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After Objectification: Locating Harm

ROSA VINCE

ABSTRACT *In this article I offer an analysis of harms associated with sexual objectification. Objectification can be benign, but harm tends to occur in three circumstances: (i) when objectification is non-consensual, (ii) when a phenomenon that I term ‘context-creeping’ occurs, and (iii) when the objectification is also enacting or reinforcing some kind of oppression. I defend the view that objectification is not always harmful, and I explain the popular intuition to the contrary by demonstrating that these three harm-generating circumstances are especially prevalent. The phenomenon of ‘context-creeping’ objectification is introduced to capture what is intuitively wrong with much objectification in media and advertising. This phenomenon describes when instances of sexual objectification (which may be, in themselves, benign) regularly occur outside sexual contexts, in a way that reinforces particular rape myths and thereby contributes to harms. This means that the ubiquity of discussion of pornography in the objectification literature is misleading, and a shift in focus to other media is warranted. I end with a warning, though: we should be very careful in how we respond to these problems, as attempts to mitigate any harms associated with objectifying media can badly misfire.*

1. Introduction

The philosophical literature on objectification thus far has overwhelmingly focused on pornography. One would struggle to find philosophical writing on objectification which does not engage Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin’s anti-pornography work at length.¹ Even those who broaden the focus to non-pornographic examples still give pornography centre stage.² This article demonstrates that we get a much fuller picture of what is going on – and what is going wrong – if we abandon that focus. Here, I take a closer look at how objectification can generate harm, and we will see that these harms are generated across many contexts.

In this article I argue that we cannot infer that something is harmful from the fact that it objectifies; we must look elsewhere for the harm.³ I offer three ways in which objectification involves harm, and argue that the prevalence of these explains the popular intuition that objectification itself is harmful. To be clear, I am suggesting that it is not objectification *itself* that is harmful in such cases, but that there are these three other factors that generate harm in common cases of objectification. So: when we want to know whether a thing which objectifies is harmful we need to establish not simply whether it is objectifying, but whether any of these three other things are occurring:

- (1) Consent Violation – the objectifier violates the consent of the person they objectify.
- (2) Context-Creeping – this is a widespread phenomenon which increases the incidence of non-consensual objectification, and will be fully articulated in the fourth section of this article.

(3) Oppression – cases which trade on, reinforce, or endorse oppression.

This analysis is vital because it provides mechanisms for evaluating and articulating harms in objectifying acts and media, which allows us to bring nuance to related debates; most obviously, debates about whether pornography is harmful. This article does not focus on pornography, but the implications for such debates are important – I will outline these at the end. Currently, there are feminists who oppose objectification, many of whom are using objectification to argue that pornography is harmful or wrong.⁴ There are also feminists who argue that some kinds of objectification are acceptable, or even ‘wonderful’,⁵ yet this diagnosis does not pinpoint where the harm lies in those cases which are harmful, or appeal to the broader social contexts which affect how harm occurs. My account agrees with the latter that objectification is not always harmful but goes on to explain why harm so often occurs (and why many feminists share the intuition that objectification is harmful) by attending to pernicious features of our social context, and showing how these harmful features co-occur and interact with instances of objectification. Importantly, this analysis demonstrates that the overwhelming emphasis on pornography in the philosophical literature on objectification may be unwarranted and distracting. We will see that the harmful instances of objectification can occur across many media, and may even be *less* concerning in pornography than ostensibly non-sexual media.

This article proceeds in six parts: I first explain what I mean by ‘harm’, and second I explain and defend what I mean by ‘objectification’. From there I show that objectification is not always harmful. This preliminary conclusion necessitates an explanation of the popular intuition that objectification is always or usually harmful. To explain this, I point to three factors which often co-occur alongside objectification, which generate harm. I then present these factors in turn, in the remaining parts of the article. First, I argue that non-consensual objectification is very common, and always harmful, often in ways that interact with broader structures of oppression. Second, I propose the concept of ‘context-creeping objectification’, whereby women are sexually objectified across a wide variety of non-sexual contexts (most obviously in adverts and other visual media), trading on and reinforcing the myth that women are always available for objectification, rather than only on occasions on which they say that they want it. Third and finally, I argue that examples of objectification which reinforce oppression will be clearly harmful, but, importantly: that harm is not best explained by objectification. Oppressive objectification is particularly common, though, which helps explain why objectification is thought of as usually or always harmful. In the closing section, I summarise my account and outline some crucial implications.

2. Harm

I will be discussing here when examples of objectification are *harmful* rather than *wrong*; wrongs that are not also harms (if they exist) are issues for attention elsewhere. I prefer working in terms of harm rather than wrong for one main reason: a focus on harm is already present in the feminist literature. For example, Eaton, Jenkins, Langton, and Dworkin and MacKinnon all discuss the harms of pornography and objectification.⁶

Examining harms to women will be important for feminist projects irrespective of whether wrongs are also addressed, but feminists might be particularly likely to prefer

working in terms of ‘harm’ to ‘wrong’ given that ‘wrongs’ appear more intimately tied to social norms, which are precisely the kinds of things feminism often calls on us to question. This seems to be what MacKinnon has in mind when she approaches pornography as ‘not a moral issue’.⁷ In two speeches, ‘Not A Moral Issue’ and ‘Francis Biddle’s Sister’⁸ (and elsewhere), MacKinnon characterises pornography as something that harms women and creates gender inequality, such that pornography’s harmfulness is invisibilised. At the same time, MacKinnon argues that we should steer well clear of approaches to pornography which are grounded in *moral disgust*. She critiques the ‘obscenity’ approach to pornography, which has dominated both UK and US pornography legislation:

Obscenity, in this light, is a moral idea, an idea about judgements of good and bad ... Obscenity as such probably does little harm. Pornography is integral to the attitudes and behaviours of violence and discrimination that define the treatment and status of half the population.⁹

MacKinnon is even more explicit in advocating for a focus on ‘harm’ in *Are Women Human?*:

In Sweden, as elsewhere, pornography is largely understood as a matter of morality, of good and bad. The right’s morality on the subject revolves around sex, the left’s around violence. The right’s morality views pornography as obscene, meaning sex that is bad or wrong to see: sex is filthy, women’s bodies are dirty, homosexuality is perverse. The materials are smut. The left’s morality sees a problem with pornography, if at all, when it shows violence. Seeing violence in pornography is helpful. But neither approach solves the real problem pornography poses for women. Ideas of good and bad in what is said and seen do not reach the harm that is being done. Neither left nor right addresses the realities of who pornography hurts, how, why, and how they get away with it.¹⁰

In the same vein, Ellen Willis and Gayle Rubin refer to ‘moralism’¹¹ or ‘moral panic’¹² when describing the kind of prejudicial normative judgements that should not infect our thinking about how to improve things for oppressed people. They both discuss how people of all genders are punished for failing or refusing to conform to patriarchal norms of what a virtuous sex life is, and consider the practice of questioning such norms to be crucial feminist activity. Though MacKinnon, Rubin, and Willis take different stances in pornography debates, they are all suspicious of claims about the *moral wrongness* of sexually explicit material, preferring to focus on material *harms*.

