Understanding Objectification Theory

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Abstract: *This paper is a concept paper which examines the needs to understand one media representation theory which is objectification theory. Objectification theory provides an important framework for researches in understanding and researching ideas to improve women's lives in a sociocultural context which sexually objectifies the female body and equates a woman's worth to her body appearance and sexual functions. This study therefore relies on extensive literature on objectification theory. The paper finds that objectification theory is relevant in the study of hip hop as it portrays the under representation of women and how it effects their wellbeing.*

Keywords: *Objectification Theory, Mass Media, Women, Objectification, Music.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is written as a concept paper to examine media representation theory which is objectification theory. Objectification theory by Fredrickson and Roberts (1970) provides a platform for researches in understanding and researching ideas to improve women's lives in a sociocultural context which sexually objectifies the female body and equates a woman's worth to her body's appearance and sexual functions. This paper therefore is divided into four sections namely this introduction, overview of objectification, objectification theory in hip hop and conclusion to aid this discussion.

2. OBJECTIFICATION: BACKGROUND OVERVIEW

Before the existence of television or mass media, women were objectified during the Cleopatra Era. For as long as there has been mankind, the female body has been objectified (Heru, 2003).While men were remembered for their bravery and war achievements, it was the women who were immortalised for their beauty, for their control over others through the objectification of their bodies' such. Even in the media today, rarely are there portrayals of dominant women without mentioning the likes of their beauty.

With this in mind, Fredrickson and Roberts (1970) developed Objectification Theoryand postulated that women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to be valued for its use by the male gender and the media. The understanding of this theory is that the media plays an important role in shaping women's thoughts on how they should or should not be looked upon in the public. Weskot (1986:5) stated that objectification "is the socially sanctioned right of all males to sexualise all females, regardless of age or status."Objectification may occur in many ways ranging from sexual violence to sexual evaluation (Fischer, Vidmar& Ellis, 1993). The most subtle and deniable way of objectification is enacted and is through gaze or visual inspection of the body (Kaschak, 1992). Objectification also occurs when a woman's body part is separated from her as a person and viewed as a mere instrument or regarded as these instruments were capable of representing her (Bartky, 1990).

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) stated that objectification occurs in three related arenas. First, it occurs within actual interpersonal and social encounters. Looking at a person as an object merely for sexual pleasure or as an object for use is considered objectification involving beauty and appearance.

Studies have shown that women are gazed at more than men (Hall, 1984), women are more likely to feel "looked at" in interpersonal encounters (Argyle &Williams, 1969) and men's gazing is often accompanied by sexually evaluative commentary (Gardner, 1980) which tends to be more derogatory when it involves women of colour (Allen, 1984). According to Cowan (1995), for women of colour,

objectifying gazes are often infused with racial slurs; for example, African American women are usually looked upon as animals whereas Asian women are seen as possessing more exotic and subservient sexuality.

Consistent with the idea that women mostly experience the objectifying gaze, anecdotal evidence from the media depicts men as being unable to stop themselves from staring at women's breasts and women are often depicted as telling men to stop ogling at their breasts and to instead focus on their faces through statements such as "my eyes are up here" (Gervais, Holland & Dodd, 2013).

Sartre (1956) described the gaze as the battleground for the self to define and redefine itself. Reinhardt (2015) stated that viewers become aware of themselves as a subject only when confronted with the gaze of the *other* and become aware of themselves as object. The gaze of the *other* is outside the viewers' immediate control and the way the gaze objectifies viewers, robs one's freedom as a subject. Indeed a certain power dynamic is inherent within the gaze as a medium and images possess a very commanding presence- there is a perverse pleasure in looking and not being able to look away.

Second, objectification also occurs in visual media that depict social and interpersonal encounters. Analyses from advertisements have shown that males are usually pictured looking directly at their female partners far more often that the reverse (Goffman, 1979; Umiker-Sebeok, 1981). Goh-Mah (2013) discussed the objectification of women in the media as the elephant in the room; though this issue is seen as being too obvious to ignore, it does come as no surprise that the issue of objectification is often side swept by media pundits. Goh-Mah (2013) further stated that 'because sexual objectification has become so visible in viewer's day-to-day lives, it has become the most potent sector of objectification; this does not however, mean that the other kinds of objectification should not be resolved.' She used dichotomy and the differentiation between subject and object status in the simplest story lines, and proceeded to say, "…in society's dominant narrative, subject and object status is heavily gendered, with men granted subject status the vast majority of the time, and women severely objectified." This proves that media's sexual objectification of women is something that stems from something much deeper than images that is seen daily.

The portrayal of men and women differ throughout various mass media and at times, because women are extremely photo shopped to fit a certain ideal of what female beauty is represented by the media, women find themselves going through extreme body modification just to be accepted by society. In today's world, women are constantly under an immense amount of pressure to conform to the perfectly thin ideal of what media defines beauty as (Goodstat, 2014).

Ford, LaTour and Lundstrom (1991) replicated a 1977 study by Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia that measured women's general perceptions of their portrayals in advertisements. The study contained 17 different statements which reflected attitudes on sex role portrayals, companies using traditional images in their advertisements, and purchase intention. In addition to that, the researchers used Arnott's Female Autonomy Inventory scale, which measured the participants' views of women's roles in society to determine if they were traditional or modern (Ford, LaTour&Lundstrom,1991). The results of the study proved that women were still critical of the way in which they were portrayed in media advertising and how they were being treated mainly as sex objects, and fundamentally dependent on men. These objectifying advertisements encourage men to be dominant and never take "no" for an answer which creates problem such as low self-esteem for women (Kilbourne, 1999). When a woman is portrayed merely as a thing, it dehumanises them which can lead to violence against that person because the thing is much easier to manipulate and abuse than a person.

