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Self-Objectification and Narrative Engagement: Entering the Story World to Escape the Self

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Self-Objectification and Narrative Engagement: Entering the Story World to Escape the Self

By

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## **Dedication**

To my daughters, Nina and Anita, for showing me that I can do hard things. To my husband, David, for doing them with me.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Laramie Taylor, for his support and guidance in all realms of life.

I would also like to thank my committee members: Jeanette Ruiz, for always having my back and maintaining a steady supply of memes, and Drew Cingel, for the opportunity to attend the most enjoyable class in my 22 years of schooling.

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## Abstract

The ways individuals engage with entertainment media narratives depend on the media content itself, external factors such as the setting in which media exposure occurs, and internal factors related to the state in which an individual is when engaging with the narrative. This dissertation explores how engaging with entertainment media narratives in a state of self-objectification affects individuals' comprehension of the narrative, transportation into the narrative, identification with the narrative characters, and enjoyment of the narrative.

In Study 1, an online experiment ( $N = 255$ ) was conducted to investigate how inducing self-objectification prior to engagement with an entertainment video influences four modes of participants' engagement with the video. Results showed that participants in the self-objectifying condition subsequently experienced increased comprehension, transportation, and enjoyment, and that this was mediated by state self-objectification; there were no significant effects on identification. After accounting for the positive indirect effect of the self-objectifying condition on transportation, there remained a significant negative main effect of condition on transportation.

Study 2 was designed as an online experiment ( $N = 297$ ) aimed to explore whether the relationships found in Study 1 were likely to remain significant when participants' state self-objectification is induced by the entertainment video itself rather than by an action preceding participants' exposure to the video. Given the prevalence of ideal-looking bodies in entertainment media, the effects of exposure to an ideal-body narrative on narrative engagement warranted exploration. Although the relationships found in Study 1 were not observed in Study 2, the results of correlation analyses suggested that participants' engagement with the narrative was likely led by the same goal as was the case in Study 1.

Study 3 replicated Study 2, but employed written entertainment media narratives in an attempt to establish true experimental control and internal validity – a task that proved to be challenging in Study 2. Participants ( $N = 294$ ) were exposed to an objectifying or non-objectifying short online story, accompanied by an adjacent objectifying or non-objectifying visual ad, given that written narratives posted online are usually accompanied by advertisements. In addition to the relationships explored in the previous two studies, Study 3 also looked at the potential effects of ad-story congruity on participants' narrative engagement. Participants' relationship status was identified as a moderator of the link between exposure to an objectifying online ad and participants' enjoyment of an adjacent short story.

Overall, these studies shed light on the ways in which being in a state of self-objectification is likely to influence individuals' engagement with entertainment media narratives; the results point toward the possibility of seeing entertainment media as an avenue for an escape from the self. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Significance of the Studies

People spend a substantial portion of their day consuming media content (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004). In doing so, they seek media messages to inform, educate, and inspire them, but most of all, they seek media content that will keep them entertained. Now more than ever, media use is motivated by the desire to experience fun and enjoyment (Raney, 2010; Vorderer et al., 2004). It is for this reason that individuals frequently choose to turn to entertainment media narratives ranging from TV sitcoms to mystery novels (Carpenter & Green, 2012), rather than other categories of media messages such as information. Narratives have the potential to entertain the audience, enrich the audience with emotional and cognitive experiences, and draw the audience into the narrative world unlike any other media message (Carpenter & Green, 2012). It is, then, not surprising that individuals' desire for media narratives, especially televised narratives, has never been greater (Raney, 2010).

Research has identified several modes of engagement with media narratives. Substantial attention has been placed on transportation into the narrative (e.g., Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008), comprehension of the narrative (e.g., Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009), identification with the narrative's characters (e.g., Cohen, 2001), and enjoyment of the narrative (e.g., Nabi & Krmar, 2004). Previous studies have examined different antecedents of narrative engagement; most of these factors have pertained to characteristics of the narrative itself, e.g., the order in which scenes are presented (Cohen et al., 2015) or the extent to which a narrative is realistic (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011). Less attention has been given to the factors pertaining to the audience, i.e., how the audience's states and traits may influence engagement with a narrative. Oatley (1999) found a relationship between participants' gender and the level of engagement with different



types of narratives. Murphy et al. (2013) found that an individual audience member's personal traits are linked with the extent to which they are likely to identify with a character. While a handful of trait-related studies can still be found in the narrative engagement literature, the state in which an individual is while engaging with a narrative has been largely overlooked as a potential factor of influence on narrative engagement. The present line of research adds to the narrative engagement literature by examining the state of self-objectification as a potential factor of influence on four modes of narrative engagement: comprehension, transportation, identification, and narrative enjoyment.

## **1.2 Self-Objectification**

Western culture places a high value on physical attractiveness (Gapinski et al., 2003), associating beauty with success and popularity (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). The importance of physical appearance is constantly emphasized by elements of the social environment, including the media; magazines, TV programs, and the Internet send the message that one's body needs to look a certain way for the individual to be accepted (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Stirling, 2009; Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Banfield, 2000). Women are expected to be, "Thin, yet impossibly toned and curvaceous" (Bell & Dittmar, 2011, p. 479), while men are expected to be lean and muscular, with a V-shaped upper body (Blond, 2008). For most women and men, these body ideals are unattainable (Groesz et al., 2002; Hendrickse et al., 2021). Nevertheless, many individuals internalize them and strive toward them (Mckinley & Hyde, 1996). Internalization of body standards can be defined as the adoption of body standards from one's social environment so that it appears as though the individual has set these standards and decided to follow them by their own choice rather than under external pressure (Mckinley & Hyde, 1996). Internalization is usually accompanied by comparing one's body to the internalized body ideal (Blond, 2008), in

line with Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory. This theory states that, when an objective measure of quality is not available, individuals evaluate themselves through comparison with others (Festinger, 1954). Given the discrepancy between the body ideals imposed by one's social environment and one's perception of their own body, for most people, internalization and body comparison are likely to result in negative feelings and judgments about their appearance (Farquhar & Wasylikiw, 2007; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; López-Guimerà et al., 2010).

Idealized bodies, especially in their sexualized form, are one of the central tenets of objectification theory by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). According to this theory, women's bodies are seen by others as objects whose purpose is to provide sexual pleasure; women are socialized to adopt an observer's perspective of their body and evaluate their body based on what it looks like rather than what it can do (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In other words, objectifying treatment coming from one's social environment (e.g., receiving appearance-related comments) or the media (e.g., watching movies depicting sexualized ideal-looking bodies) causes women to self-objectify (Karsay et al., 2018), either as a temporary reactive state to a specific stimulus or as a personality trait resulting from habitual exposure to objectifying content (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2012). Self-objectification manifests through the practice of body monitoring, i.e., using cognitive resources for evaluation of one's body appearance from an observer's perspective, in order to determine whether one's body is attractive enough and hence, good enough (Calogero, 2012; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Thus, in empirical studies, self-objectification is usually operationalized as body monitoring (Quinn et al., 2010). Even though objectification theory was developed as an attempt to explain the effects of self-objectification in women, such as body shame and sexual dysfunction (Dakanalis & Riva, 2013), more recent

research has demonstrated the prevalence of self-objectification in men (e.g., Frederick et al., 2022; Harsey & Zurbriggen, 2021).

It is important to note that self-objectification may be observed as both a trait (Fredrickson et al., 1998) and a state (Calogero, 2012); this dissertation focuses primarily on self-objectification as a state.

### **1.3 Narratives and Narrative Engagement**

Narration can be defined as, “The symbolic presentation of a sequence of events connected by subject matter and related by time” (Scholes, 1980, p. 209). However, defining a narrative simply as a product of narration would not be accurate, given that the act of narration produces a *story* – a similar, yet not identical construct. While a story can be conceptualized as the result of the narrator’s message production, a narrative includes an additional element pertaining to the action of the message recipient; Laer et al. (2014) defined narrative as a story that is being consumed *and interpreted* by the message receiver. To transform a story into a narrative, then, it is necessary for the recipient to focus their attention on the story and assign meaning to the story (Laer et al., 2014).

Individuals seek narratives, especially entertainment media narratives, because they wish to be entertained (Hoeken et al., 2016). However, entertainment media narratives offer more than the satisfaction of hedonic needs; narratives have been found to influence social thinking and decision-making, emotion processing (Shackleford et al., 2016), knowledge attainment, and attitude change (Murphy et al., 2013). For example, in a study by Murphy et al. (2013), watching a fictional narrative about cervical cancer was associated with an increase in participants’ knowledge about and a more positive attitude toward cancer screening. Furthermore,

entertainment media narratives enable individuals to explore possible selves without the risk of negative consequences (Green et al., 2004). Considering the prevalence of entertainment media narrative consumption and the real-life implications of narrative exposure, audience engagement with narratives warrants further exploration. It is important to note that the term narrative engagement is sometimes used interchangeably with narrative involvement. However, according to Busselle and Bilandzic (2009), while narrative engagement refers to any type of audience's interaction with narratives, involvement is a narrower term referring to, "an overall sensation of being engrossed in a story" (Busselle and Bilandzic 2009, p. 325). This dissertation focuses on four modes of narrative engagement, given that these four modes are most likely to be influenced by self-objectification: narrative comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment.

#### **1.4 Comprehension**

Narrative comprehension can be defined as the act of making sense of a narrative (Johnson & Sangalang, 2017) by creating meaning from a network of received information (Lynch et al., 2008) and constructing a mental representation of narrative elements (Bilandzic et al., 2019). It is important to note that narrative comprehension requires the message receiver to go beyond the information explicitly stated in the narrative and form inferences and assumptions about different elements of the narrative such as events and relationships between the characters (Rapaport et al., 1994). Narrative comprehension is a cognitive process; to understand a narrative, individuals need to direct their attention toward the message they are receiving (Laer et al., 2014) and engage in cognitive processing of the message (Bilandzic et al., 2019). This act of cognitive processing of a narrative may bring pleasure to audience members, especially when processing a complex narrative (Mittell, 2006).

According to the mental models approach, cognitive processing of a narrative results in the creation of mental models that, “Represent settings, characters, and situations, and are created by combining information from the text with knowledge the reader or viewer already possesses about life in general as well as about the specific topic and genre of the narrative” (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009, p. 322). To fully understand a narrative, an audience member constantly updates the constructed mental models (Song et al., 2021). For example, when watching a movie, viewers will not be successful in narrative comprehension unless they actively process current information and add it to the previous information from the movie (Lee et al., 2013). Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) compare the process of constructing and updating mental models to an assembly process in which newly gained information should be processed in a way that corresponds to what is already known. It should be pointed out that the initial mental model is constructed by relying on schemas, i.e., existing knowledge structures based on past encounters with similar narratives that enable the viewer to form initial interpretations and expectations of a narrative (Raney, 2004). While mental models are, “Constrained in the time and space of the narrative” (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008, p. 258), the existence of schemas does not depend on a specific narrative (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008).

In addition to constructing and updating mental models, narrative comprehension also requires a deictic shift – a cognitive process in which audience members locate themselves in the time and space of the narrative (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). In other words, audience members switch from their real-life “I”, “here”, and “now” to the “I”, “here”, and “now” of the specific narrative and start interpreting the narrative and constructing and updating mental models from the “inside” perspective (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008).