A focus on ‘harm’ is thus already at work in the feminist literature, though it is not always made explicit. Making this focus explicit also makes it harder to talk at cross-purposes, and looking at harm enables us to locate points of disagreement with precision, and to identify routes to resolution more easily.¹³ For instance, if we utilise a clear definition of harm, and we establish that two apparently disagreeing feminists are both in fact concerned about the same kind of harm, a conversation can be had about how to reduce that harm. There might be other reasons that are illuminated through such a conversation, however, which render progress impossible, such as if we discover that one feminist is concerned about harms to a different group of people than the other. Nevertheless, this kind of analysis can show where common ground lies (and where it does not).

Examining harms here both does justice to influential feminist literature that helped form current objectification debates, and enables a specificity which minimises the chances of talking at cross-purposes.

I utilise the following definition of harm:

A setback to a welfare interest.

‘Welfare interest’ here captures:

interests in the continuance for a foreseeable interval of one’s life, and the interests in one’s own physical health and vigour, the integrity of one’s body,¹⁴ the absence of absorbing unpleasant pain and suffering, emotional stability, the absence of groundless anxieties and resentments, the capacity to engage in social intercourse and to enjoy and maintain friendships, at least minimal income and financial security, and a tolerable social and physical environment, and a certain amount of freedom from interference and coercion.¹⁵

When I am harmed, one of my welfare interests is put into a worse condition than it would otherwise have been. This understanding of harm is not entirely uncontroversial,¹⁶ but it is useful for present purposes, and makes sense of what we ordinarily understand as harms. For a straightforward example: if I break my ankle and this sets back my interest in an absence of pain, I have been harmed. Or instead: if someone spreads vicious rumours about me, and I am ostracised by my community, I have had my interest in my capacity to enjoy and maintain friendships set back, and am thereby harmed (even if I do not know that this has happened and do not know that I would otherwise have been better off). For a final example: if someone threatens me, and forces me to do things that I do not want to do, I have had my interest in freedom from coercion set back, and am thereby harmed. This definition of harm, which is broader than simply covering physical injuries, fits best with the wide feminist literature which wants to make sense of many varied harms to women. Having said all of this, a reader with an alternative conception of harm should be able to go along with the rest of this article, as the harms that arise here will, I think, be uncontroversial.

A worry one might have is that sometimes multiple interests are set back for multiple people. Sometimes we are asked to choose between two options which each cause harm, such that identifying that a harm has occurred is not the end of the story in terms of how to respond to it. This is something that we must struggle with, and would equally have to struggle with if we were concerned with competing wrongs instead of competing harms. I contend, though, that the seriousness of this problem is somewhat reduced in my account. First, identifying the harms done with precision puts us in a better position to respond to them. This might prompt us to analyse further potential harms similarly carefully to decide what actions to take, and this is only a good thing. Second, the question of whether a particular harm is decisive generally arises when a potentially costly response to that harm is proposed. For example, this problem arises when someone asks, ‘How do we balance harms from particular media against the harms of censorship?’ If we follow my account, a tension like this one is unlikely to arise, as I argue against legislative responses (such as censorship) to the harms identified here – more on this later.

3. Objectification

I offer the following definition of objectification:

Objectification occurs where either (1) or (2) of the following conditions is present:

- 1) *Reduction to body:* a) The objectifier treats the person as nothing/little over and above her body or body parts. b) The objectifier foregrounds the person's body or body parts.
- 2) *Reduction to appearance:* a) The objectifier treats the person as nothing/little over and above her looks/appearance to the senses. b) The objectifier foregrounds the person's looks/appearance to the senses.

I also take *instrumentality*¹⁷ – using someone as a means for your own ends – to be an extremely common feature of objectification, but not a necessary one.

I provide a fuller defence of this definition elsewhere.¹⁸ Here, I offer brief support for utilising this definition, and four examples of objectification, to guide our analysis.

For each criterion, I provided two senses of 'reduction', (a) and (b). Though they are separated out, they differ only in degree, rather than kind. Here I elucidate these senses of 'reduction'.

If I treat someone only as a body, then I have treated them as an object, but a definition that restricted objectification to cases where one was treated as *nothing* over one's body would be so narrow as to capture very few cases indeed, and feminists agree that objectification is not vanishingly rare. Imagine an interviewer who stares at a job candidate's legs for much of their interview, and makes comments like, 'You would be much prettier if you smiled'. The interviewer is clearly reducing the candidate to their appearance, but they are not treating the candidate as they would a statue. The interviewer still considers the candidate's behaviour and apparent mood to be somewhat relevant. The candidate's level of discomfort with this situation will probably be relevant to the interviewer, even if this is in a wholly unsympathetic way (and of lesser relevance than their appearance). To include such cases as objectification means construing 'reduction' slightly more broadly than the target being 'nothing' over and above their body or appearance.

The second way of understanding 'reduced to' is *foregrounding*. If I foreground some feature *y* of thing *x*, then when I think of *x* I will most readily think of *y*, or I will relate to *x* in terms of *y* (despite knowing that *x* in fact has other features). I borrow the term 'foregrounding' from Olberding, who explains how, when we interact with others, we 'foreground' some features of ourselves and 'background' others.¹⁹ Things can go wrong when someone attempts to present themselves in one way (*foregrounding* a feature), and their audience rejects this attempt, instead treating a different feature as most relevant (i.e. placing another feature in the foreground). This idea of 'foregrounding' is, I think, the same thing that Whiteley has in mind when describing objectification as involving 'making women's bodies salient'.²⁰

If I reduce a woman to her curves, when I think of that woman I first think of her shape, rather than her aggressive attitude or knitting skills. Foregrounding a person's body (and backgrounding other features) is what is going on when people say, 'That is objectifying, it reduces women to their bodies!'

