

Exposure to Income Inequality on Social Media and Female Self-Objectification: The Mediating Role of Perceived Competitiveness

Feng Yang^{*}, Haiyan Zhang, Zhiyi Lin, Tianning Zhang, Xiaotong Liu

Department of Teacher Education, Taishan University, Tai'an, China

Email address:

sdpnyangfeng@hotmail.com (Feng Yang), 542553886@qq.com (Haiyan Zhang), Linzhiyi072@163.com (Zhiyi Lin),

sdzhangtianing@163.com (Tianning Zhang), 19863332396@163.com (Xiaotong Liu)

^{*}Corresponding author

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Abstract: Female self-objectification refers to a phenomenon that women tend to overemphasize the importance of physical appearance in their self-worth. An increasing body of research suggests that engaging in appearance-relevant activities on social media platforms will contribute to the self-objectification of women (e.g., viewing selfies). From an evolutionary psychology perspective, attractive appearance will help women get more advantages in social competition. And recent research has demonstrated income inequality has a close connection with perceived competition and perceived competition had a close connection with female-self-objectification, thus indicating the possible connection between income inequality and female self-objectification. However, so far, little research has been conducted to examine the relationship between income inequality and female self-objectification. Given that, by using an online questionnaire survey, with 120 young female adults as participants, the present research firstly examined the relationship between income inequality exposure on social media and female self-objectification, and the possibly mediating role of perceived competition. The results showed that income inequality exposure on social media did not have a direct prediction on female self-objectification, but income inequality exposure has an indirect effect on female self-objectification via the mediating role of perceived competition. That is, income inequality exposure was significantly and positively related to perceived competition, $\beta = 0.30, p < 0.001$, and perceived competition was further related to female self-objectification, $\beta = 0.49, p < 0.001$. The present research firstly examined the relationship between income inequality exposure and female self-objectification, which enrich the understanding of how income inequality perception on the psychological level affected the self-concept of women.

Keywords: Income Inequality, Social Media, Feminism, Self-Objectification, Media Psychology

1. Introduction

So far, the objectification theory has been proposed over two decades, which aims to provide a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon that the whole Western society guides women to focus more on physical appearance rather than body function and internal attributes [1]. In a society with prevalent objectifying cues, women may internalize societal standards to evaluate their bodies from a bystander, which is called the self-objectification of women. A growing body of research suggests that accessing appearance-relevant content on social

media will contribute to the objectification tendency of women, such as engaging in fitness activities orientated to improving body appearance, or exposure to images containing objectifying symbols [2, 3].

It should be pointed out that, the existing research mainly explores some individual-level factors that may exacerbate the self-objectification tendency of women, little attention has been paid to explore possibly inducing factors on a broader societal level. Past researchers have pointed out that, from an evolutionary psychology perspective, attractive appearance actually is helpful for women's social competition and upward

social class mobility [4]. Consistent with this proposition, recent empirical research also demonstrates that women in high-competitive context tend to display higher self-objectification tendency than those in low-competitive context [5]. Additionally, a growing body of research shows that high income inequality increases individuals' concerns for their social status, thus constructing the competitive climate in the society [4, 5]. Notably, whereas the existing research indicates income inequality in the society should contribute to the self-objectification via the perceived social competitiveness, no research has been conducted to directly test this possibility. To fill this gap, the present study aims to firstly examine the relationship between income inequality exposure and female self-objectification, and the mediating role of perceived competition between them.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Objectification Theory

Approximately twenty years ago, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) proposed the objectification theory [1]. The theory aims to explain the phenomenon prevalent in Western society — the whole society empowers women to believe that their self-worth is rooted in their physical appearance, rather than body function or internal attributes. Under this social atmosphere, women may pay excessive attention to their appearance, even holds that attractive appearance plays a primary role in their self-worth. If women live in a society with prevalent objectifying experiences, they will chronically internalize cultural-societal beauty standards and strives to achieve the so-called perfect body shape. This process has been called the self-objectification of women [6]. It should be pointed out, although the objectification theory originates from the Western society, the self-objectification of women has been widely observed across the world. Additionally, while the self-objectification tendency exists for both women and men, past research consistently reveals that there is more significant self-objectification tendency for women than for men.