Given the considerable theorizing about narrative comprehension, the lack of empirical research is surprising. In one of the few existing studies, Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) operationalized narrative comprehension as cognitive perspective taking by asking participants whether they understood the reasoning behind the characters' actions and the way the events unfolded. Krendl and Watkins (1983) measured narrative comprehension in children by capturing the audience's character and plot recall.

## **1.5 Transportation**

Prior to defining and discussing transportation, it is useful to briefly touch upon flow, a broader construct not limited to narrative engagement. Flow is a subjective state in which a person is fully absorbed in the activity they are performing (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). During flow, an individual becomes fully concentrated on the activity and loses their reflective self-consciousness. The subjective perception of time is altered so that one perceives the passing of time as much faster than it actually is (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). One way to describe a flow experience would be as "being in the zone" (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009, p. 324). Almost any activity can be a flow activity, as long as an individual feels like it is intrinsically rewarding (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). However, flow has so far mostly been studied within the context of sports, art, and video games. For example, one study in which participants were playing Tetris demonstrated that, in order to achieve flow, participants' skill level had to match the level of game difficulty (Keller & Bless, 2008).

Just like artists in the state of flow are fully involved in the creation of an art piece, audience members in the state of flow are fully involved in the construction of narrative meaning and the emotions experienced while engaging with a narrative (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). This subjective experience is called transportation, a special case of flow limited to narratives

(Tal-or & Cohen, 2010). “Transportation into narrative then can be seen as the extent to which an audience member becomes absorbed into the activity of constructing mental models” (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008, p. 261). All cognitive resources are being directed toward the narrative setting, plot, characters, and connections between them. Consequently, the viewer is being transported into the narrative world. In other words, he or she loses the sense of self and real-life surroundings, and starts feeling like a part of the narrative, experiencing narrative events directly (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). This temporary relocation to an “alternative universe” (Green, 2004, p. 247) explains why we sometimes tend to lose the sense of time and other people in the room while watching a highly engaging movie (Green, 2021). It is important to note that, unlike narrative comprehension, transportation is not a fully cognition-based mode of narrative engagement. In addition to cognitive processes (see Tchernev et al., 2021), transportation encompasses emotional involvement in the narrative and seeing vivid mental images (Green & Brock, 2000). In other words, transported individuals are not only fully concentrating on the mental model construction; they are also experiencing intense emotional reactions to the narrative.

Studying transportation is important due to a range of implications for media message recipients. First, transportation is a highly desirable state (Green et al., 2004) because transportation likely contributes to enjoyment (Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017). Indeed, measures of transportation and enjoyment are usually highly correlated in empirical studies (Green et al., 2004). However, while enjoyment is inherently positive, transportation can sometimes entail negative feelings (e.g., experiencing fear while being transported to a horror movie) (Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017). Second, fully focusing on the narrative world reduces counterarguing (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Carpenter & Green, 2012). Thus, individuals might “return” from the narrative

world with altered attitudes. For example, in one well-known study, transportation into a story about a murder in a shopping mall was associated with a negative attitude toward shopping mall safety (Green & Brock, 2000). Third, transportation facilitates viewers' connections with the characters (Green et al., 2004): identification and parasocial interaction. Finally, transportation may enhance learning by immersing the audience into a world of new information (Green et al., 2004).

Transportation has been operationalized as a state measure of attentional focus, although there were attempts to develop a transportability scale that would measure transportation as a trait (see Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004). To measure transportation, researchers usually administer a questionnaire immediately after narrative exposure, given that introducing it during exposure would likely result in distraction; distraction has been found to disrupt transportation (Green & Brock, 2000). Thus, a shortcoming of transportation measures is that they capture one's retrospective recollection of transportation, rather than the actual degree of transportation (Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017). For example, a widely used Transportation scale by Green and Brock (2000) includes items such as, "While I was reading the narrative, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind" and, "I found my mind wandering while reading the narrative" (both reverse-coded).

## **1.6 Identification**

Identification with media narrative characters is a process in which an audience member temporarily suspends their own identity and experiences everything that happens to the character as if it happens to them (Cohen, 2013). The viewers not only become part of the narrative world; they become one with the character they identify with by adopting the character's perspective and feelings (Cohen, 2001). That is, cognitive empathy and affective empathy are two



constitutive elements of identification. This dissertation uses the term cognitive empathy (Igartua, 2010; Tal-or & Cohen, 2010) to differentiate “adopting the character’s goals and point of view within the narrative” (Tal-or & Cohen, 2010, p. 404) from cognitive perspective taking, a construct discussed earlier as a dimension of narrative comprehension (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2009). While cognitive empathy entails temporarily suspending one’s own identity, cognitive perspective taking does not.

Even though identification is usually based on perceived homophily (Murphy et al., 2013; Pinkleton et al., 2010), audience members may identify with dissimilar others, e.g., characters they wish to resemble (Cohen, 2013; Hoeken et al., 2016). Thus, other than contributing to narrative enjoyment (Cohen, 2001), identification with characters of entertainment media narratives may facilitate personal change and growth (Cohen, 2001). In line with Bandura’s social learning theory, identification may result in modeling others’ positive behavior such as exercising or volunteering, even if the model is a mediated character (Bandura, 2001). Moreover, identification with narrative characters may be used as a mechanism of persuading audience members to adopt certain attitudes, e.g., attitudes about the environment (McCormack et al., 2021) or teen pregnancy (Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010), which may potentially result in behavioral changes. Lastly, identification with an entertainment media narrative character allows for identity play, i.e., exploring multiple possible selves without having to take the risk of changing one’s country of residence, spouse, or occupation (Green et al., 2004; Slater et al., 2014). Experiencing alternative life paths by means of identification might contribute to self-evaluation and affect one’s future decisions and behaviors (Martinez, 2012).

Narrative engagement scholars have attempted to explicate the relationship between identification and transportation. Some posit that, to achieve transportation, a viewer must first

identify with a character (Tal-or & Cohen, 2010; Wissmath, Weibel, & Groner, 2009). Others theorize that individuals cannot identify with the narrative characters without first becoming transported into the narrative world (Green et al., 2004). Because the two engagement modes overlap to the extent that they both involve being immersed in a narrative, measuring identification may present a challenge. A well-known identification scale by Cohen (2001) operationalizes identification as the degree of affective empathy, cognitive empathy, internalization of the character's goals, and loss of self-awareness. Given that some items fail to separate identification from transportation (e.g., "While viewing program X, I felt as if I was part of the action"), researchers have been using modified versions of the scale (e.g., Tal-or & Cohen, 2010).

## **1.7 Enjoyment**

As noted earlier, this dissertation is focusing on the modes of narrative engagement whose elements are flow and/or the use of cognitive resources. Although one part of the literature looks at narrative enjoyment as an entirely affective state, Nabi and Krcmar (2004) point out that, similarly to attitudes, narrative enjoyment has an affective (e.g., empathy, suspense), cognitive (judgments of characters and the plot), and behavioral component (viewing behavior). A study by Raney and Bryant (2002) found that viewers enjoyed a crime drama more when they cognitively judged the main character as ethical, intelligent, or interesting. Thus, narrative enjoyment is included in the present line of research and defined as the pleasure derived from the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of the narrative viewing experience (Nabi and Krcmar, 2004; Raney, 2010).

It is important to note that narrative enjoyment is a highly subjective experience. For example, some audience members might enjoy empathizing with a character while other

viewers' enjoyment might be derived from fear and anticipation (Raney, 2010). It is even possible to enjoy content traditionally perceived as negative, such as violence (Hoffner & Levine, 2005). Furthermore, for some individuals, enjoyment of entertainment media narratives might be motivated by a desire for relaxation; for others, enjoying a narrative is a way to temporarily escape reality (Vorderer et al., 2004). Indeed, a substantial number of empirical studies found a positive association between transportation and enjoyment (e.g. Hall and Bracken, 2011; Johnson & Sangalang, 2017). Although the direction of causality is hard to determine, some scholars posit that being transported into a narrative is a prerequisite for enjoyment (Vorderer et al., 2004). At the same time, Sherry (2004) has argued that for narrative enjoyment to take place, the narrative content being interpreted must match the audience's cognitive ability to interpret it; this idea is similar to the balance between individuals' performance ability and task difficulty known to be a prerequisite for flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Lastly, Raney (2004) has proposed that enjoyment increases when a favorite character is being rewarded or a disliked character experiences a negative outcome (Raney, 2004), in line with the belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980).

The importance of studying enjoyment lies in the notion that enjoyment is the main driving force of entertainment media consumption (Sherry, 2004). Furthermore, enjoyment was found to be related to other modes of narrative engagement (e.g. Hall and Bracken, 2011; Johnson & Sangalang, 2017). Enjoyment is also important to narrative producers as an indicator of the audience's preferences that may help producers increase ratings and profit (Nabi & Krcmar, 2004). As of yet, there is no standard media enjoyment scale. Some empirical studies employed a one-item measure, e.g., "To what extent did you like the film?" (Igartua, 2010). Another common approach to measuring enjoyment is to list several attributes relevant to

enjoyment (e.g., pleasurable, interesting, well-made) and have the participants rate the extent to which each attribute describes the narrative used as a stimulus (Hall & Bracken, 2011).

## **1.8 Overview of the Studies**

The relationships between state self-objectification on the one hand and comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment on the other were investigated by conducting three online experimental studies. In Study 1 (Chapter 2), self-objectification was induced prior to media exposure. In Study 2 (Chapter 3), self-objectification was induced by the entertainment narrative itself. Unlike the first two studies in which participants were exposed to video narratives, Study 3 (Chapter 4) looked at the potential links between state self-objectification and written narratives while accounting for the potential influence of online ads.

## Chapter 2 Escaping the Self after Taking a Selfie

A substantial part of the literature studies self-objectification as an outcome of exposure to objectifying stimuli (e.g., Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2012). The focus of this dissertation, however, is principally a contribution to the body of research investigating the *consequences* of self-objectification (e.g., Grower & Ward, 2021; Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003).

### 2.1 The Impeding Role of Self-Objectification

In a well-known study by Fredrickson et al. (1998), self-objectification was manipulated by having women put on a swimsuit or a sweater. Results showed that wearing a swimsuit diminished one's math performance through the mechanism of self-objectification (i.e., monitoring one's own "beach body"). This effect was later confirmed on an ethnically diverse sample of women and men (Hebl et al., 2004). Similarly, Quinn et al. (2006) found that wearing a swimsuit resulted in slower response time while performing a Stroop color-naming task. Finally, a recent study by Dimas et al. (2021) showed that wearing a swimsuit affected women's performance of the one-legged stand balance task.

Even though the relationship between state self-objectification and task performance is not immediately apparent, it becomes more clear after considering the allocation of cognitive resources; when individuals are self-objectifying, their cognitive resources are being split towards the task they are performing and the act of body monitoring (Gapinski et al., 2003). In other words, some part of cognitive resources is spent on evaluating one's appearance while performing the task, leading to an increased cognitive load (Gay & Castano, 2010). Consequently, fewer resources are left to be spent on the task itself, resulting in impaired

performance (Quinn et al., 2006). If we conceptualize narrative engagement as a task one wishes to accomplish during media exposure, it is reasonable to expect that engaging with a narrative in a state of self-objectification will have a negative effect on those modes of narrative engagement whose constitutive elements are the experience of flow and/or the use of cognitive resources: narrative comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment.