Now consider the following examples:

- 1) *Casual Sex: Two enthusiastically consenting adults enjoy a one-night stand after meeting briefly in a club; the main reason they decided to spend the night together was the physical sexual appeal of the other person's body.*

2) *Model*: An advert for a new American Apparel store features a woman in underwear with her legs spread wide and her crotch in the centre of the picture, accompanied by the words 'now open'.²¹

3) *Squeeze One*: At a party, a man discreetly squeezes a stranger's bottom, to communicate that she looks sexy.

4) *Squeeze Two*: At a party, a man discreetly squeezes his girlfriend's bottom, to communicate that she looks sexy.

On most plausible definitions of objectification, these examples are objectifying. These examples resemble those offered by Bartky (an ogling interviewer, a catcall),²² LeMoncheck (a catcall, a selfish lover, workplace sexual harassment),²³ and Nussbaum (images in *Playboy* magazine, and multiple examples from erotic literature, including characters in D.H. Lawrence's work, who reduce one another to their body parts in shared pursuit of sexual pleasure).²⁴

These examples will – and should – count as objectification on my view.

In *Casual Sex*, the participants are reciprocally treating each other as little (though not nothing) above their body parts, and they are foregrounding one another's bodies, while backgrounding one another's other attributes. *Casual Sex* is relevantly similar to examples considered objectifying by other widely accepted accounts: for Kant, there are descriptions of sex that describe partners using each other for sexual pleasure, with no backdrop of a loving marriage.²⁵ Nussbaum gives the example of the characters Lady Constance Chatterley and Mellors, who are having sex for the pleasure of it and express fascination with each other's sexual body parts.²⁶

In *Model*, the subject's crotch and thighs are (quite literally) foregrounded, and she is treated primarily in terms of her body parts. Many online magazine articles on objectification use adverts like *Model* as their key examples,²⁷ and others have images of these adverts embedded in the article, implicitly intended as examples. For example, a *Marie Claire* article discussing the objectification of men includes an image of a poster advertising David Beckham's fragrance range, which is just a picture of him in his underwear.²⁸

In *Squeeze One*, the objectifier treats his target as little above her body, and in *Squeeze Two*, the same thing occurs, though this time in the context of a preexisting relationship. In each case the objectifier foregrounds their target's body and backgrounding other features. What is immediately obvious about *Squeeze One* and *Two* is that only one of the two appears harmful. In fact, of our four examples, only half of them look harmful. I will argue that those which are harmful, are harmful in distinct ways, and by virtue of something more than being simply objectifying.

First I want to back up the intuition that two of these examples are harmless, which generates the result that objectification is not *always*²⁹ harmful.

In the case of *Casual Sex*, since it is stipulated that the two *enjoyed* a consensual encounter, I mean this to imply that neither participant feels like³⁰ their interests have been set back. If we consider each interest above, it certainly seems possible to have casual sex that does not set back any of these. This is unlike in *Squeeze One*, for example, where the woman squeezed by the stranger had her interest in bodily integrity set back, as well as freedom from interference,³¹ and absence of suffering if the experience was distressing. (It may seem that in *Casual Sex* their interest in bodily integrity is still set back, since physical boundaries are crossed, but this cannot be so for *consensually* entering someone's personal space, as otherwise every time anyone touched another person we would have to call

it a harm. We should conceive of ‘bodily integrity’ as ‘*being the person in control of one’s own body and boundaries*’, which is not set back by consensual touching.) Since no welfare interests from the list of interests above³² have been set back, no harm is done here.

As with *Casual Sex*, if we assume that the touching in *Squeeze Two* is consensual (which I intended this case to be), then again it looks like none of the above interests are being set back. I expect there are many other similar candidates for objectifying acts in the context of similar sexual relationships (taking naked photos of one another, dirty talk, etc.). Again, this provides us with examples of harmless objectification, and these kinds of acts should come out as harmless on other accounts of harm too.

I expect that some might really want to conceive of these examples as *not* objectification, precisely because they intuitively see them as harmless. Given that many people see objectification as usually harmful, they may want to justify cases like *Casual Sex* as non-objectifying in order to preserve their intuition that *Casual Sex* is not harmful. I am showing here that this is unnecessary; in this article I provide an explanation for why people find so much objectification to be harmful, which preserves the intuitions both that acts like *Casual Sex* are harmless and that they are objectifying. Importantly, if we decided to exclude cases of casual sex where participants are only interested in one another’s bodies and their willingness, we would struggle to include cases like an ogling interviewer, where the objectifier is interested in another’s body and a couple of other things about them.

Similarly, given that objectification is not always harmful, one need not, and should not, treat the *extent* to which something is objectifying (or reductive) as a proxy measure for how harmful it is. A more reductive case can be less harmful (or even benign) compared to another less reductive case. A therapist who foregrounds her patient’s testimony, experiences, and breasts, could treat her patient less reductively than two strangers treat one another for casual sex, but the therapist will do more harm.

Finally, provided the examples are intuitive, a reader need not commit to my precise definition of objectification, in order to go along with the rest of the article. Nevertheless, before getting to the three harm-generating circumstances, I first offer one reason to use my definition of objectification.

My definition shares key elements with other prominent accounts of objectification, and is faithful to popular usage outside academia. ‘Reduction to body’ and ‘reduction to appearance’ are features of objectification that Langton offered to complement the seven features in Nussbaum’s influential account.³³ Nussbaum’s original account also frequently described objectification as ‘reduction to body’,³⁴ even though those terms were not built into her list of seven features (an omission also remarked upon by Langton).³⁵ Kant and MacKinnon describe people as reduced to bodies/body parts.³⁶ For Bartky, objectification involves taking a part – one’s body, or sexual body parts – to represent the whole; a person is ‘identified with’ her body.³⁷ Similarly, new work by Whiteley describes objectification in terms of reduction to body, and a practice of ‘making women’s bodies salient’.³⁸

Perhaps more importantly, reduction to body/appearance also tracks popular usage of objectification. In popular magazines and blogs we find objectification characterised as ‘reduc[ing] anyone to their body’,³⁹ ‘reducing people who are just trying to do their jobs to their genitals’,⁴⁰ and many more.⁴¹

At this point we have an idea of what objectification is, and can take for granted that it is *not always* harmful, so how can we explain the intuition that there is something troubling in many cases?