Past research reveals that women with the self-objectification tendency will perceive body shame and body dissatisfaction due to not achieving the so-called ideal bodies [7, 8]. Moreover, this subjective experience will further lead to a series of negative physical and psychological consequences, including low appearance esteem, depression, eating disorder, and sexual dysfunction [9]. Given that, researchers pay much attention to clarifying possible factors that may contribute to the self-objectification of women. Prior work in the field of social media demonstrates that there is a significant connection between social media use and the self-objectification of women [10]. The following research further clarifies that specific activities on social media platforms, rather than social media use intensity on the general level, will exacerbate the self-objectification tendency of women. For example, with 100 female adolescents aged 13 to 18 as participants, researchers used the questionnaire survey

to examine the relationship between smartphone use and body esteem [11]. The results showed that after controlling for the effect of social media use, smartphone use could not significantly predict the body esteem of female adolescents. Further analyses showed that both browsing websites and watching TV shows had a significantly negative correlation with body esteem, but online shopping, photography, texting, or emailing did not have a significant prediction on body esteem. In addition, posting selfies on social media platforms or exposure to selfies shared by others has been found to be related to be the self-objectification of women [12].

In addition to specific activities on the individual level, recent research indicates that competitive contexts will enable women to display the self-objectification tendency. For instance, with a large sample ($n = 1416$), researchers found that competitive contexts resulted in self-objectification among women who believe sex is power, and the result-pattern remained consistent among correlational studies, a quasi-experiment, and completely controlled experiments [4]. This result reminds us that when women perceive high social competitiveness, they may adopt the self-enhancement strategy based on their physical appearance in order to increase the probability of winning in social competition. Given that, it is necessary for researchers to pay more attention to possible factors of increasing competitive perception on a broader level, because high competition perception has been evidenced to be a risk factor of inducing the self-objectification of women.

2.2. Income Inequality and Perceived Competitiveness

In the past four decades, despite the fact that the average income per capita across the world has been found to significantly grow, we must realize that the vast majority of the population around the world benefits less from the economic growth [13]. Actually, the issue of income inequality is becoming more and more prominent in modern society. Income inequality can be defined as the asymmetric distribution of wealth or income in a given society [14]. On the societal level, income inequality often is represented by the GINI coefficient (that measures the extent to which resources deviate from a perfectly equal distribution) or the 80/20 ratio (that measures the income distribution ratio between the top 20% and the bottom 20%). The former reflects to what extent the income distribution deviates from a perfectly equal distribution in a society, and the latter reflects the ratio between the top income 20% and the bottom income 20% in a society. The income inequality indexed by the GINI coefficient or 80/20 ratio can also be called objective income inequality.

In those societies with higher income inequality, researchers observe a larger number of social problems. For example, individuals living in the society with high income inequality reported lower life satisfaction and subjective well-being, and the whole society showed less social cohesion [15]. On the individual level, for individuals in the society with high income inequality, they perceived a distant psychological distance with others and showed lower interpersonal trust [16]. Recently, researchers propose a

concept construct similar to but different from objective income inequality — perceived income inequality. Perceived income inequality often is defined as an individual's perception about how wealth and resources are distributed between the members of a society [17]. Compared to objective income inequality, subjective income inequality has been shown to have greater impacts on people's lives and social cohesion. For example, past research reveals that high-perceived inequality leads to adopting a more individualistic self-concept, showing less wills to cooperation, and displaying increased perceptions of threat and negative attitudes towards minority groups [18]. Given the above considerations, the income inequality in the present research was conceptualized as perceived income inequality.