Stankiewicz (2008) stated that it is apparent that the link of sexuality and victimisation in advertising affects the male psyche by causing them to heedlessly become 'desensitised' to the synthesis of sex and violence. Desensitisation to violence against women has become so common in western societies that one in four women have become victims of rape or attempted rape, and many college girls have experienced sexual discrimination (Fisher, Cullen & Turner, 2000). Stankiewicz (2008) further argued that the regular images of women as sex objects in media may cause people to think that a woman's physique and sexuality are what makes her precious. These stereotypical portrayals of women are taken as a socially acceptable reality and with repeated exposure of women as "sexualised product adornments" (Pritchard, 2001:79), these images will crystallise into a form of perspective (Noraini, Esmaeil & Shahizah, 2014).

Third and perhaps the most insidious manner in which objectifying gaze affects women is in people's encounter with visual media which highlights bodies, body parts and aligns viewers with sexualising gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Research on main stream films (Kuhn, 1985), visual arts (Berger, 1972) and music videos (Sommers-Flanagan, 1993), each provide evidence that a women's body is targeted for sexual objectification more often than men.

People today are the most media saturated and media engaged in the media history. As media takes the centre stage in shaping the world's perception of itself, the individual struggles to maintain its unique identity. The individual absorbs the output of the media as the way of life and thus perceptions begin to form on certain genders, cultures and understandings. These individuals feed on the output of the media to the extent that it influences their way of thinking and life. Many people think they are immune to media influences. Survey shows that almost everyone thinks media affect others but not themselves (Kilbourne, 1999). However, scholars who study media say that most people rely on media to craft their opinions, identities and lives (Shade, 1995). Media scholar Kellner (2011) noted that media culture provides viewers with "models of what is meant to be male or female." This creates the ideals of what is desirable in women and men.

This in return creates a stereotyping individual who belittles the opposite sex based on the media's perception. Kellner (2011) stated that it is difficult to look at gender and not judge oneself in the process. One reason is that gender objectification is almost inseparable from in one's everyday life. The positioning of men and women in society is controlled by their position in economy and social status and the power relations within these structures. It can be seen as an individual or public concern.

3. OBJECTIFICATION THEORY IN HIP HOP- A GENERAL OUTLOOK

Among media theory that is relevant for this genre is Objectification Theory. Szymanski, Moffitt andCarr (2010) stated that "objectification theory provides an important framework for understanding, researching, and intervening to improve women's lives in a sociocultural context that sexually objectifies the female body and equates a woman's worth with her body's appearance and sexual functions." Apart from that, objectification reviews the after effect of objectification involving women in terms of bodily harm and psychological problems they may face while trying to live up to the portrayal of women in the hip hop videos and lyrics.

Hip hop has become a central and vital part of entertainment today (Schmidt, 2013). According to Schmidt (2013), music videos objectifying women in obscene manner has become the selling point for the entertainment market, and this is seen involving females of different races throughout the whole world. Continuous objectification such as this will allow public to think that it is acceptable to objectify women in a degrading manner. In Mulvey's (1975: 63), *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, she statedthat "the beauty of the women as an object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look."

Researchers have found a positive relationship between music genre specifically hip hop consumption, self-objectification as proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts such as that when the consumption of music increases, so does the self-objectification behaviour. This is due to the effect that when a visual stimulus is seen as objectifying it can lead to many negative psychological effects predicted by the objectification theory such as depression, anxiety and body dissatisfaction. Study conducted by Pardun, L'Engle and Brown (2005) found that in the context of media with music in particular, contained more sexual content than any other media.

Whilst Weitzer and Kubrin, (2009) noted that sexually explicit and derogatory lyrics especially in hip hop music has been frequently criticised for its under representation of women using lyrics which objectify and exploit women. Adams and Fuller (2006:940) assert that rap music reduces women to objects "that are only good for sex and abuse," which "perpetuate ideas, values, beliefs and stereotypes that debase women."

Goodstat (2014) stated that evidence of objectification involving women can be found everywhere, from the media to women's interpersonal experience, specific environments and cultures in the world where objectification of women is cultivated and condoned. These media outlets constantly expose the fact that women are more often sexualised and portrayed in 'objectified manners' which include

wearing provocative clothes, serving nothing more that decorative objects for men and emphasised as being useful only for their physical parts. These objectification proceeds to name calling such as their use of deprecating phrases and adjectives to describe women and at times catcalling and leering.

The objectification in hip hop at times also puts a woman in a limbo as the perception of media on women is changing according to what media deems as sellable. A woman could be pressured to look thin in one society and heavy bottom and voluptuous in a different society. This objectification in the hip hop genre brings much confusion to women that they resort to artificial enhancements to improve their figures. In other words, girls and women are conditioned from a young age to view the body as a "work in progress" or something in constant need of alteration. Instead of being satisfied with their body as a whole, they concentrate on what separate entities they lack (Kilbourne, 2002).

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion, it is palpable that objectification theory is embedded in media theories and studies. Objectification theory was created to research women and how media representation affects their physical health and wellbeing but this theory is able to reach out to other studies revolving the media due to its wide scope in understanding women and the media. This is supported by Szymanski, Moffitt and Carr (2010) where they stated that "objectification theory provides an important framework for understanding, researching, and intervening to improve women's lives in a sociocultural context that sexually objectifies the female body and equates a woman's worth with her body's appearance and sexual functions."

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