In the following three sections, I argue that there are three things which often occur with objectification, rendering it harmful (which it is not *in itself*). These will be neither merely *coincidental* harms, nor harms *merely because* they are objectifying. Instead, these harms are related to how objectification often happens in our society. The relevant features of our society are important contextual factors that make certain kinds of harms more likely or more potent. I will consider harms related to objectification which occur as a result of rape culture,⁴² as well as patriarchy, white supremacy, anti-blackness, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, fatphobia, and other widespread prejudices.

4. Harm-Making Factor #1: Consent Violation

Objectification is harmful when it is non-consensual, and since much objectification is non-consensual, much objectification is harmful. I do not think this will be particularly controversial. I do not mean to imply here that consent is an ‘independent value’; non-consensual *x* may look different to non-consensual *y*. Objectification being non-consensual will not be harmful in exactly the same ways as something else being non-consensual. We will look now at precisely what harms are involved, and how, with non-consensual objectification.

It should be intuitive that *Squeeze One* and *Two* differ, and this judgement lines up with harms specifically related to consent. In *Squeeze One*, her interest in ‘bodily integrity’ and ‘freedom from interference’ has been ‘set back’ (possibly along with other interests)⁴³ because someone has touched her body without consent. In *Squeeze Two*, no interests have been set back. It seems obvious, then, that *Squeeze One* is harmful in ways that *Squeeze Two* is not by virtue of consent violation.⁴⁴

It is important to note that this is an asymmetrical relationship: *all* non-consensual objectification will count as harmful in virtue of the agent’s interest in ‘freedom from interference’ being set back, this does not mean that *consensual* things are automatically *harmless* – there are still many other ways interests can be set back. Further, if we consider ‘objectification’ to mean something like ‘reducing someone to their body’, or ‘treating someone as little above their body’, it becomes obvious that when objectification is harmful, it is more likely to involve the setting back of bodily integrity, because ‘reduction to body’ will often involve doing something to or with the body. Setbacks to bodily integrity will be particularly important kinds of setbacks because of the implications for personal safety, as we will see.

To pre-empt an objection: it may seem that these explanations are a little weak, or coldly detached, considering how harmful being objectified non-consensually *feels*. An explanation of the harm you experience getting catcalled may not feel like it is quite captured by your ‘freedom from interference’ being set back. A stranger hassling you with requests for a charity donation, and a stranger hassling you with requests to see your breasts, do not feel the same. I suggest that this is because in all non-consensual sexual objectification (regardless of whether there is bodily contact) it is easy and reasonable to feel threatened with non-consensual bodily contact and other violence. When we are non-consensually reduced to our body or appearance (i.e. when we are objectified), rather than interfered with in some other way (as in the charity donation case), extra harms are particularly likely, given our patriarchal context. While catcalling in itself might not look like it causes harm beyond ‘freedom from interference’, given the patriarchal context we live in where women

and those read as women are extremely likely to experience sexual violence, and receiving certain kinds of comments (non-consensual verbal and non-touching objectification) justifiably increases their fear of physical violence,⁴⁵ what could just be a few words actually sets back our 'ability to engage normally in social intercourse', 'emotional stability', and 'absence of suffering'.

When one lives under constant threat of sexual violence, non-consensual sexual words and implications can do much more harm to us than non-consensual things which are not sexual. Having consent overridden may, in itself, only be harmful by virtue of one interest being set back ('a certain amount of freedom from interference'), but given the context of patriarchy, how much we value self-direction, and implications for our safety, many more interests are being set back when consent is overridden in relation to our bodies. A setback to bodily integrity will be a particularly important harm, given the importance of physical safety to our wellbeing; setbacks to freedom from interference (like catcalls) which also imply potential setbacks to bodily integrity should be treated seriously by virtue of this implication. To put this in real terms: if someone is willing to sexually harass you verbally, what assurance do you have that he will not sexually harass you physically? (The same is not true for interferences that do not involve sexual objectification as we are understanding it: we do not all know a girl who was assaulted after ignoring a request to sign a pledge for the environment, but people are regularly sexually and non-sexually assaulted for ignoring non-consensual sexual objectification in the forms of catcalls and advances.)

This appreciation of context helps explain why a 'setback to interest in non-interference and bodily integrity' does not fully capture how bad non-consensual sexual objectification can be, in contrast with other non-consensual things which do not involve reduction to body or appearance. Different kinds of setbacks to bodily integrity can have differing impacts on one's general wellbeing (and so may snowball into setbacks to other interests, like 'absence of suffering', to differing degrees). For example, a friend flicking your ear non-consensually may be annoying but feels completely different to a friend non-consensually flicking your nipple. This amounts to a big difference in the two harms. Because of our (rape) culture, more setbacks happen when the non-consensual thing is sexual.⁴⁶ When these kinds of interferences happen, we feel profoundly unsafe, and suffer in a way that we do not when being flicked on the ear. Comparatively, when we are subject to a setback to freedom from interference from someone of greater social power than ourselves, we are also likely to experience (entirely reasonable) feelings of unsafety. If you are a poor woman living in rented accommodation, and your landlord non-consensually flicks you on the ear while reminding you your rent is due, you might experience additional setbacks by virtue of the power imbalance rendering that interference more damaging to your feelings of personal safety than if a friend had flicked your ear. This is to illustrate that context is crucial in identifying harms. The harms of non-consensual sexual objectification (understood as reduction to body or appearance) can similarly be magnified by contextual factors and awareness of further risks, rendering people with less social power, who are more likely to have their bodily integrity violated, more vulnerable.