Researchers have pointed out that, income inequality will elevate the importance of social status in a society [19]. In other words, the more unequal a society is, the more important social status of an individual will be. Specifically, high income inequality of a society means that higher social position will be associated with more positive consequences and lower social position will be associated with more negative consequences. Consequently, it is not surprising that higher income inequality triggers greater status competition, and people are commonly concerned about their position on the economic ladder. Supporting the above reasoning, by creating a fictional society, researchers found that when the wealth gap between the rich and the poor was large, participants expected others to be independent of them, focus more on their own goals rather than group goals, and display more competition than cooperation [20]. In simple words, individuals living in a high-income inequality society were more likely to believe that individuals in the society would adopt the individualism to guide their cognition and behaviors. Similarly, in another research, researchers conducted a cross-sectional study and a lab study to examine the effect of perceived income inequality and status anxiety and the underlying mechanism [21]. The results of two studies consistently showed that higher perceived income inequality led to higher status anxiety and perceived competition played a mediating role between them, thus providing compelling support for the prediction of income inequality exposure on perceived competitiveness.

2.3. Income Inequality Exposure on Social Media, Perceived Competitiveness and Female Self-Objectification

As we have discussed in previous section, the existing research in the field of social media mainly focus on how specific appearance-relevant activities contribute to the self-objectification of women, such as viewing fitness posts highlighting appearance benefits. According to the propositions of social comparison theory, comparing the self with inferior others is an effective way to elevate the self-esteem of the individual [22]. As a result, individuals tend to share the good side of the lives, rather than the bad side on social media platforms. Besides beautiful selfies, individuals may also share a romantic candle dinner, an exciting holiday travel and so on. More importantly, due to the widening gap between rich and poor in modern society, individuals often

share some things that can indicate their social status, like a latest cell phone, a brand-name bag, a luxurious meal, or a fancy watch. On social media, accessing such content may awaken individuals' perception of income inequality. And income inequality perception, as we have documented, will further induce competitive perception.

In the high-competitive context, to compete for valuable social resources, competence-relevant traits are expected to be valued for both men and women. Ironically, given that women are stereotyped as more positive on the warmth dimension, competition often led women to value their physical features over their inner qualities (including competence traits), a phenomenon known as self-objectification [23]. From an evolutionary perspective, enhancing the self via beautiful appearance is considered to an effective strategy of self-enhancement for women in social competition. For example, recent research concerning women's intrasexual competition and self-objectification found that intrasexual competition had a significant prediction on the self-objectification of women (e.g., more preference for appearance-relevant products) [5]. Following the above reasoning, we proposed that exposure to income inequality on social media would have a negative prediction on female self-objectification via the mediating role of perceived competition. This proposition can be represented by two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Income equality exposure on social media would be significantly and positively related to the self-objectification of women.

Hypothesis 2: Perceived competitiveness played a mediating role between Income equality exposure on social media and female self-objectification.

2.4. The Current Research

It should be noted that, although the existing work in the field of income inequality and female objectification indicates the feasibility of our proposition, there is little research providing empirical support. To fill this gap, the present research will firstly examine the relationship between income inequality exposure on social media and the self-objectification of women, and the underlying mechanism. To this end, with young female adults in China-Mainland as participants, we will conduct an online survey, in which we will successively ask participants to report their exposure frequency of income inequality on social media, perceived competitiveness, self-objectification, and some demographic information. To our knowledge, the present research is the first to examine the relationship between inequality exposure on social media and the self-objectification of women, which will enrich our understanding of how income inequality on the societal level affect individuals' self-concept.

3. Method and Results

3.1. Participants

The participants were 120 young female adults, whose age ranged from 19.42 to 43.47. The averaged BMI was 21.53,

with a range from 14.17 to 28.12. Of them, 22 participants reported that they lived in the country and 98 participants reported that they lived in the city. All participants were Han nationality. For their participation, they can receive 2 RMB.

3.2. Measures

The measure of income inequality exposure on social media. So far, no available scale can be used to assess the exposure frequency of income inequality cues on social media. Given that, inspired by previous research [24], we generated seven activities that may induce income inequality perception. These items include: 1) showing a lot of money, 2) taking photos with a luxury car or yacht, 3) dining or staying at a luxury hotel/villa, 4) showing brand-name cosmetics, 5) showing designer clothes, shoes or bags, 6) showing valuable electronics or watches, and 7) sharing the experiences of traveling abroad. All the items were provided by two female psychological postgraduates who are familiar with multiple social media platforms. For each item, participants needed to report how often they access the item when using social media. They need to indicate their answer on a 7-point scale (1 = *never*, 7 = *always*). The frequency of income inequality exposure was assessed by summing the score on each item, with higher values indicating more inequality exposure. The internal consistency coefficient was 0.83.

