

Women as decorative accessories: Keep silent or take a stance?

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How do Italian women react once they are made aware that using bikini-clad models draped over sports cars or scantily dressed actresses on television actually degrades and objectifies the female sex into mere sexual objects? Most become angry and want to support protests against such female sexual objectification, says Francesca Guizzo of the University of Padova in Italy, lead author of a study in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*. She believes awareness campaigns targeting women can be powerful tools to call them to action to make a stance against sexualized images and unrealistic beauty ideals that are regularly shown on television.

"In many Western countries we are accustomed to being exposed to media images of undressed and sexy bodies often used as decorative objects or instruments to attract new consumers," explains Guizzo, who says that [women](#) are far more likely than men to be hyper-sexualized in advertisements, magazines, films and television. Such sexual objectification by the media can degrade women, influence the way they are treated, and affect their psyche and sense of self-worth.

To shed more light on the influence of such media portrayals in Italy, Guizzo's team recruited 78 Italian men and 81 women. Participants watched a television clip in which women are sexually objectified (sexual objectification video clip) or the same clip with a commentary added explaining why the footage degrades women (critique video clip) or a nature documentary (control condition).

After watching the critique video clip, female participants were more prone to recognize the disadvantaged position of women in society, and they felt angrier and guiltier about how the Italian media and society treat them. Moreover, women were more willing to support collective action (such as the signing of petitions and participation in a rally). The same effect was not noted among men.

It was also found that people who are habitually exposed to sexually objectifying TV are generally less likely to take a collective stance against such degrading exposure. It also influenced women's intention to do something about it. These results extend previous research showing that frequent exposure to sexualized media increases endorsement of stereotypical gender roles and the view of women as sexual objects.

"The overall pattern of results suggests that the chronic exposure to objectifying media might lead to the dangerous assumption that such female portrayal is the norm, thus further reducing people's likelihood to react," says Guizzo.

She believes that sensitizing campaigns could represent, at least for women, a powerful tool to raise awareness and to motivate individuals to engage in collective action aimed at improving media portrayals of women. "Media literacy messages in the form of critique videos may be valuable tools to promote more active and critical media consumption and media specialists, concerned citizens, and social [media](#) activists may use such messages to motivate women to collectively take action against [sexual objectification](#)," she adds.

More information: Francesca Guizzo et al, Objecting to Objectification: Women's Collective Action against Sexual Objectification on Television, *Sex Roles* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-016-0725-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0725-8)

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