Though my discussion of consent violation so far has focused on the objectification of women (as well as those of us who are not women, but are usually treated as such), the broader message here is that contextual factors, particularly increased vulnerability to sexual violence, amplifies the harm of non-consensual sexual objectification. This is not unique to women. Since my project aims to explain harms related to objectification in a way that also explains why feminists have often seen objectification of women as almost

always harmful, this focus is helpful. It is worth reiterating, though, that my definition of objectification is not gendered (anyone can be reduced to their body or appearance), and I see that as a benefit of my account. We will see further implications of this later on.

So, objectification is seen as often harmful because objectification is often *non-consensual*, and non-consensual sexual objectification yields particular kinds of harms because of its sexual component and involvement of the body. The intuition that much or all objectification is harmful can be made sense of by the fact that so much objectification is non-consensual,⁴⁷ and consent violation always sets back some interests, and often sets back many.

5. Harm-Making Factor #2: Context-Creeping

The second kind of harm I describe explains the popular condemnation of objectification in examples like *Model*. Recall the *Model* example:

An advert for a new American Apparel store features a woman in underwear with her legs spread wide and her crotch in the centre of the picture, accompanied by the words ‘now open’.

We can assume the model consented to be in the picture, and to it being used to advertise clothing. So at first glance the consent discussion cannot help us establish what is harmful here. There are, however, identifiable harms done, and these harms are related to the objectification.

It seems plausible that adverts like the *Model* example contribute to, and help sustain, an environment where non-consensual sexual objectification and sexual assault are widespread and treated as permissible (or at least not warranting serious punishment).

When people claim ‘that poster objectifies women’, an element of that claim is that it contributes to many women’s objectification. The idea that the poster makes it the case that other women (not just the one pictured) are objectified by other men in the world. So the existence of posters that demonstrate the objectification of a particular woman communicate that that is acceptable behaviour, and offer an example of how to treat women. This kind of claim can be explained using speech act theory⁴⁸ or social ontology,⁴⁹ but all we need for our purposes is to demonstrate the plausibility of the claim that adverts and other media influence people. This is so intuitive (if adverts did not influence people, then most companies would be wasting a lot of time and money) that we do not have studies demonstrating this general a claim, though there are multitudinous examples of studies arguing that particular kinds of adverts are more effective at influencing people in particular ways, which implicitly means that adverts do, in general, influence people.⁵⁰ There is also evidence that objectifying adverts and television shows in particular foster pernicious sexist beliefs,⁵¹ and this is supported by popular intuitions (for example, 70,000 people signed a petition criticising an advert for damaging women’s body image).⁵²

But why is ‘communicating that objectification is acceptable’ harmful (to people other than the person in the picture) if not all objectification is harmful? Causing more objectification will only be a problem if the *kind* of objectification being caused is, for the most part, harmful. This is precisely the claim being made: *that the kind of objectification being caused by these posters is harmful*. What might seem puzzling is that if the poster leads by

example, why would an example of consensual objectification encourage non-consensual objectification? There are two reasons that this could happen. First, while the woman who posed for the image might consent to be objectified, the image may represent a non-consenting woman. For example, a woman might consent to be pictured tied up and pulling a frightened expression, in which case the picture represents a non-consenting woman, while the model herself was consenting. The audience will see the non-consenting woman, so that is the example they learn from. I am less interested in this first kind of reason here. Second, I propose that there is a phenomenon whereby many (albeit consensual) images of objectification in various contexts contribute to many cases of non-consensual objectification⁵³ because of their insidious spread through and embedding in non-sexual contexts.

I term this phenomenon ‘context-creeping objectification’.

What these adverts do is put sexually objectifying content *outside a sexual context*. Sexual objectification is entirely appropriate, if not unavoidable, in the context of sex acts. Selling clothes is not (ordinarily) a sex act. When we bring sexual objectification into the process of selling clothes, we communicate that it is appropriate to treat women as sex objects in the context of selling clothes, that is, *outside* a consensual sexual relationship or encounter. If this happens in all kinds of advertising, all genres of television shows, magazines, and literature, then, I suggest, this contributes to many of the *non-consensual* sexual objectifications that occur. For example, it is much easier for a manager to stare at a job applicant’s breasts during an interview if there are countless uncriticised examples of reducing women to body parts in other non-sexual contexts. Why might this happen? The context-creeping of objectification in adverts, comedy shows, etc. contributes to a cluster of rape myths,⁵⁴ which can be represented by one in particular: that women are always up for sex. For ease I am treating that specific rape myth as representative of a group of rape myths, all of which only make sense with the background assumption that women are always up for sex and/or they are up for sex even when they are not explicitly expressing the desire to have sex, including:

- (1) Women mean yes when they say no;
- (2) Women secretly want to be raped;
- (3) Women doing certain things (smiling, accepting a drink, dressing a particular way) indicates willingness to have sex.⁵⁵

These examples of objectification outside sexual contexts give the impression, through their existing in great number across a great many contexts, that women are happy to be reduced to their body or appearance regularly and across many contexts. This is not true: women only want to be sexually objectified some of the time. What ends up happening is that women and those read as women are objectified⁵⁶ regularly and in many contexts *when they do not want it*. It does come back to consent, then: sexual objectification in a non-sexual context makes *non-consensual* objectification more likely, and is harmful in that way.⁵⁷

I propose the concept of ‘context-creeping’ as pointing to a particular pattern of objectification which covers treating women like sex objects in many contexts, where harm is generated down the line as women and those read as women are treated as always available for objectification.

I want to emphasise that this is not a prudish ‘keep sex behind closed doors and out of sight’ position; this is a claim that there is something wrong with treating women as appropriate targets of sexual objectification *all the time* rather than *only at the times when they indicate they want it*. On this view, a poster in a fetish club advertising a sex party using objectifying images might be totally fine, but a similar-looking poster on a bus advertising a clothing company is not, because the former does not contribute to the belief that women generally appreciate sexual objectification *outside a sexual context*.⁵⁸

Is there any empirical support for this phenomenon? Yes. There are a few studies suggesting rape myth acceptance is affected by objectifying adverts.⁵⁹ There is also evidence that rape myth acceptance affects likelihood of sexual assault which counts – perhaps trivially – as non-consensual objectification.⁶⁰ Though more research on the effects of different media is needed, there is (a) evidence that there is plenty of objectification in all media and (b) evidence that rape myths are extremely widespread.⁶¹ I am proposing context-creeping objectification as a link between, and a plausible explanation of, the existing evidence.