The measure of perceived competitiveness. Following Sommet *et al.* (2019), Murayama and Elliot's (2012) the five-item perceived competitiveness scale was used to measure participants' competitive perception [24, 25]. The scale consisted of five items: 1) In my town/city, it seems that people are competing with each other; 2) In my town/city, it seems that I am competing with others; 3) In my town/city, people seem to share the feeling that competing with each other is important; 4) In my town/city, I feel that I am being compared with others; 5) In my town/city, people seem to value competition. Two psychological postgraduates, who are fluent in both Chinese and English, translated the English version into the Chinese version. In the present research, the internal consistency coefficient of the scale was 0.84.

The measure of female self-objectification. In the present research, the measure of female self-objectification was employed via the Self-Objectification Questionnaire developed by Noll and Fredrickson's (1998) [27]. The questionnaire consisted of ten attributes (five were competence-based attributes and five were appearance-based attributes): strength, physical coordination, energy level, health, physical fitness, weight, sex appeal, physical attractiveness, firm/sculpted muscles, body measurements. For such attributes, participants need to rank order a list of ten attributes in terms of importance to their self-concept. For an

individual, the most important item would be scored nine points, the second most important scored eight points, and so on with the least important scoring zero [27]. The self-objectification score of an individual was calculated by subtracting the sum of the competence score (summing the scores on five competence-based attributes) from the appearance score (summing the scores on five appearance-based attributes), thus generating a score from -25 to +25. Under this logic, higher and more positive scores mean greater self-objectification tendency.

The measure of demographic information. In addition to three key variables, we also collected some demographic information, including their nationality, age, residence (country/city), weight, height, education, monthly income, and subjective social status.

3.3. Procedure

The survey was carried out via an online data-collection platform — Credamo (www.credamo.com). Only female adults who are familiar with at least one social media platform are allowed to participate in the survey. Prior to the formal survey, participants needed to read the introduction about the survey, and they were asked to assign the informed consent if they were willing to continue the task. Then, they successively report their income inequality exposure on social media, perceived competition, female self-objectification, and demographic information. All participants can make their own choices about whether they would complete the survey on a computer or on their cellphone. Only when they have completed all items, they can submit the questionnaire successfully. So, no missing item was generated in the survey. For their participation, all participants can receive 2 RMB (approximately 0.3 USD).

3.4. Results

3.4.1. The Relationship Between Income Inequality Exposure and Female Self-Objectification

Before we did any inferential statistics, we firstly conducted correlational analyses among variables, which were provided in Table 1. Correlational results showed that there was a significant and positive correlation between income inequality exposure and perceived competition, $r = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$. We also found that there was a significant and positive correlation between perceived competition and female self-objectification, $r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$. Additionally, participants' month income was positively and significantly correlated with self-objectification, $r = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$, and the correlation between month income and subjective social status was also significant, $r = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$.

Table 1. Mean value, standard deviation, and correlations among variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Income inequality exposure	Perceived competitiveness	Self-objectification	Age	BMI	Income	Education	Social status
Income inequality exposure	32.21	8.61	1							
Perceived	3.92	0.84	0.33**	1						

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Income inequality exposure	Perceived competitiveness	Self-objectification	Age	BMI	Income	Education	Social status
competitiveness										
Self-objectification	5.63	13.47	0.14	0.51**	1					
Age	31.11	5.19	0.20*	-0.05	0.13	1				
BMI	21.53	2.70	-0.01	0.01	0.12	0.15	1			
Income	4.96	1.28	-0.02	0.10	0.29**	0.17	-0.02	1		
Education	5.33	1.22	-0.01	-0.12	0.02	-0.02	-0.06	0.11	1	
Social status	5.54	1.38	0.02	-0.25**	-0.16	0.12	-0.02	0.25**	-0.05	1

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

After that, to examine whether income inequality exposure on social media had a significant prediction on female self-objectification, we conducted a linear regression equation in which self-objectification was regressed on income inequality exposure. Age, income, education, BMI, and social status were included in the equation as control variables, and all variables were standardized before entering the equation. The result showed that income inequality exposure failed to significantly predict female self-objectification, $\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.17$. Inconsistent with our Hypothesis 1, this result showed that income inequality exposure could not produce a direct effect on female self-objectification. In the following section, we sought to examine whether income inequality exposure could have a prediction on female self-objectification via the mediating role of perceived competition.

