist despite degrading interaction quality over time. More broadly, when norms or incentives prioritize appearance, dominance, or instrumental outcomes, objectification may be reinforced in the short term even as it undermines longer-term relational and collective functioning.

Extending the framework across contexts does not imply symmetry in power, prevalence, or harm. Sexual objectification of women by men remains uniquely embedded in structural gender inequality and carries disproportionate consequences for women's safety, status, and opportunity (Roberts et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2023). The claim advanced here is therefore limited: Objectification, whether sexual or nonsexual, constitutes a psychologically costly mode of engagement even as its prevalence, meaning, and consequences vary systematically with social structure. Clarifying when, how, and for whom these costs emerge remains an important task for future theory and research.

Conclusion

Research on sexual objectification has grown substantially over the past 2 decades but has focused primarily on consequences for women as targets (e.g., Roberts et al., 2018). With this framework, we extend this literature by foregrounding the psychological, relational, and professional costs borne by individuals who objectify. Integrating evidence from social cognition, relationship science, and organizational research, we propose that objectification undermines the perceptual and regulatory capacities that support effective interaction.

Conceptualizing objectification as a self-undermining mode of social perception shifts the theoretical lens from one-sided harm to dysfunction in interdependent gender relations (Bareket & Fiske, 2025). We identify four mechanisms through which objectification may degrade social calibration, leading to consequences for intimacy, collaboration, leadership, and professional judgment. We also motivate a methodological shift from static judgments to interactive designs that capture how objectification unfolds over time.

Recognizing costs for objectifiers does not imply symmetry in harm. Sexual objectification remains disproportionately consequential for targets, particularly women, whose safety, status, and well-being are directly affected. Reframing objectification in terms of its costs to objectifiers does not dilute its role in sustaining gender inequality; rather, it identifies an additional mechanism through which objectification persists as a corrosive practice: It damages the relationships and institutions on which

objectifiers and objectified depend. Understanding these costs broadens the motivational basis for intervention and advances a more complete account of objectification as both a social injustice and a self-undermining mode of social perception.

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Notes

1. Throughout, "sexualized" describes appearance- or body-focused depiction and perception (often the stimulus or manipulation in empirical studies; Ward et al., 2023), and "objectified" describes the construal or treatment of a person as an object with reduced mind and agency (Loughnan et al., 2010; Nussbaum, 1999). Because sexualized portrayals are the usual means of inducing or indexing objectification, the two terms often co-occur; usage here follows each cited study and is distinct from the sexualized-versus-appearance-focused distinction discussed in this section.
2. Cognitive load may arise from multiple sources, including working memory demands, executive control processes, or perceptual attention (for a review, see Fiske & Taylor, 2024). The present argument does not hinge on distinguishing among these components but instead emphasizes the broader principle that sexual/appearance-focused evaluation can compete with cognitive resources needed for effective social interaction.

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