6. Harm-Making Factor #3: Oppression

Sometimes when objectification happens, it is not just a case of reducing the person to body parts; sometimes, the particular language used or ways in which body parts are emphasised carry other meanings.

A fat person can be reduced to their weight, and while doing this, the objectifier brings in stereotyped associations with greed. A Japanese woman can be reduced to her skin colour, and while doing this, the objectifier brings in stereotyped associations with submissiveness. These are stereotypes that draw on and reinforce oppression.

I do not suggest that this is a particular kind or sub-category of objectification, and I do not think different kinds of oppression are reducible to one analytic (what this means will become clear shortly). Instead, I am claiming that if objectification is done in a racist or fatphobic way, it is harmful by virtue of being racist or fatphobic. I do not think the objectification framework needs to add anything to these kinds of harms. To be clear, when objectification is fatphobic, it is harmful by virtue of enacting fatphobia, not by virtue of objectification.

That might sound like a strange thing to emphasise, but it is responding to a trend in the literature of seeing racist objectification (as a common example in anti-pornography literature)⁶² as an especially potent, bad, kind of objectification. Jennifer Nash explains how some feminists have described race as a *compounding* factor; that objectification of women is bad, and that racialised objectification is *even worse*.⁶³ Along with Nash, I do not think this is a good move, not just because I do not think objectification itself is bad, but also because Nash is right in arguing that different oppressions do not straightforwardly stack along the same axis; misogynoir⁶⁴ is not just misogyny amplified, it is a distinct kind of oppression. This point targets the kind of account where the wrongness of objectification has already been established, and racism (of *any* kind) is seen as an exacerbation of the central issue: sexism. Such accounts treat different kinds of racisms as interchangeable, and as straightforwardly translatable onto the structures of sexism. Sexism does not have special status on my account: when objectification is sexist, it is harmful by virtue of enacting sexism, not by virtue of objectification.⁶⁵ (Similarly, when objectification is

racist, it is harmful by virtue of enacting racism. It may be that objectification is a particularly convenient and effective means of doing, say, fatphobia, but that does not mean objectification is the first place to look for the harms in fatphobic objectification.) This will mean, among other things, that if someone wants to claim that all pornography is sexist, then they have to show that this is the case by virtue of something other than objectification – more on these issues in a moment.

Though an account like mine does not treat objectification as bad (or oppressive, or sexist) in itself, it is still important to ensure that in explaining *how* and *when* harm is done around objectification, I do not end up treating different kinds of oppressions as interchangeable in attempting to enumerate ways in which objectifying things can harm. Fatphobia, transphobia, ableism, sexism, anti-blackness, Islamophobia will all function in different ways, so we cannot say, ‘Objectification is bad when it is oppressive in *x* way’, where ‘*x*’ tries to cover multiple kinds of oppression.

Instead, I suggest that if an example of objectification involves transphobia, our starting point needs to be looking at transphobia to see how that harm is working; starting with objectification will not do the work. For example, if there is anti-blackness in an objectifying deodorant advert, we need to talk about anti-blackness. Perhaps then we want to talk about how anti-blackness is done in media like this, or the ways anti-blackness can be expressed using objectification, but the point is that objectification as a concept cannot be the explanation for all oppressive and offensive media, speech, etc. which is objectifying. We cannot expect to use the same tools to explain (a) why a fatphobic beer advert is harmful and (b) why an Islamophobic catcall is harmful, just because they both use objectification as a medium. This is what I mean in saying that different kinds of oppression are not reducible to one analytic.

However, I do think the prevalence of various oppressions in examples of objectification is relevant to our analysis here, insofar as this prevalence helps explain why objectification is treated as usually harmful. Since so much objectification is also racist, much objectification involves harm. The mistake is to see the harm as a feature of the objectification rather than a feature of the racism (a mistake that helps white anti-objectification feminists escape their own potential complicity in racism, by seeing the racism as part of something they do not participate in and also suffer from: objectification).

I will not attempt to elucidate all of the ways in which sexism, racism, ableism, etc. are harmful; that does not seem necessary for our purposes here as it should be uncontroversial that they *are* harmful. So we now have the third way in which objectifying things can be harmful: when they draw on, reinforce, or enact oppression – though remember, this oppression is not best explained via objectification.

It might be contested that this third harm-making factor I offer leaves a window for the anti-objectification feminists to say ‘Aha, if any *oppressive* objectification is harmful, then any *sexist* objectification is harmful, and all objectification *is* sexist, so all objectification is harmful!’ To which we can respond: all objectification is *not* sexist. If we revisit our definition and examples, this is clear. *Casual Sex* is clearly not sexist (notice I did not gender the participants; imagine they are both cis men if that helps make this clear). Further, even if most objectification is sexist, it is not sexist by virtue of being objectifying. I leave the anti-objectification feminist the task of articulating precisely what is sexist about *all* objectification, and I would be very surprised if there were a justification of *Casual Sex* being sexist, which met feminist commitments (i.e. did not collapse into an anti-sex or slut-shaming attitude rooted in misogyny). I am sure anti-objectification feminists can find

plenty of examples of media that are sexist and objectifying, and that use the objectification as a medium for communicating sexism, but this is entirely consistent with all I say here.⁶⁶ If it is the case that many examples of objectification are sexist (for example, objectifying comments implying that women are less intelligent), then this also helps explain the popular intuition that most objectification is harmful, because so much of it is sexist. The point I have made here is that the harm in objectifying and sexist media will lie in the *sexism* rather than the *objectification* (or otherwise in *consent violation*, or through doing *context-creeping*). It would be too large a project to attempt to define sexism here, but there is nothing built into our definition of objectification – nothing about reduction to body or appearance – that is automatically sexist. We can absolutely have examples of sexual objectification, both harmless (like *Casual Sex*) and harmful (like *Squeeze One* sexual assault), that can be non-sexist. A definition of objectification which required that it always be sexist would be implausibly narrow, and would either rule out or mischaracterise much objectification of men (and so deviate from popular usage).⁶⁷

7. Implications

In this article, I began by demonstrating that objectification is not always harmful. Then I explained the intuition that much objectification is harmful, through articulating three factors which render objectifying things harmful. First, objectifying things do harm when they violate consent; consent violation is always harmful, but it is particularly harmful when a thing is *sexual*, and given our rape culture, non-consensual sexual objectification is especially harmful.