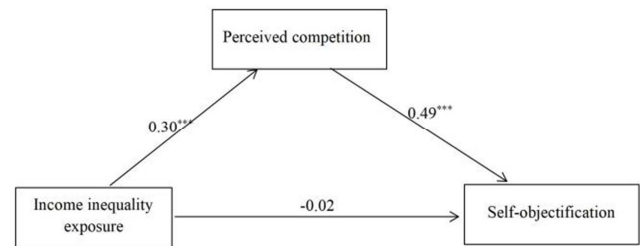
3.4.2. The Mediating Role of Perceived Competition

Table 2. The mediating model summary.

	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Direct effect	-0.03	0.08	-0.19	0.14
Indirect effect	0.17	0.06	0.08	0.31

To examine whether income inequality exposure had a connection with self-objectification via the mediating role of perceived competition, we used the Macro Process developed by Hayes (2013) to test the mediating role of perceived competition [28]. The Macro Process assess the reliability of an indirect effect by creating a confidence interval (CI). If the generated CI does not include zero, the indirect effect will be considered to be reliable; otherwise, the indirect effect will be considered to be not reliable. By applying this approach, we found that the mediating role of perceived competition between income inequality exposure and female self-objectification was significant, $f = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.29] (see Table 2). In contrast, the direct effect between income inequality exposure and female self-objectification was not significant, $f = 0.02$, 95% CI [-0.19, 0.15]. Specific path coefficients were provided in Figure 1. As shown in the figure, income inequality exposure had a significant prediction on perceived competition, $\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$, and perceived competition further had a significant prediction on female self-objectification, $\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$. The direct prediction of income inequality exposure on self-objectification was not significant, $\beta = -0.02$, $p = 0.80$. The above results demonstrated the mediating role of perceived competition between income inequality exposure

and self-objectification, thus supporting our Hypothesis 2.



Note. *** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 1. The mediating role of perceived competition was presented schematically.

4. Discussion

With 120 female adults as participants, by adopting a questionnaire survey, the present research investigated the relationship between income inequality exposure and female self-objectification. The results showed that, although income inequality exposure did not have a direct prediction on female self-objectification, income inequality exposure on social media had a significantly indirect prediction on female self-objectification via the mediating role of perceived competition. The current research carried implications for deepening the understanding of social inequality and female self-objectification.

4.1. Implications

The present research enriched the understanding of female self-objectification. It is well accepted that paying excessive attention to physical appearance and overemphasizing the role of physical appearance in self-worth are typical characteristics of female self-objectification. Benefiting from the Web 2.0 technique and the user-generated content idea, social media has explosively grown over the past two decades [29]. An increasing number of research indicates that, while social media enables individuals to readily perceive social support from online friends, it has been also found to be related to a series of negative psychological consequences. For instance, for photo-based social media platforms, they commonly encourage users to highlight appearance-relevant benefits, thus resulting in the self-objectification of women. Indeed, by clarifying specific activities on social media platforms, prior literature has revealed that some appearance-relevant activities (e.g., viewing selfies), rather than social media use

intensity on the general level, will elevate the self-objectification of women [11].

Extending previous research in the field of social media and female self-objectification, the present research firstly demonstrates that income inequality exposure on social media platforms will contribute to the self-objectification of women. As we have documented in the literature review section, individuals commonly display the good side of their lives resulting from the so-called positive self-presentation tendency. So, it is not surprising that many people are willing to depict themselves as the rich or social elite. This intentional self-improvement strategy on social media will increase social media users' awareness for the category of wealth or social status. Previous research has revealed that the increased salience of wealth or social status will elevate individuals' perception for social competitiveness. To get the advantage in social competition, women will put more importance on their physical appearance, because past research has found that attractive women can have competitive advantages in multiple social contexts (e.g., seeking an ideal partner in the mating market or job hunting) [5]. This may be why income inequality exposure on social media was found to significantly and positively predict female self-objectification. Overall, frequent exposure to income inequality cues on social media will make women believe that they are living in a society with high competition, and to get competitive advantages, they are willing to put more importance on their physical appearance, thus resulting in female self-objectification.