As explained in Chapter 1, to understand a narrative, audience members need to perform several cognitive processes such as forming inferences and assumptions, creating meaning, creating and updating mental models, and performing a deictic shift. However, if one's cognitive resources are being allocated to a task other than narrative engagement, e.g., finding the cause of an outside noise while watching a movie (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009), comprehension is likely to be diminished. Likewise, directing attention to something other than the narrative is likely to negatively influence transportation into the narrative. For example, in one study, reading subtitles was found to diminish transportation into the narrative (Wissmath et al., 2009). Similar effects of directing one's attention away from the narrative are to be expected in terms of identification. To identify with a character, one needs to be fully focused on the character and their behavior (Bandura, 2001), cognitively process the character's goals, motives, and interpretations (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Cohen, 2001), and temporarily forget one's own identity (Cohen, 2001). Research shows that identification can be easily interrupted during narrative exposure with stimuli that direct the viewers' attention back to themselves (Cohen, 2001). These stimuli can be both external (e.g., a vibrating phone in one's pocket) and within the narrative itself (e.g., a character directly addressing audience members). Finally, the allocation of cognitive resources towards something other than the narrative is likely to diminish the audience's enjoyment, given that narrative enjoyment is not an entirely affective experience; it

also includes a cognitive component (Nabi and Krcmar, 2004). Enjoyment partially depends on the audience's judgments of the narrative elements such as the characters, the relationships between them, and the plot (Nabi and Krcmar, 2004). To make these judgments, audience members need to engage in cognitive processing of the narrative. However, if the audience's attention is directed away from the narrative, cognitive processing becomes a challenge.

As noted earlier, a state of self-objectification prompts individuals to engage in body monitoring; body monitoring involves focusing on one's own physical appearance. If an individual is experiencing an elevated awareness of oneself, their attention has shifted away from the narrative. Therefore, it would be reasonable to expect that engaging with an entertainment media narrative in a state of self-objectification will diminish comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment.

## **2.2. The "Escape from Self" Idea**

One line of research offers an opposing viewpoint to the one presented in the preceding paragraphs. This line of research looks at media exposure as an "escape from self"; individuals strategically expose themselves to entertainment media to temporarily block or avoid negative feelings and judgments about the self (Larson, 1995; Moskaleiko & Heine, 2003). For example, Larson (1995) posits that adolescents and adults turn to television because it provides them with a "state of nonfeeling" (Larson, 1995, p. 547) as opposed to the negative emotional states they go through during the day. Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found that individuals are likely to intentionally engage themselves in heavy television viewing shortly after negative experiences. Lastly, a study by Moskaleiko and Heine (2003) found that individuals who received negative comments about themselves watched television longer than individuals who received positive comments. Thus, in addition to entertainment, television viewing also seems to provide

individuals with a chance to temporarily block out their negative self-feelings (Moskalenko & Heine, 2003). This is in line with the TEBOTS model (Slater et al., 2014), according to which experiencing one's personal identity may be perceived as limiting, especially for individuals with a discrepancy between who they are and who they want to be. Those individuals are likely to seek temporary relief from the self (Slater et al., 2014).

At the center of the “escape from self” argument is the concept of objective self-awareness (Wicklund, 1975). According to the theory of self-awareness (Wicklund, 1975), at some moment in time, individuals' attention can be directed either toward themselves or away from themselves. Objective self-awareness is a state in which individuals are focusing on themselves (Wicklund, 1975). To easily differentiate between objective self-awareness and self-objectification, two overlapping yet non-identical terms, this paper uses an alternative term coined by Wicklund: self-focused attention. In the state of self-focused attention, individuals become more aware of their shortcomings, i.e., the discrepancies between their actual selves and the standards they wish to achieve, likely resulting in negative feelings towards the self (Wicklund, 1975). Admittedly, a state of self-focused attention may sometimes result in positive feelings, for example, during or shortly after an accomplishment. However, Wicklund (1975) posits that the influence of one's recent success is short-lived and that future instances of self-focused attention typically reinvolve negative self-feelings.

Negative feelings about oneself serve as a driving force for an individual to escape the state of self-focused attention by focusing on external stimuli (Wisman et al., 2015). For example, Wisman et al. (2015) found that individuals low in self-esteem consumed higher amounts of alcohol during a night out than individuals scoring high on self-esteem, as an attempt to temporarily escape self-thoughts. Particularly appealing are those stimuli that are easily



accessible and captivating, like a good movie (Wicklund, 1975). Entertainment narratives may temporarily block self-criticism by providing a distraction (Moskalenko & Heine, 2003). As previously discussed, a state of self-objectification is characterized by negative feelings about oneself. Therefore, in line with the “escape from self” argument, it is possible to formulate opposing hypotheses: Engaging with a narrative in a self-objectifying state will be positively associated with comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment. If individuals feel bad about their body appearance, they may strategically engage with an entertainment media narrative. Consequently, self-objectifying individuals may score higher on narrative comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment. Indeed, a study by Greenwood (2008) found that engaging with a narrative in a state of frustration, sadness, and/or discomfort was associated with higher transportation scores.

In conclusion, given the conflicting hypotheses, the present study aims to answer the following:

*RQ1:* How will being in a self-objectifying state during exposure to an entertainment media narrative affect narrative comprehension?

*RQ2:* How will being in a self-objectifying state during exposure to an entertainment media narrative affect transportation into the narrative?

*RQ3:* How will being in a self-objectifying state during exposure to an entertainment media narrative affect identification?

*RQ4:* How will being in a self-objectifying state during exposure to an entertainment media narrative affect enjoyment?

## **2.3 Method**

### **2.3.1 Participants**

Participants ( $N = 255$ ) were recruited through Amazon's crowdsourcing marketplace MTurk. This platform was selected because compared to a traditional college student sample, MTurk sample is likely to be significantly more diverse in regards to participants' ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Casler et al., 2013). The sample size was selected based on previous studies testing the effects of self-objectification on task performance.

More than half of the participants self-identified as male ( $n = 155$ , 61%). Participants were aged between 18 and 76 ( $M = 35.4$ ,  $SD = 11.4$ ). Participants identified their race/ethnicity as White ( $n = 167$ , 65.5%), Asian/Pacific Islander ( $n = 56$ , 22%), Black or African American ( $n = 17$ , 6.7%), Hispanic or Latino ( $n = 14$ , 5.5%), Native American or American Indian ( $n = 13$ , 5.1%), or "other" ( $n = 3$ , 1.2%). Median household income ranged between \$50,000 and \$59,999 and on average, participants obtained a bachelor's degree.

### **2.3.2 Procedure**

Participants were invited to, "complete a survey about experiences with media narratives" in exchange for financial compensation. After accepting the invitation, participants were directed to the survey website Qualtrics where they participated in an online experiment in which the level of state self-objectification was manipulated. Following the consent form and introduction, all participants were asked to complete a simple photo-taking task using their mobile phone camera. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to the self-objectifying condition and presented with the following instructions:

“Please stand in front of a mirror and use your phone camera to take a selfie from your calves up to your neck. To protect your identity, your face should not be visible in the photo. Take as many photos as you like until you are satisfied with the way you look. Your photo will only be visible to others taking this survey. Your photo will not be shared with anyone outside of this survey.”

The other half of the participants were assigned to the control condition and presented with the following instructions:

“Please use your phone camera to take a photo of the nearest source of light (e.g., a lamp or a window). Take as many photos as you like until you are satisfied with the way your photo looks. Then, navigate to the next page. Your photo will only be visible to others taking this survey. Your photo will not be shared with anyone outside of this survey.”

This experimental manipulation is in line with the notion that state self-objectification can be activated in an environment that emphasizes one’s appearance, such as in front of the mirror (Calogero, 2012). The manipulation was pretested on a small sample of undergraduate students. To further bolster the experimental manipulation, after completing the photo-taking task, both groups of participants were asked to rate their own photos, using the following prompts:

“Imagine how a member of the opposite sex, about your age, would evaluate your photo. Use the slider to indicate the rating your photo would most likely receive.”

“Imagine how a member of the same sex, about your age, would evaluate your photo. Use the slider to indicate the rating your photo would most likely receive.”

After rating the photographs, participants were asked to upload them to an online folder. Then, participants were directed to an upload window that was intentionally designed to display an error message. Because research shows that a state of self-objectification is likely to be activated by prompting an individual to evaluate their own body from an observer's perspective (Calogero, 2012), making the participants *believe* they will be uploading their photo to a folder accessible to other participants was presumably sufficient to manipulate self-objectification. Furthermore, actual photo upload was avoided in order to protect participants' privacy. The deception was explained in detail in the study debrief.

To confirm that self-objectification was successfully induced in the self-objectifying condition and not induced in the control condition, following the manipulation check procedures in Gapinski et al. (2003) and Quinn et al. (2006), participants completed a modified version of the Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). Each participant was presented with an unfinished statement, "I am \_\_\_\_\_" ten times and asked to complete as many sentences as they could using attributes that best described them.

Next, all participants watched a 6-minute Australian film *Bunny New Girl*, embedded in the questionnaire. This movie, depicting a young girl's first day at a new school, was chosen as an entertainment media narrative with a low presence of ideal-body images, to ensure that participants' scores on the four modes of narrative engagement are a reflection of the self-objectification manipulation rather than the narrative elements.

### **2.3.3 Measures**

Questions pertaining to the dependent variables were administered immediately following participants' exposure to the narrative. Comprehension was measured using an adapted

version of the Cognitive Perspective Taking (CP) subscale and the Narrative Realism (NR) subscale of the Narrative Engagement Scale (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Two CP subscale items adapted from (Cohen, 2001) were excluded due to the likelihood of measuring identification rather than narrative comprehension (e.g., “I could easily imagine myself in the situation of some of the characters”). The remaining four CP subscale items were included in the questionnaire (e.g., “I understood the reasons why the characters did what they did”). All four items of the NR subscale were included (e.g., “I understood why the events unfolded the way they did”);  $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ .

Transportation into the narrative was measured using the adapted version of the Transportation Scale by Green and Brock (2000). Items were adapted to reflect engagement with a visual rather than a written narrative (e.g., “While I was watching the narrative, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind (R)”). Additionally, an adapted version of selected items from the Intense Concentration and the Lack of Worry subscales of Szymanski and Henning's (2007) Flow scale was used. These items were developed to capture flow specifically in the context of self-objectification (e.g., “I was worried about how I look from the outside/how others would perceive me”);  $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = .93$ ,  $\alpha = .70$ .

Identification was measured with selected items from Cohen's (2001) Identification scale. As explained in Tal-or and Cohen (2010), Cohen's original 10-item measure includes items that fail to make a distinction between identification and transportation (e.g., “While viewing program X, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed”). Thus, the questionnaire included only those items capturing identification as an experience comprised of cognitive empathy and affective empathy, following Cohen's (2001) definition (e.g., “While viewing the program, I could feel the emotions character X felt”);  $M = 5.66$ ,  $SD = .98$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ .

Lastly, because there is no standard instrument for measuring narrative enjoyment, the procedure by Hall and Bracken (2011) was followed. Participants were presented with eight attributes describing the narrative: enjoyable, boring (R), entertaining, dull (R), pleasurable, interesting, captivating, and well-made, and asked to evaluate how well each attribute describes the narrative on a scale from 1 to 10;  $M = 7.51$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ .

The last block of questions in the questionnaire was pertaining to participants' demographic characteristics.

### **2.3.4 Results**

Participants' responses to the modified version of the Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) were coded as appearance-related (e.g., beautiful, fat) or non-appearance-related (e.g., focused, supportive). For each participant, a proportion of appearance-related responses was computed (the number of appearance-related responses relative to the total number of listed traits). An independent samples t-test demonstrated that the proportion of appearance-related responses was significantly higher among the participants in the selfie, i.e., self-objectifying condition ( $M = .27$ ,  $SD = .32$ ) than the participants in the source of light, i.e., control condition ( $M = .08$ ,  $SD = .17$ ),  $t(254) = -6.14$ ,  $p < .001$ . In line with the reasoning by Calogero (2012), t-test showed that a state of self-objectification was successfully induced in those participants who were randomly assigned to the selfie condition.

Bivariate Pearson's correlations were computed among state self-objectification and the four narrative engagement modes (Table 1). Consistent with existing narrative enjoyment research (e.g. Hall and Bracken, 2011; Johnson & Sangalang, 2017), each of the other three modes of narrative engagement were associated with enjoyment of the narrative. Interestingly,

strong correlations were found between narrative comprehension and the remaining three engagement modes.

Table 1 Correlations among key study variables

	1	2	3	4	5
1. State self-objectification					
2. Comprehension	.326***				
3. Transportation	.217***	.709***			
4. Identification	.100	.455***	.469***		
5. Enjoyment	.190*	.628***	.582***	.622***	

Note. \*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$

To address the research questions, Model 4 of Hayes’s PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) was used. The experimental condition was coded as 1. The control was coded as 0. State self-objectification, indicated by proportion appearance, was tested as a mediator of the link between condition and comprehension (*RQ1*), transportation (*RQ2*), identification (*RQ3*), and enjoyment (*RQ4*). This type of analysis gives a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect through the mediator after 5,000 bootstrapped samples. The mediating relationship is considered significant at  $p < .05$  if the confidence interval does not include a zero (Hayes, 2013). In response to *RQ1*, a positive indirect effect of condition on narrative comprehension, mediated by self-objectification, was found (95% CI = [.18, .47];  $b = .31$ ). In response to *RQ2*, a positive indirect effect of condition on transportation, mediated by self-objectification, was found (95%

CI = [.08, .30];  $b = .18$ ). There was no significant effect of condition on identification with the narrative characters via self-objectification (95% CI = [-.01, .18];  $b = .08$ ) (RQ3). Finally, in response to RQ4, a positive indirect effect of condition on narrative enjoyment, mediated by self-objectification, was found (95% CI = [.08, .40];  $b = .23$ ). Therefore, being in a self-objectifying state during exposure to an entertainment media narrative positively affected comprehension, transportation, and enjoyment, but not identification.

After accounting for the positive indirect effect of the self-objectifying condition on transportation, results indicated a negative main effect of condition on transportation into the narrative ( $b = -.28, p = .025$ ). There was no direct effect of condition on either of the three remaining modes of narrative engagement.

## **2.4 Discussion**

The present study adds to the narrative engagement literature by considering how the state in which the viewers are while engaging with an entertainment media narrative is likely to affect viewers' comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment of the narrative. Thus far, most narrative engagement studies have been focusing on the links between narrative engagement and the characteristics related to the narrative itself, such as scene sequencing (Cohen et al., 2015) or the extent to which a narrative is realistic (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011). The present study is the first to investigate the effects of viewers' states on the four modes of narrative engagement. Furthermore, the present study adds to the self-objectification literature as the first study examining narrative engagement levels as outcomes of state self-objectification. First, a new line of theorizing was offered that drew connections between task performance in a self-objectifying state and narrative engagement in a self-objectifying state; here, the common denominators were the allocation of cognitive resources and disrupted flow. According to this



line of theorizing, it was expected that being in a self-objectifying state during exposure to an entertainment media narrative will diminish narrative comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment. Second, a set of alternative hypotheses were introduced, based upon the theory of self-awareness and narrative engagement as an “escape from self”. It was expected that engaging with a narrative in a self-objectifying state will be positively associated with comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment.

The results showed that exposure to a self-objectifying condition prior to engagement with an entertainment media narrative is likely to increase narrative comprehension, transportation, and enjoyment, via state self-objectification. Interestingly, exposure to a self-objectifying condition prior to engagement with an entertainment media narrative is also likely to directly *negatively* affect transportation into the narrative. Furthermore, exposure to a self-objectifying condition prior to narrative engagement is not likely to influence viewers’ identification with the narrative characters via self-objectification. A direct effect of a self-objectifying condition on narrative comprehension, identification, and enjoyment was also found to be unlikely.

A positive indirect effect of a self-objectifying condition on comprehension, transportation, and enjoyment via state self-objectification is in line with the “escape from self” idea. As mentioned earlier, individuals may strategically engage with media content as an attempt to “escape” negative emotional states (e.g., Larson, 1995; Moskalenko & Heine, 2003); self-objectification is followed by negative emotions about one’s body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Thus, it is likely that individuals in a state of self-objectification will turn to entertainment media narratives to temporarily suppress a negative self-state. A study by Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) showed that one potential consequence of this type of strategic media

use is prolonged media exposure. The findings of the present study indicate that it is not only the length but also the “depth” of media engagement that is likely to increase when individuals turn to media in a negative self-state. The present study showed that viewers are likely to understand the narrative better, become more “lost” in the narrative, and enjoy the narrative more when engaging with the narrative in a state of self-objectification. However, state self-objectification did not influence identification with the narrative characters. Our results support the findings by Johnson et al. (2015) who found that individuals seeking a temporary “escape from self” through narrative engagement are likely to experience greater enjoyment and transportation but not identification with the narrative characters. Cohen (2013) posits that identification with a narrative character requires two steps: first, individuals temporarily abandon their own identity, and second, individuals adopt the identity of the character they identify with. The first step corresponds to the “escape from self” idea. However, the present study indicates that the second step may be missing. In other words, when engaging with a narrative in a self-objectifying state, individuals do abandon their own identity, but it seems that they do not adopt the identity of a character from the narrative. Rather, it seems like engaging with a narrative in a self-objectifying state prompts individuals to temporarily assume a state of “non-identity”.

Certainly, the most surprising finding of the present study is the direct negative effect of condition on transportation into the narrative, given that the indirect effect of condition on transportation via self-objectification was found to be positive. These findings suggest that taking a selfie prior to narrative engagement is likely to diminish transportation via an alternative path that does not include self-objectification. Future studies should consider other potential mediators of the link between a self-objectifying condition and transportation. Furthermore,

future studies should investigate why exposure to a self-objectifying condition is likely to have a direct negative effect on transportation, but not on comprehension, identification, and enjoyment.

Although the primary focus of the present study was investigating self-objectification and narrative engagement, the experimental manipulation also reflects another commonly studied behavior: the selfie. The findings of the present study are consistent with the existing literature on the self-objectifying effects of the selfie. In line with Salomon and Brown (2020), the results of the present study demonstrated that the act of taking a selfie increases state self-objectification even when the selfie is not shared with others. This may inform future studies on photo behaviors on social media.

The findings of the present study are also in line with recent research indicating that a state of self-objectification is likely to result in a temporary ‘alienation’ from the self; in a study by Felig et al. (2021), self-objectification inhibited the feeling of being cold in women wearing very little clothing. As the “escape from self” was never directly measured in the present study, future studies should include a measure that corresponds to this theoretical construct, to come up with more accurate conclusions.

Despite the theoretical contribution of the present study and its potential to inform media producers’ efforts to maximize viewers’ narrative engagement experiences, the present study faces a number of limitations. First, by choosing to focus only on televised entertainment media narratives, the study fails to demonstrate whether the same effects of state self-objectification would exist when engaging with different types of narratives; written narratives can be equally captivating as televised narratives (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Second, by not including adolescents in the sample, the study fails to capture a developmental period when physical appearance is of particular importance (Vannatta et al., 2009). Finally, in the experiment,

participants were exposed to an entertainment media narrative with a *low* presence of ideal-body images. It was, then, found that participants were likely strategically engaging with the narrative to temporarily escape their negative self-state prompted by self-objectification. However, research shows that entertainment media are typically characterized by a *high* presence of ideal-body images (Dittmar et al., 2009; Ricciardelli et al., 2000). If individuals are likely to engage with entertainment media to escape their self-objectifying state, and the prevalence of ideal-body images in entertainment media further induces self-objectification (Barbara L. Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), then it is possible that engaging with typical entertainment media narratives will no longer serve as an “escape from self”. Thus, Study 2 will investigate whether the direct and indirect effects found in Study 1 still exist when self-objectifying individuals are engaging with an entertainment media narrative with a high presence of ideal-body images.

### Chapter 3 Engagement with (Non)Ideal-Body Narratives on Screen

Study 1 investigated how the level of viewers' state self-objectification during engagement with an entertainment media narrative is likely to affect four modes of narrative engagement: comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment. Results showed that comprehension, transportation, and enjoyment, but not identification, were likely to increase when self-objectification was induced immediately before watching an entertainment narrative, mediated by individuals' state self-objectification. In brief, when people are experiencing more self-objectification as they approach a media narrative, they are more likely to engage the narrative more fully. The idea of media exposure as an "escape from self" was offered as a potential theoretical explanation for this finding.

In Study 1, state self-objectification was manipulated by an action unrelated to media exposure (taking a selfie vs. photographing the nearest source of light). Then, participants were exposed to a narrative with a *low* presence of ideal bodies, which is typically not the case when it comes to entertainment media narratives (Calogero, 2012; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Study 2 further examined the links found in Study 1 to determine whether the links still exist when state self-objectification is induced within an entertainment media narrative itself, one with a high presence of ideal bodies. It is possible that, when exposed to a typical entertainment media narrative, i.e., a narrative with a high presence of ideal bodies (Calogero, 2012; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), viewers will no longer be able to use the media as a way to escape negative feelings about their physical appearance, given that the prevalence of ideal bodies in mediated narratives is likely to reinforce state self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In other words, it is possible that exposure to ideal-looking bodies on screen will serve as a reminder of one's own physical appearance, in which case the "escape from self" idea would not hold true.

In addition to the reasoning presented above, Study 2 hypotheses were also informed by the findings of two lines of research. First, the existing studies on the effects of ideal-body media demonstrate that state self-objectification is likely to be induced by exposure to media content with a high presence of ideal bodies (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2012). For example, Aubrey and Taylor (2009) found that reading magazines depicting ideal bodies primed men to focus more on their own physical appearance. Aubrey et al. (2009) found that even brief exposure to ideal-body images is likely to increase state self-objectification in women. Finally, a meta-analysis of 50 independent studies on self-objectification found that exposure to appearance-focused media content is likely to increase self-objectification in both women and men. The second line of research informing the hypotheses includes empirical studies observing state self-objectification as task performance disruption (Quinn et al., 2010); this body of literature was already discussed in detail as part of the literature review for Study 1.