I then proposed a concept: context-creeping objectification. This second harm-generating factor captures a phenomenon whereby there are a great many examples of objectification *outside* sexual contexts, giving the impression that women are happy to be sexually objectified any time and any place, rather than only in particular circumstances when they consent to it. This contributes to a particular rape myth, underpinning other rape myths: that women are always up for sex. This links back to consent, as the prevalence of this rape myth contributes to non-consensual objectification such as catcalling, sexual harassment, and sexual violence.

I then suggested that another reason why people see objectification as being harmful is that much objectification is also oppressive: since so much objectification in the media is also racist, many examples of objectification involve harm. I warned against seeing objectification which draws on, reinforces, or enacts oppression as a sub-category of objectification. Rather, we should attend to how different kinds of oppression take different shapes.

What should we do with this analysis? I propose that in future, we can use concepts like context-creeping objectification to evaluate harms done by media such as adverts, blockbuster movies, and sitcoms, and to examine the role of rape myths in these media. However, I very deliberately do not make any policy recommendations to combat the harms identified in this article. As soon as some organisation is tasked with legislating which images are objectifying and which are not, the likelihood is that the results would be racist, transphobic, and homophobic. Non-sexual images of black people and queer people are often mis-read as sexual. When social media sites and platforms attempt to filter sexual content, this is exactly what happens, and fat black people and black trans people are

particularly likely to have their pictures removed, while similar images of slim, white, cis people are not.⁶⁸ Further, there might be competing reasons why some objectifying imagery is desirable in ordinarily non-sexual contexts, such as particular kinds of protests, which I do not explore here. I do not claim that each and every objectifying image outside a sexual context contributes to context-creeping objectification. On the contrary, I claim that the way images interact with dominant norms and pernicious myths generates the harm; not all images will interact with those norms in this way.

A key implication of the arguments I have developed, that I want to emphasise, is this: the conclusion that objectification is harmful in these ways gives us reason to question the current centrality of pornography to discussions of objectification. The claims that particular kinds of sexual media are harmful *by virtue of* objectification are undermined by the analysis in this article. The task for anyone opposing a particular kind of media is to show that that kind of media is *any worse* than other media (in respect of the three dimensions I have outlined in this article). It is certainly not obvious to me that this would be the case for pornography.

I warn that we should be wary of endeavours to target particular kinds of media, while neglecting all others. The centrality of pornography to the objectification debates cannot, I claim, be explained by pornography being more harmful than other media. This article begins to show why. I draw particular attention to the fact that pornography will be *less* able than (ostensibly) non-sexual media to do one of the harms identified here: context-creeping objectification. Instead, the centrality of pornography to objectification literature and discourses might be explained by an unjust stigmatisation of sex workers, which is rooted in misogynistic ideologies of which women are ‘good’ and which are ‘bad’.⁶⁹ We need to be wary of ways in which particular media are singled out, and consider when this academic focus may itself be influenced by and reinforce oppression and stigmatisation.

Rosa Vince, Department of Philosophy, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK.
r8vince@gmail.com

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NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Langton, "Sexual Solipsism"; Papadaki, "What is Objectification?"; Papadaki, "Treating Pornography"; Saul, "On Treating Things."
- 2 See, for example, Nussbaum, "Objectification"; Eaton, "(Female) Nude." Notable exceptions to this trend are thinkers like Bartky and Beauvoir who write on *self*-objectification: Bartky, "Narcissism"; Beauvoir, *Second Sex*.
- 3 In this article I use 'objectification' and 'sexual objectification' interchangeably. I am not discussing non-sexual objectification.
- 4 Most notably: Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Langton, "Speech Acts"; Langton, "Autonomy-Denial"; and MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*; and the authors who are influenced by the above writers, as well as by Nussbaum "Objectification."
- 5 Nussbaum, "Objectification," 290.
- 6 Eaton, "Sensible Antiporn Feminism"; Jenkins, "What Women Are For"; Langton, "Speaker's Freedom"; Dworkin and MacKinnon, *Pornography and Civil Rights*.
- 7 MacKinnon, "Not a Moral Issue (1983)."
- 8 MacKinnon, "Francis Biddle's Sister."
- 9 *Ibid.*, 175.
- 10 MacKinnon, "On Sex and Violence," 91.
- 11 Willis, "Feminism Moralism and Pornography."
- 12 Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 163.
- 13 A focus on wrongs could also have this particular benefit, though such a focus would lack the main justification articulated above. Additionally, if one wanted to take on the project of analysing wrongs associated with objectification, an existing analysis of the harms would be extremely useful. I am grateful to an Associate Editor of the journal for this suggestion.
- 14 I mean this to refer to 'bodily integrity' in the sense of *autonomy* over one's physical boundaries.
- 15 This is a modified version of Feinberg's account; Feinberg, *Harm to Others*, 34.
- 16 There are some well-known objections to Feinberg's account, and other 'counterfactual' and Millian accounts. For a brief overview of these and some potential solutions, see Klocksiem, "Defense."
- 17 Nussbaum, "Objectification," 257.
- 18 Vince, "Objectification as Reduction."
- 19 Olberding, "Subclinical Bias."
- 20 Whiteley, "Harmful Salience Perspectives," 200.
- 21 *Huffington Post*, "American Apparel." Since writing this article, I discovered an article by Paula Keller that uses this same example to illustrate objectification; this is a coincidence. I should also note that though Keller's account of objectification differs from mine in extension, I do not think there is much conflict between our views; the 'context-creeping' objectification I outline below could be understood as explaining the same phenomenon Keller is explaining. Keller, "Objectified Women."
- 22 Bartky, "On Psychological Oppression," 26–27.
- 23 LeMoncheck, *Dehumanizing Women*, 7–10.
- 24 Nussbaum, "Objectification," 252–4, 274–5.
- 25 Kant, "Duties to the Body."
- 26 Nussbaum, "Objectification."
- 27 McNamara, "This Video Shows"; Heldman, "Sexual Objectification"; Slade, "Queer Woman Looking"; Fabello, "Can Women Self-Objectify?"; Utt, "3 Ways"; Saxena, "I Tried Wearing."
- 28 Buchanan, "Objectify Men?"
- 29 Though I do not pursue this here, this implies that objectification is not *necessarily* harmful, since for objectification to be *necessarily* harmful, it must be *always* harmful across all possible worlds. 'All worlds' *includes* our world, so if objectification is *not always* harmful in our world, then it is *not always* harmful across *all* possible worlds, and therefore *not necessarily harmful*.
- 30 This is subjective at this stage because I do not want to be accused of jumping the gun. Given that it is at least possible to be harmed without realising, I do not want to declare these two have not been harmed until we

examine possible harms (i.e. our list of interests which can be set back), so we can be sure no harms have flown in under the intuitive radar. This is a point of my approach: rather than making claims about when objectification is bad/wrong/harmful without defining these, I do low-level, fine-grained analysis to clarify whether harm has been done and how.