To what extent female self-objectification can help women compete for valuable resources is an issue that deserves our further discussion, though this discussion has gone beyond the scope of the present research. Past work has demonstrated that as the income inequality of a society, perceived competitive climate will become more salient and individuals in the society tend to show less interpersonal trust and cooperation [19, 21]. According to our reasoning, for women with high self-objectification, their excessive concerns for their body aims to enhance their competitive advantages in social context. However, for a long time, women are at a more disadvantaged position (compared to men) in social competition, and they are stereotyped as positive warmth but negative competence [30]. On the country level, stereotypes are considered to be ideological tools to maintain the existing social hierarchy. As a consequence, when the income inequality of a society increases, the expected gap on the competence dimension between advantaged and disadvantaged groups will be amplified. Following this logic, women will be stereotyped as more negative than men on the competence dimension in the high inequality society. In this case, the self-objectification of women may inadvertently strength this stereotyped perception — women have attractive bodies but lack the competence. Finally, the social status of women is further weakened.

4.2. Limitations and Future Work

Firstly, prior research has found that perceived income inequality on the individual level, rather than objective income inequality on the societal level, has greater impacts on individuals'

cognition and behaviors. Therefore, on the operational level, the income inequality in the present research was defined as the perceived income equality on the psychological level. It should be noted that, although perceived income inequality and objective income inequality are considered to be different constructs, several studies still reveal that there is a close connection between them. Given that, researchers can attempt to investigate whether the relationship between perceived income inequality and female self-objectification varies with the objective income inequality in a society. For example, it will be an interesting thing to explore whether the contributing effect of perceived income inequality on female self-objectification can be further exacerbated in the society with high objective income inequality. In contrast, we also can explore whether the effect of perceived income inequality on female self-objectification can be alleviated in the society with low objective income inequality.

Secondly, the present research was the correlational design. As a result, although the present research demonstrated that there was a significant connection between income inequality exposure and female self-objectification, we actually cannot draw a causal inference for the relationship between them. For example, while frequent access to income inequality content on social media leads to the self-objectification of women is reasonable, the opposite explanation also seems to be feasible. Namely, those women with high self-objectification are more likely to notice some objectifying cues on social media (e.g., browsing some luxury goods), which will further strength the self-objectification of women. Additionally, the sample of the present research only consisted of 120 participants; and this small sample size, more or less, will bring some limitations on the generalization of our findings. Given the above considerations, future research should include a larger sample and conduct a controlled lab experiment to improve the reliability and generalization of our findings.

Finally, the participants involved in the present research were all young female women, whose age ranged from 19.42 to 43.47. Despite the fact that self-objectification is more obvious among young women than any other age group, prior literature shows that female self-objectification can be observed even at the age of 8 years old. Given that, in future research, by adopting a larger sample including several age groups, we can examine whether the result pattern observed in the present research can be generalized to other age groups, or explore how the relationship between income inequality exposure and female self-objectification fluctuate with individuals' age. Additionally, self-objectification is not only observed among women, but also is prevalent among men. However, the characteristics of self-objectification between men and women are considered to be different. So, it is still unclear whether the result pattern obtained in the present research can be generalized to adult men. This issue will be resolved in future research.

5. Conclusion

By employing a questionnaire survey, the present research found that the more individuals were exposed to income

inequality cues on social media, the more they were likely to perceive high competition climate. To get a greater advantage in social competition, higher social competition perception further led to higher self-objectification of young female adults. By firstly examining the relationship between income inequality exposure and female self-objectification, the present research clarified how income inequality perception in a society affected the self-objectification of women, and also enriched the understanding of how economic contexts on the macro level exerted an influence on the self-concept of women on the individual level.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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