To sum up, Study 2 further advances the line of thinking presented in Study 1 by examining how the presence of ideal bodies in the entertainment media narrative itself is likely to affect narrative engagement. Study 2 tested the following hypotheses and research questions (Figure 1):

*H1a:* Exposure to an entertainment media narrative with a high presence of ideal bodies will negatively affect narrative comprehension.

*H1b:* Exposure to an entertainment media narrative with a high presence of ideal bodies will negatively affect transportation.

*H1c:* Exposure to an entertainment media narrative with a high presence of ideal bodies will negatively affect identification.

*H1d*: Exposure to an entertainment media narrative with a high presence of ideal bodies will negatively affect enjoyment.

*H1e*: The links between exposure to an entertainment media narrative with a high presence of ideal bodies and the four modes of narrative engagement will be mediated by state self-objectification.

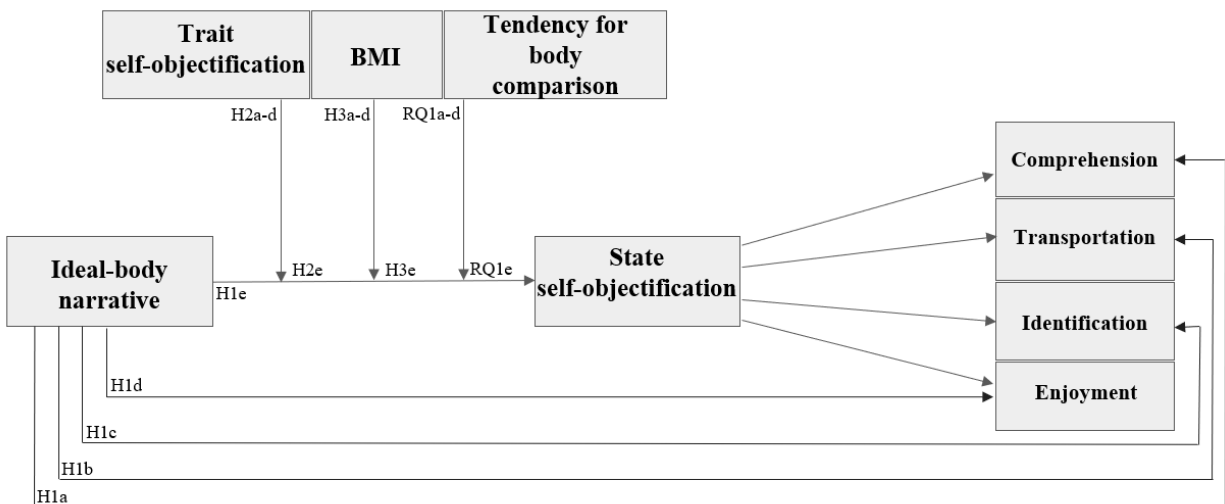


Figure 1 The conceptual model guiding Study 2

### 3.1 Potential Moderators

Furthermore, informed by the findings of previous studies on self-objectification, Study 2 looked at potential moderators of the relationship between an objectifying stimulus and the level of state self-objectification. Namely, Study 2 tested the moderating role of participants’ individual characteristics.

#### 3.1.1 Trait Self-Objectification

The term trait self-objectification refers to “differences in the degree to which people internalize observers’ perspectives on their physical selves in their everyday lives” (Gapinski et

al., 2003, p. 377). According to self-objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), the onset of state self-objectification in an objectifying situation (e.g., exposure to ideal-body media) is more likely in individuals scoring high on trait self-objectification than in individuals who are not particularly prone to self-objectification. In a study by Gay and Castano (2010), exposure to an objectifying condition resulted in poor performance on a letter-number sequencing task, but only in those individuals who scored high on trait self-objectification. Thus, I hypothesized that participants' trait self-objectification level would moderate the link between exposure to an entertainment media narrative with a high presence of ideal bodies and narrative comprehension (*H2a*), transportation (*H2b*), identification (*H2c*), and enjoyment (*H2d*), via state self-objectification (*H2e*), such that participants scoring higher on trait self-objectification would score lower on the four modes of narrative engagement than participants scoring lower on trait self-objectification.

### **3.1.2 Body Mass Index**

Participants' body mass index was examined as a potential moderator of the link between exposure to a self-objectifying narrative and narrative engagement levels, mediated by self-objectification. Past studies have found a positive relationship between BMI and the levels of body-focused negative affect (Dittmar et al., 2009), and a negative correlation between BMI and flow (Greenleaf, 2005). However, it is still unclear whether individuals with a higher BMI are more, equally, or less susceptible to negative effects of self-objectifying stimuli than individuals with a lower BMI, especially considering that, during the process of body monitoring, individuals' evaluations are based on their *perception* of their own body rather than the actual body shape and size. Inasmuch as state self-objectification is induced by a comparison between the mediated ideal body and the viewer's perception of their own bodies, it is possible



that individuals with a smaller discrepancy between the two bodies would experience lower levels of state self-objectification compared to participants in which this discrepancy is higher, ultimately affecting participants' levels of narrative engagement. Therefore, I hypothesized that participants' BMI would moderate the link between exposure to an entertainment media narrative with a high presence of ideal bodies and narrative comprehension (*H3a*), transportation (*H3b*), identification (*H3c*), and enjoyment (*H3d*), via state self-objectification (*H3e*), such that participants with a higher BMI would score lower on the four modes of narrative engagement than participants with a lower BMI.

### **3.1.3 Tendency for Body Comparison**

According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals evaluate their physical appearance by comparing it to the appearance of others. During this process, individuals engage in monitoring of their own body, one of the manifestations of self-objectification (Calogero, 2012; Mckinley & Hyde, 1996). It is, then, reasonable to believe that state self-objectification will, to some extent, be influenced by one's tendency for body comparison. Dittmar and Howard (2004) studied individuals' tendency to compare themselves to models in the media and found this trait to be a moderator of the effects of exposure to media models. It is, however, still unclear whether the strength of one's tendency for body comparison is likely to influence one's performance of a certain task. Observing narrative engagement as a task, as explained in Study 1, I posed the following research question: Will the strength of participants' tendency for body comparison moderate the link between exposure to an entertainment media narrative with a high presence of ideal bodies and narrative comprehension (*RQ1a*), transportation (*RQ1b*), identification (*RQ1c*), and enjoyment (*RQ1d*), via state self-objectification (*RQ1e*)?

## 3.2 Method

### 3.2.1 Stimuli Pretest

Two sets of entertainment media narratives were pilot-tested on a separate sample of 56 undergraduate students at a large West-coast university. In each set, one video was depicting an ideal-body couple and the other video was depicting a non-ideal-body (i.e., average-looking) couple. The videos were made by editing publicly available *YouTube* vlogs to create pairs of narratives that would be comparable to one another in all other aspects except the shape and size of depicted bodies. The first set of videos showed heterosexual romantic couples on a beach while the second set of videos showed heterosexual romantic couples buying groceries and preparing food. Each pretest participant viewed all four videos with no sound.

First, the following text was presented to each participant:

“Female bodies come in a tremendous range of sizes and shapes, some of which are more valued by our culture than others. Take a few moments to think about the kind of FEMALE body shape and size that MOST people in our culture would consider to be ideal. When you have that “ideal” shape in mind, navigate to the next page.”

The same text was then presented with the word “male” instead of “female”. Next, body ratings were obtained using a sliding scale of 1 to 10. Each participant was asked to rate the extent to which the female body in the video qualified as an ideal body from the perspective of most men, most women, and the participant’s own perspective. The same questions were then asked about the male body in the video. Mean body rating scores were computed for each of the eight rated bodies (male and female ideal-body subjects in the first set of videos, male and female non-ideal-body subjects in the first set of videos, male and female ideal-body subjects in

the second set of videos, and male and female non-ideal-body subjects in the second set of videos). Body ratings among the sets of videos were compared using independent samples t-tests. In the first set of videos, there was a significant difference in body ratings of the ideal-body female subject ( $M = 8.27, SD = 1.58$ ), and the non-ideal-body female subject ( $M = 4.92, SD = 1.83$ ),  $t(92) = 9.48, p < .001$  as well as the ideal-body male subject ( $M = 7.84, SD = 1.70$ ), and the non-ideal body male subject ( $M = 6.33, SD = 1.63$ ),  $t(92) = 4.28, p < .001$ . In the second set of videos, there was a significant difference in body ratings of the ideal-body female subject ( $M = 7.68, SD = 1.28$ ), and the non-ideal-body female subject ( $M = 3.11, SD = 2$ ),  $t(92) = 13.49, p < .001$  as well as the ideal-body male subject ( $M = 7.35, SD = 1.72$ ), and the non-ideal body male subject ( $M = 3.02, SD = 1.91$ ),  $t(91) = 11.38, p < .001$ . In both sets of videos, the male and female ideal-body subjects were rated as significantly more ideal-looking than the non-ideal-body subjects. However, the difference in ratings of the ideal- and non-ideal-body male subjects was larger in the second than the first pair of videos.

In addition to body ratings, each of the four videos was rated on the PANAS scale (Watson et al., 1988). PANAS was designed to measure positive and negative affect; this scale was included in the pretest to measure whether the ideal- and non-ideal-body videos in each set were being rated similarly with regard to the emotions they elicited. Independent samples t-tests were performed to compare the two videos within the first set and the two videos within the second set with regard to mean scores on all dimensions of PANAS (e.g., interested, distressed, excited). T-test results showed that in the first set of videos, the ideal-body video was making participants more upset,  $t(93) = 3.04, p < .01$ , more hostile,  $t(93) = 2.40, p < .05$ , more irritable,  $t(93) = 3.85, p < .001$ , less enthusiastic,  $t(93) = -2.23, p < .05$ , and less proud,  $t(92) = -3.60, p <$

.01, than the non-ideal-body video. In the second set of videos, none of the PANAS scores were significantly different between the ideal- and the non-ideal-body videos.

The ideal- and non-ideal-body videos from the second set were selected as the main study stimuli (Figure 2) given their similarity in the provoked emotional response and their difference in terms of subjects' body shapes and size, confirmed by participants' ratings.



Figure 2 Control and condition stimuli

### 3.2.2 Participants

Participants ( $N = 297$ ) were undergraduate students at a large West-coast university who completed the study in exchange for extra credit. More than half of the participants self-identified as female ( $n = 220$ , 74.1%). Participants were aged between 18 and 47 ( $M = 20.79$ ,  $SD = 3.26$ ). Participants identified their race/ethnicity as Asian/Pacific Islander ( $n = 150$ , 50.5%), White ( $n = 69$ , 23.2%), Hispanic or Latino ( $n = 62$ , 20.9%), Black or African American ( $n = 13$ , 4.4%), Native American or American Indian ( $n = 2$ , .7%), or “other” ( $n = 19$ , 6.4%). Median household income was between \$40,000 and \$49,999, and on average, participants had a high school diploma or the equivalent.