- 31 I see the distinction between these two as: a setback to freedom from interference covers things which violate our boundaries, whereas a setback to bodily integrity covers specifically things which violate bodily boundaries. The former is related to, but not identical with, coercion.
- 32 I suspect we would be unlikely to find an interest being set back in this case even if the list of interests were expanded to include other plausible welfare interests.
- 33 Langton, "Autonomy-Denial," 228–9; Nussbaum, "Objectification."
- 34 Nussbaum, "Objectification," 254, 264, 272, 274, 275.
- 35 Langton, "Autonomy-Denial," 228.
- 36 Kant, "Duties to the Body," 155–62; MacKinnon, "Francis Biddle's Sister," 175.
- 37 Bartky, "On Psychological Oppression," 23, 26–7.
- 38 Whiteley, "Harmful Salience Perspectives," 200.
- 39 Buchanan, "Objectify Men?"
- 40 Reid, "Objectifying Men's Crotches."
- 41 Talkspace, "Street Harassment"; Williams, "Hear Me Phwoar"; Slade, "Queer Woman Looking"; Yakimovich, "Sexual Objectification"; Fitzgerald, "Women Tell Us"; Alvarez, "Sofia Vergara"; Yang *et al.*, "Ideal Body Types."
- 42 By rape culture, I mean an environment where rape and sexual violence are common and not usually taken seriously. In such a culture, dominant myths and norms treat most cases of sexual violence as acceptable, trivial, or the fault of the victim. For a fuller description, see, for example, Crewe and Ichikawa, "Rape Culture and Epistemology."
- 43 Given the world we live in (where women and those read as women are often touched non-consensually, and where this abuse is largely unpunished), when a woman is touched without her consent her suffering can go beyond just the setting back of her bodily integrity. More on this shortly.
- 44 A competing explanation for the difference between *Squeeze One* and *Two* could be Nussbaum's *mutuality*, *symmetry*, and *intimacy*. However, Marino offers convincing reasons to prefer *consent* as the difference-maker. Crucially, 'mutuality, symmetry, and intimacy' do not track *harm* in the way that consent violation does (i.e. something can be *symmetrical* and be harmful, or, for example, my relationship with my doctor is not *intimate*, at least in Nussbaum's sense of the term, but it is harmless). Nussbaum, "Objectification"; Marino, "Ethics."
- 45 Fairchild and Rudman, "Everyday Stranger Harassment."
- 46 Rape culture may not be the *only* reason these things are more harmful; I only claim that it is *a* reason.
- 47 See Fairchild and Rudman, "Everyday Stranger Harassment," for a collection of studies demonstrating how common harassment like catcalling is, and *Everyone's Invited*.
- 48 Langton, "Speech Acts"; McGlynn, "Propaganda." Stanley's discussions of propaganda could also be especially useful here: Stanley, "How Propaganda Works."
- 49 Jenkins, "What Women Are For."
- 50 For example, Alpert *et al.*, "Purchase Occasion Influence."
- 51 Suarez and Gadalla, "Stop Blaming the Victim"; Edwards *et al.*, "Rape Myths"; Lanis and Covell, "Images."
- 52 Baring, "Petition."
- 53 For recent evidence of how widespread sexual harassment, abuse, and assault are, see the website *Everyone's Invited*, which contains 54,046 testimonies from students at school and university, submitted between 8th March and 15th August 2021 (after which the site ceased updating the submission count).
- 54 There might also be a connection to other misogynistic myths which are not *rape* myths, like 'women are obsessed with their appearance', but I do not explore that here.
- 55 See Edwards *et al.*, "Rape Myths"; Sleath and Bull, "Brief Report"; and McMahan and Farmer, "Updated Measure," for the prevalence of these kinds of myths.
- 56 I am thinking here of cases like *Squeeze One*, catcalling, and staring, which are done regularly to women and those read as women in day-to-day life.
- 57 It is additionally harmful in adding to widespread fear of non-consensual sexual attention and unfair treatment of women.
- 58 There is much more that could be said about how context can change meanings and effects, that I do not explore here. I think what I propose here is complemented by what Jennifer Saul argues in "Pornography, Speech Acts and Context."

- 59 Suarez and Gadalla, “Stop Blaming the Victim”; Edwards *et al.*, “Rape Myths”; Lanis and Covell, “Images.”
- 60 Lackie and de Man, “Correlates of Sexual Aggression.”
- 61 Sleath and Bull, “Rape Myth Acceptance”; Suarez and Gadalla, “Stop Blaming the Victim”; McMahon, “Rape Myth Beliefs”; Edwards *et al.*, “Rape Myths.”
- 62 Dworkin, “Why Pornography Matters,” 153; MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 199–200.
- 63 Nash, “Strange Bedfellows.”
- 64 Bailey, “On Misogynoir.”
- 65 Though it might of course be harmful by virtue of either of the first two harm-generating factors, as *any* objectification might be.
- 66 Some may think all objectification is sexist because they think reducing someone to their body is sexist. Reduction to body is not itself sexist, as our harmless examples show, but, given rape culture, women and those read as women disproportionately experience harmful reduction to body (in the form of non-consensual sexual objectification).
- 67 Men’s objectification is taken seriously in popular media; for example, Buchanan, “Objectify Men?”; Reid, “Objectifying Men’s Crotches”; Williams, “Hear Me Phwoar”; Yakimovich, “Sexual Objectification.”
- 68 Dickson, “Why Instagram Rejected.”
- 69 Willis, “Feminism Moralism.”

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