### 3.2.3 Procedure

Participants were invited to “complete a survey about experiences with media narratives” in exchange for extra credit. The study was approved by the university’s institutional review board. Participants were directed to Qualtrics, a survey website, where they read and signed a consent form for participating in an online experiment. All participants first completed two blocks of questions measuring trait self-objectification and the tendency for body comparison. Then, they were instructed to watch a short YouTube video (approximately two minutes) “produced by someone who has recently started their own YouTube channel”. Half of the participants were assigned to the control condition, i.e., they viewed the non-ideal-body couple, while the other half, in the self-objectifying condition, viewed the ideal-body couple. As noted earlier, all other aspects of the videos were kept as similar as possible. A written narrative originally produced for the purpose of the study was recorded as a voice-over in both the control and the self-objectifying condition video; it was a short story of a young woman preparing to share the news of her pregnancy with her husband and his parents.

Following the procedures in Gapinski et al. (2003) and Quinn et al. (2006), after watching one of the two videos, participants completed the same block of open-ended questions used as a manipulation check in Study 1. This block of questions was intended to confirm that self-objectification was successfully induced in the self-objectifying condition and not induced in the control condition. A measure of state self-objectification was later derived from participants’ responses.

Next, participants were asked to answer some questions about their reaction to the video and presented with four blocks of questions measuring the dependent variables: comprehension,

transportation, identification, and enjoyment. Lastly, participants completed a block of demographic questions before they were thanked and debriefed.

Responses to the abbreviated Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) were coded following the procedure described in Study 1. More than one-third of participants (37.7%) completed all ten “I am \_\_\_\_\_” sentences. About one third of participants (32%) listed three traits or less. Adjectives “beautiful”, “attractive”, and “tall” were the most commonly mentioned appearance-related traits. The most common non-appearance-related traits were “happy”, “strong”, and “healthy”. Overall, “healthy” was the most frequently mentioned trait, listed by 22% of participants after watching one of the two videos.

### **3.2.4 Measures**

Study 2 employed the same measures used in Study 1 to capture participants’ levels of comprehension ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = .96$ ,  $\alpha = .85$ ), transportation ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = .74$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ), identification ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ), and enjoyment ( $M = 4.79$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ).

Trait self-objectification levels were measured using the Self-Objectification Questionnaire by Noll and Fredrickson (1998). Participants were given a list of body attributes that included five appearance-related attributes (weight, sex appeal, physical attractiveness, firm/sculpted muscles, measurements) and five non-appearance-related attributes (physical coordination, health, strength, energy level, physical fitness level). Participants were asked to rank order the attributes from 1 to 10 based on the impact of each attribute on the way they think about their bodies. Following the procedure by Noll and Fredrickson (1998), separate scores were computed for the appearance- and non-appearance-related categories by summing up the ranks within each category. Finally, a difference score was computed by subtracting the non-

appearance score from the appearance score; higher total scores indicated higher levels of trait self-objectification (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998), ( $M = 7.61$ ,  $SD = 12.17$ ).

Participants' body mass index was calculated by entering self-reported values of participants' weight and height into the BMI formula (CDC, 2022), ( $M = 24.02$ ,  $SD = 5.03$ ).

The tendency for body comparison, i.e., the frequency of participants' body comparison with media images, was measured using the Distal: Frequency subscale of the Physical Appearance Comparison Scale-3 (PACS-3) by Schaefer and Thompson (2018). Participants indicated their level of agreement with each of the eight statements (e.g., "When I watch television, I compare my weight/shape to the weight/shape of the TV personalities") on a scale of 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*), ( $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = .97$ ,  $\alpha = .94$ ).

### **3.2.5 Results**

The proportion of appearance-related responses to the abbreviated version of the Twenty Statements Test was calculated for each participant following the same procedure as in Study 1. To compare the proportions of appearance-related responses in participants who viewed the ideal-body video ( $n = 146$ ) and participants who viewed the non-ideal-body video ( $n = 151$ ), an independent samples t-test was conducted. Results showed that the proportion of appearance-related responses was significantly higher among the participants in the control condition ( $M = .12$ ,  $SD = .20$ ) than among the participants in the self-objectifying condition ( $M = .07$ ,  $SD = .15$ ),  $t(295) = 2.57$ ,  $p < .05$ . Therefore, either exposure to the stimuli induced *higher* levels of self-objectification in those participants who were randomly assigned to the control group than the participants in the self-objectifying condition, induced a greater reduction in self-objectification among those in the experimental condition, or some combination of both. This was the opposite

of the intended manipulation outcome and inconsistent with what was observed in the rigorous pre-test.

Bivariate Pearson’s correlations were computed among key study variables (Table 2). In line with Study 1 results and the existing literature on narrative enjoyment (e.g. Green et al., 2004; Hall and Bracken, 2011), participants’ level of narrative enjoyment was strongly correlated with levels of comprehension, transportation, and identification. The present study findings also confirmed a strong correlation between identification and transportation (see Green et al., 2004; Tal-or & Cohen, 2010; Wissmath, Weibel, & Groner, 2009). Additionally, identification was found to be strongly correlated with comprehension, in line with Study 1 results.

As an exploratory measure, correlations between trait self-objectification and each dependent variable were analyzed. Interestingly, participants’ trait levels of self-objectification were strongly positively correlated with participants’ levels of transportation into the narrative and strongly negatively correlated with their levels of state self-objectification measured via the proportion of their appearance-related responses to the abbreviated Twenty Statements Test.

Table 2 Correlations among key study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Tendency for body comparison							
2. Trait self-objectification	-.218***						
3. State self-objectification	.127*	-.194***					
4. Comprehension	.023	.032	-.041				



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5. Transportation	-.078	.164***	-.072	.246***		
6. Identification	.118*	.128*	-.075	.474***	.384***	
7. Enjoyment	.142*	.128*	-.068	.341***	.410***	.546***

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Note. \*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$

Model 4 of Hayes's PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) was used to address *H1a-H1e*; state self-objectification was tested as a mediator between exposure to an entertainment media narrative with a high presence of ideal bodies and the four modes of narrative engagement. This type of analysis gives a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect through the mediator after 5,000 bootstrapped samples. The mediating relationship is considered significant at  $p < .05$  if the confidence interval does not include a zero (Hayes, 2013). The existing literature argues that self-objectification levels are likely to be influenced by participants' gender (e.g., Dakanalis and Riva, 2013; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997) and age (e.g., Grippo & Hill, 2008; McNeill & Firman, 2014; Szymanski & Henning, 2007). Therefore, gender and age were included in the statistical analysis as controls. The experimental condition was coded as 1. The control was coded as 0. A negative effect of condition on state self-objectification was found,  $b = -.05$ ,  $t(295) = -2.57$ ,  $p = .01$ , reflective of the already-observed significantly higher state self-objectification scores among participants in the control condition. However, none of the analyzed mediation models yielded significant results.

To address *H2a-H2e*, *H3a-H3e*, and *RQ1a-RQ1e*, Model 7 of Hayes's PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) was used; participants' trait self-objectification levels, BMI, and the tendency for body comparison were tested as potential moderators of the link between exposure

to an entertainment media narrative with a high presence of ideal bodies and the four modes of narrative engagement via state self-objectification. None of the hypothesized moderation models were significant.

### **3.3 Discussion**

The present study investigated how exposure to ideal bodies in entertainment media narratives is likely to affect narrative engagement, namely, comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment. The present study examined state self-objectification as a potential mechanism of influence of ideal bodies on participants' narrative engagement levels. Informed by two lines of research – one showing that ideal-body images in the media are likely to induce state self-objectification (e.g., Aubrey and Taylor, 2009; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2012) and the other showing that a self-objectifying state is likely to impede task performance (e.g., Dimas et al., 2021; Fredrickson et al., 1998), I hypothesized that exposure to an entertainment media narrative with a high presence of ideal bodies will negatively affect comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment, mediated by state self-objectification. Participants' trait self-objectification levels (see Gay & Castano, 2010), body mass index (see Dittmar et al., 2009), and the tendency for body comparison (see Dittmar & Howard, 2004) were measured as potential moderators of the hypothesized relationships.

The results showed that there was a negative effect of condition on state self-objectification; following narrative exposure, state self-objectification was higher among participants who viewed a non-ideal-body video compared to participants who viewed an ideal-body video. One possible explanation is that the choice of stimulus videos resulted in the manipulation of body salience rather than state self-objectification. Given that a measure of body salience (e.g., Seifert et al., 2008) was not included in the study design, further research is

needed to investigate the potential effects of exposing participants to different body shapes and sizes in an entertainment media narrative on body salience. Images of bodies in the media typically set unattainable standards of physical appearance (Groesz et al., 2002; Hendrickse et al., 2021), such as having a thin yet curvy body for women (Bell & Dittmar, 2011) or a lean and muscular body for men (Blond, 2008). However, the video to which control participants were exposed depicted a couple whose body shape and size were strikingly average for men and women living in the United States (CDC, 2021). It is possible that the unusualness of displaying overweight bodies in an entertainment media narrative contributed to the effect of the control video on participants' state self-objectification.

This is not to say that there was no support for the underlying expectations informing the study. Participants' trait self-objectification levels were positively correlated with levels of transportation into the entertainment media narrative they viewed. Additionally, participants' trait self-objectification levels were negatively correlated with participants' state self-objectification levels. In other words, participants who habitually objectified themselves more frequently were likely to accomplish a higher degree of transportation into the narrative and a lower level of self-objectification while watching the narrative. These findings correspond to the "escape from self" idea presented in Study 1; for participants high in trait self-objectification, engagement with an entertainment media narrative can apparently function as an escape from negative self-thoughts (Larson, 1995). In Study 1, a state of self-objectification was induced with a non-narrative stimulus (photo-taking task); subsequent exposure to an entertainment media narrative in a self-objectifying state was found to be linked with increased comprehension, transportation, and enjoyment. The "escape from self" idea (Larson, 1995) was offered as a potential explanation of this mechanism. In the present study, an attempt was made to induce a

state of self-objectification with a narrative itself, i.e., by choosing a stimulus video that was likely to prompt participants to self-objectify. The results of correlation analysis point to a possibility that an “escape from self” happened in Study 2, but with habitual or pre-existing self-objectification rather than what was induced by the narrative.

Although exposure to the two narratives resulted in different levels of self-reported self-objectification, none of the hypothesized mediation models yielded significant results. PROCESS analysis results showed that the final step from Study 1 findings – increased narrative engagement – was missing in Study 2. As participants in the present study were exposed to narratives with a high presence of body depictions, it is possible that the entertainment narrative world no longer served as a “safe space” for an escape from participants’ body-related thoughts; perhaps the participants perceived the video as a narrative they wanted to escape *from*, thereby rendering the video an unlikely candidate for a video to escape *into*.

Lastly, results showed significantly higher state self-objectification among participants in the control condition compared to participants in the self-objectifying condition. However, due to the study design, it is not possible to discern whether the video viewed by the control group increased self-objectification or the video viewed by the condition group decreased self-objectification. Therefore, the absence of a true control is considered to be a limitation of the present study.

## Chapter 4 Online Ads and Short Stories

Two experimental studies were conducted so far to investigate how individuals engage with entertainment media narratives in a state of self-objectification. In Study 1, self-objectification levels were manipulated by asking participants to take a selfie or a photo of the nearest source of light. Participants were then exposed to an entertainment media narrative that did not include any ideal-body content. According to the results, three out of four measured narrative engagement modes were likely to increase in those participants who engaged with the narrative in a self-objectifying state, potentially because the entertainment media content is likely to serve as an avenue for escaping the negative self-thoughts. Informed by the findings of Study 1, Study 2 also looked at engagement with entertainment media narratives. However, in Study 2, state self-objectification levels were manipulated by exposing participants to an ideal-body video or an average-body video. The intention was to induce higher self-objectification levels in the ideal-body condition compared to the control. However, the ideal-body video had a negative effect on viewers' self-objectification, possibly due to the body salience effect that was not accounted for during the study design. Although the manipulation resulted in unintended differences between the two groups, correlation analysis still showed some support for the "escape from self" idea introduced in Study 1.

Admittedly, Study 2 presented significant challenges in terms of experimental design. Namely, establishing experimental control proved to be difficult given that the presence or absence of ideal-looking bodies in the video needed to be manipulated while keeping all other elements of the narrative constant. The failure of the ideal-body video to elicit greater state self-objectification among viewers than the control video may have been attributable to any on a number of small differences between the two videos, calling into question whether internal

validity was achieved. To ensure internal validity, Study 3 was designed using a *written* entertainment media narrative as a stimulus and intended to investigate similar relationships to those that were the focus of the previous two studies. The choice of a written instead of a televised narrative also echoes much of the pioneering research in the field of narrative engagement. For example, Green and Brock (2000) developed a scale for measuring transportation by having participants read a short story about a girl being stabbed at a shopping mall. Narrative engagement scholars later adapted this scale to measure transportation into televised narratives (e.g., Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010). The remaining three modes of narrative engagement that are the subject of this dissertation were also explored in experiments using written narratives: comprehension (e.g., Lynch et al., 2008), identification (e.g., Hoeken et al., 2016), and enjoyment (e.g., Johnson et al., 2015). These studies demonstrated that, although written narratives lack the visual aspect, readers are still likely to engage with them in ways that are similar to viewers' engagement with televised narratives. That is because reading a story, just like watching a story unfold in a video, entails constructing (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009) and updating (Song et al., 2021) mental models, as explained in previous chapters. Rather than from the visual elements designed by the creators of televised narratives, the richness of written narratives comes from the writers' descriptions and the imagination of the reader (Bower & Morrow, 1990). For example, the reader constructs a spatial model of the story, i.e., "a mental map of the places, landmarks, and objects as they are laid out in space and the locations of the characters as they move about" (Bower & Morrow, 1990, p. 45).

#### **4.1 Online Ads**

Study 3 was conducted online and centered around written entertainment narratives published on the Internet. A quick Google search yields thousands of short-story websites,

attesting to the popularity of this type of entertainment. When visiting a short-story website (e.g., *Short-story.me*, *Wattpad.com*), one element that is immediately apparent is the presence of ads, especially banners. This is not surprising considering that online advertising is currently the most prevalent form of advertising (Harms et al., 2019). In addition to video ads and ads with a social media post format (Harms et al., 2019), banners are a predominant type of online advertising (Liu et al., 2019). Contrary to the widespread belief that Internet users avoid engaging with banners, research shows that banners attract users' attention. For example, based on eye tracking and ad recall measures, Hervet et al. (2011) found that most participants in their study focused on the banner at least one time while visiting a website. Furthermore, banners are likely to be evaluated more positively than other types of online ads such as article-style ads (Harms et al., 2019). Banners are also likely to provide a better understanding of the intended message of the ad (Harms et al., 2019).

In terms of content, objectifying ads are prevalent in the media (Bolanos Melgar & Elsner, 2016), especially ads depicting nude or scantily clad women (Fullerton & Kendrick, 2000). A content analysis of 1,755 ads from 13 countries showed that female nudity in ads is much more common than male nudity (Matthes & Prieler, 2020). Research shows that ads containing nudity are likely to be engaging, even distracting (Maliszewski et al., 2019; Reichert, 2002; Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020), because individuals are, "evolutionarily predisposed to attend to emotionally arousing cues such as sex and violence" (Lull & Bushman, 2015). As noted earlier, individuals' cognitive resources are limited (Lang, 2000). In the presence of sexualized content (e.g., ads containing nudity), the attention is likely to be directed toward the sexualized content at the expense of non-sexualized content (Lull & Bushman, 2015). While Lull and Bushman (2015) account for this attentional narrowing by drawing from the evolution and

emotional arousal theoretical framework, other researchers argue that self-objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) offers an explanation for the impairment of cognitive processing (see the introduction to Study 1). Conversely, Study 1 found that self-objectification was likely to *increase* the levels of audience engagement with a non-sexualized narrative; namely, those modes of engagement that require cognitive processing. The “escape from self” idea was offered as a theoretical explanation (see Study 1). The findings of correlational analysis in Study 2 also offered some support for the “escape from self” idea. In line with the findings on the positive effects of state self-objectification on narrative engagement, Study 3 tested the following hypotheses in the context of ads and entertainment media narratives:

Participants’ exposure to an objectifying online story will increase participants’ comprehension (*H1a*) of the story, transportation into the story (*H1b*), identification with the protagonist (*H1c*), and enjoyment of the story (*H1d*).

Participants’ exposure to an objectifying online ad will increase participants’ comprehension (*H2a*) of the story, transportation into the story (*H2b*), identification with the protagonist (*H2c*), and enjoyment of the story (*H2d*).

The hypothesized effects will be mediated by state self-objectification (*H3*).

According to self-objectification theory and the research built upon it, individual characteristics are likely to influence the degree of self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Women are more likely to self-objectify than men (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Given the relatively greater susceptibility to self-objectification and higher representation of objectified female bodies in the media, Study 3 was carried out with a sample of individuals who identify as women.



In addition to gender, the degree of self-objectification also varies with age. Past studies indicate a decrease in women's trait self-objectification with age (Grippo & Hill, 2008; Szymanski & Henning, 2007; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). Additionally, a study by Greenleaf (2005) found that older women scored higher on the loss of self-consciousness compared to younger women; loss of self-consciousness is an important element of transportation. Therefore, it is worth investigating whether participants' age will moderate the link between participants' exposure to an objectifying online story and narrative comprehension (*RQ1a*), transportation (*RQ1b*), identification (*RQ1c*), and enjoyment (*RQ1d*), and whether participants' age will moderate the link between participants' exposure to an objectifying online ad and narrative comprehension (*RQ2a*), transportation (*RQ2b*), identification (*RQ2c*), and enjoyment (*RQ2d*).

One part of the literature on women's body image suggests a potential moderating role of race/ethnicity. For example, in a study by Stevens et al. (1994), women who identified as African American were less likely to diet and more likely to consider themselves attractive than women who identified as White. Furthermore, Ordaz et al. (2018) found that women who identified as African American reported lower levels of pressure to be thin than those who identified as White or Hispanic or Latino. However, when the swimsuit vs. sweater study by Fredrickson et al. (1998) was replicated on an ethnically diverse sample, results showed that women were likely to experience the negative outcomes of state self-objectification on task performance regardless of their race/ethnicity (Hebl et al., 2004). Thus, the present study will explore whether participants' race/ethnicity will moderate the link between participants' exposure to an objectifying online story and narrative comprehension (*RQ3a*), transportation (*RQ3b*), identification (*RQ3c*), and enjoyment (*RQ3d*), and whether participants' race/ethnicity will moderate the link between

participants' exposure to an objectifying online ad and narrative comprehension (*RQ4a*), transportation (*RQ4b*), identification (*RQ4c*), and enjoyment (*RQ4d*).

Lastly, I will look at a potential moderating role of participants' relationship status, in line with the "partner market" idea by Schmitz (2016). According to this idea, when searching for a romantic partner, individuals frequently make judgments about the "goods" they have to offer to a potential partner, including one's own physical appearance. Thus, it is possible that single individuals will be more likely to engage in body monitoring than non-single individuals. In other words, self-objectification might be more prevalent among those participants that are not in a romantic relationship. Given the lack of research on this topic, it is worth exploring whether participants' relationship status will moderate the link between participants' exposure to an objectifying online story and narrative comprehension (*RQ5a*), transportation (*RQ5b*), identification (*RQ5c*), and enjoyment (*RQ5d*), and whether participants' relationship status will moderate the link between participants' exposure to an objectifying online ad and narrative comprehension (*RQ6a*), transportation (*RQ6b*), identification (*RQ6c*), and enjoyment (*RQ6d*).

## **4.2 Ad-Story Congruity**

The level of congruity between a piece of media content (e.g., a narrative) and an embedded ad varies. Media scholars pay significant attention to the concept of congruity and its implications – whether the ad and the narrative are congruent in terms of a specific characteristic. One line of research looks at congruity in terms of sexualization levels; in a meta-analysis of 53 experiments, Lull and Bushman (2015) found that when a piece of media content and an ad are congruent (i.e., when both are sexualized), individuals' memory of the ad is likely to improve compared to a non-congruent condition. The reasoning is that the sexualized piece of media content activates sexual thoughts, thus making the sexualized ad more accessible (Lull &

Bushman, 2015). On the contrary, Lawrence et al. (2021) argue that congruity is detrimental to individuals' memory and that the recall of a sexualized ad is more likely to be successful in the context of a non-sexualized program simply due to the isolation effect (sexualized ad being different from the rest of the content). Given the opposing findings, the potential effects of ad-story congruity warrant further exploration. Study 3 aims to answer the following:

Will there be an effect of ad-story congruity on participants' narrative comprehension (*RQ7a*), transportation (*RQ7b*), identification (*RQ7c*), and enjoyment (*RQ7d*)?

### **4.3 Method**

#### **4.3.1 Stimuli Pretest**

To select stimuli for Study 3 (ad and narrative), focus groups were conducted. Undergraduate students from a large West-coast university who identified as female were invited to participate in a virtual focus group in exchange for extra credit. Four virtual focus groups were conducted via Zoom with a total of 15 participants. At the beginning of each focus group, the researcher greeted the participants and explained the purpose of the focus group. Each participant then read six written narratives; each of the narratives was between 300 and 500 words long and required about two minutes of reading time. Some of the narratives were created by adapting existing pieces of fiction while others were produced by the researchers for the purpose of the present study. All narratives had a female protagonist and included an appearance description of the protagonist that clearly demonstrated having an ideal-looking body. After reading each of the narratives, participants were asked a series of questions to estimate how well participants understood the narrative and were transported into the narrative, whether they identified with the protagonist, and whether they enjoyed reading the narrative.

Additionally, each participant was shown a total of 12 images of young and curvaceous women, each with a well-defined physique and revealing clothing, matching the typical representation of female bodies in ads (Reichert, 2002). After viewing each image, participants were asked to comment on the model's appearance in terms of Western society's body ideals and the typical female body representation in the media, especially ads. After sharing their observations about the narratives and images, participants were thanked.

Based on the focus group insights, two narratives and three images that received the most positive feedback were selected for further analysis. A short online survey was then conducted on a separate sample of undergraduate students who identified as female ( $N = 36$ ) in exchange for extra credit. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the three images (Figure 3), this time edited to appear as an online ad – an image of a perfume bottle/deodorant with a visible brand name was included in the bottom right-hand corner of the ad.



Figure 3 Pretested ads

The ad was shown with the following instructions: “Female body that is young, thin, and curvaceous is perceived as an ideal-looking female body in Western culture. With that in mind,

please observe the following online ad.” After seeing the ad, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree that the person in the ad has an ideal body. Participants were then asked to complete the abbreviated Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) used in Study 1 and Study 2 as a measure of state self-objectification. Finally, each participant was asked to read two short fictional narratives, one about a woman hoping to adopt a cat and the other about a woman hoping to be hired as a babysitter. Objectification was manipulated by including or excluding descriptions of the protagonist’s body (e.g., “She was a classic beauty; young, a size 4, an hourglass figure, the kind that was sure to turn heads regardless of what she was wearing.”). Each participant was presented with one objectifying story (i.e., condition) and one non-objectifying story (i.e., control). In other words, participants were presented either with the experimental condition version of the cat story and control version of the babysitter story or with the control version of the cat story and experimental condition version of the babysitter story. This allowed for larger samples in each of the conditions. After reading the narratives, participants completed an eight-item measure of narrative engagement (two items per engagement mode) that captured levels of comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment for each of the stories. To check for the objectifying potential of the narrative, participants also responded to questions pertaining to the protagonists’ appearance (“In the story you just read, how physically attractive would you say the female protagonist was?”, and, “To what extent would you agree with this statement: The female protagonist had an ideal body”).

#### **4.3.2 Pretest Results**

Looking at the means of body idealness ratings for all three ads, Ad 2 ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = .96$ ) seemingly received a higher score than Ad 1 ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) and Ad 3 ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = .70$ ). However, a one-way ANOVA revealed that the difference in body idealness ratings

between at least two ads was not statistically significant,  $F(2, 33) = 2.15, p = .13$ . Still, Ad 2 was selected as the stimulus for the main study, given the findings of focus groups in which Ad 2 received the most positive feedback. Furthermore, a comparison of participants' responses to the 10 statements test revealed that the participants who viewed Ad 2 gave a higher proportion of appearance-related responses after ad exposure ( $M = .63, SD = .23$ ) than the participants who viewed Ad 1 ( $M = .62, SD = .36$ ) or Ad 3 ( $M = .23, SD = .25$ ),  $F(2, 32) = 6.64, p < .01$ .

The mean engagement scores for the cat story and the babysitter story were compared by conducting an independent-sample t-test. The babysitter story ( $M = 2.96, SD = .75$ ) was rated as significantly less engaging than the cat story ( $M = 3.51, SD = .68$ ),  $t(69) = -3.23, p < .01$ . Participants' ratings of both narratives were also analyzed to determine the objectifying potential of the control versus condition version of the narratives. Independent-sample t-tests were conducted to compare the ratings of the protagonist's attractiveness for the control versus condition version of each story. For the cat story, the ratings of the protagonist's attractiveness were significantly lower in the control ( $M = 2.58, SD = 1.02$ ) than in the experimental condition ( $M = 3.65, SD = 1.12$ ),  $t(34) = -3.00, p < .01$ . For the babysitter story, there was no significant difference in the attractiveness ratings for the control ( $M = 2.88, SD = .70$ ) and the experimental condition ( $M = 2.89, SD = .83$ ) versions of the story,  $t(33) = -.03, p = .98$ . Independent-sample t-tests were also conducted to compare the ratings of the protagonist's body idealness for the control versus condition version of each story. For the cat story, there was no significant difference in the ratings of the protagonist's body idealness for the control ( $M = 4.00, SD = 1.29$ ) and the experimental condition ( $M = 4.12, SD = 1.27$ ) version of the story,  $t(34) = -.28, p = .79$ . For the babysitter story, the ratings of the protagonist's body idealness were significantly lower in the control ( $M = 3.41, SD = .80$ ) than the experimental condition ( $M = 4.17, SD = 1.04$ ),  $t(33)$

= -2.40,  $p < .05$ . In sum, the protagonist's attractiveness was rated higher in the experimental condition than the control version of the cat story, but not the babysitter story, and the protagonist's body idealness was rated higher in the experimental condition than the control version of the babysitter story, but not the cat story.

A one-sample t-test with a test value of 3 was then conducted to determine whether the participants who read the condition version of the cat story rated the protagonist's attractiveness (measured on a 5-point scale) as above average. Results showed that the mean attractiveness score in the experimental condition group was significantly higher than average,  $t(16) = 2.39, p < .05$ , while the mean attractiveness score in the control group was not significantly higher than average,  $t(15) = -1.23, p = .24$ . Similar procedure was followed to determine whether the participants who read the experimental condition version of the babysitter story rated the protagonist's body idealness as above average. Results of a one-sample t-test with a test value of 3 showed that the mean body idealness score in the experimental condition group was significantly higher than average,  $t(17) = 4.75, p < .001$ . The difference between the mean body idealness score and the test value in the control was borderline significant,  $t(16) = 2.14, p = .05$ . In conclusion, for the babysitter story, both the experimental condition and the control version of the narrative were found to have objectifying potential. Conversely, for the cat story, only the experimental condition version of the narrative was found to have objectifying potential. Given the findings on the engagement scores and the objectifying potential of both pretested narratives, the cat story was selected for the main study (see Appendix B).

### **4.3.3 Participants**

Participants ( $N = 294$ ) were recruited using the global data platform Dynata. The sample size was selected based on previous studies testing the effects of self-objectification on task

performance. Eligibility was limited to individuals residing in the United States who identify as female aged 18-30 ( $M = 23.8$ ,  $SD = 3.75$ ), given that young women are far more likely to experience high levels of self-objectification than other groups (Calogero, 2012). In terms of race/ethnicity, participants identified as White ( $n = 160$ , 54.4%), Asian/Pacific Islander ( $n = 53$ , 18%), Black or African American ( $n = 49$ , 16.7%), Hispanic or Latino ( $n = 48$ , 16.3%), Native American or American Indian ( $n = 6$ , 2%), or “other” ( $n = 11$ , 3.7%) with a median household income between \$40,000 and \$49,999. On average, participants reported their education as having obtained an associate’s degree.

#### **4.3.4 Procedure**

Participants received an invitation from Dynata to take part in a research study in exchange for monetary compensation. After expressing their interest, participants were directed to Qualtrics and asked to respond to some questions about them, read a short fictional story, and respond to questions about their engagement with the story. Those participants who gave their consent and confirmed their age and gender identity were presented with a block of questions about their personality (The Mini-IPIP scale by Donnellan et al., 2006) to mask the study intent. Trait self-objectification levels were measured following the procedure from the previous study ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 12.61$ ). All participants were then instructed to read a short fictional narrative presented in the form of a website screenshot that included an ad (banner). The narrative, i.e., the cat story, appeared in one of the two versions: with (experimental condition) or without (control) a description of the protagonist’s ideal-looking body. The story was otherwise identical in both versions and followed the attempt of a young American woman to adopt a cat while vacationing in a foreign country (Appendix B).



The ad also appeared in one of the two versions: the experimental condition included a photo of a seated ideal-looking young woman wearing revealing workout clothes and a small image of a deodorant with a brand name, while the control version of the ad showed only the deodorant and the brand name (Figure 4).

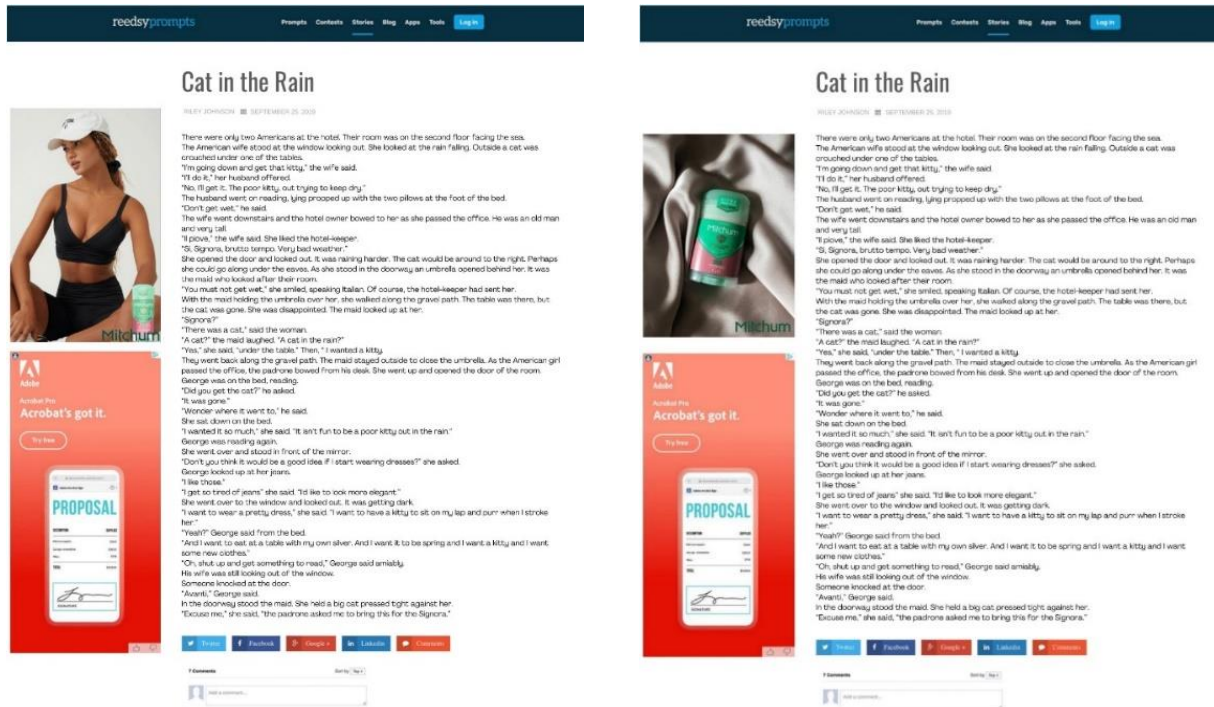


Figure 4 Experimental condition and control stimuli

Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the four conditions: objectifying narrative, objectifying ad (1), objectifying narrative, neutral ad (2), neutral narrative, objectifying ad (3), neutral narrative, neutral ad (4).

All participants then completed the same comprehension ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ), transportation ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = .86$ ,  $\alpha = .64$ ), identification ( $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ), and enjoyment ( $M = 5.71$ ,  $SD = 2.25$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ) instruments that were included in Study 1 and Study 2 questionnaire, as well as the measure of state self-objectification used previously (the

abbreviated Twenty Statements Test by Kuhn and McPartland, 1954). The final block of questions pertained to participants' demographic characteristics and relationship status, coded as in a relationship ( $n = 137$ ) or single ( $n = 157$ ).

#### 4.3.5 Results

Responses to the abbreviated version of the Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) were coded following the same procedure as in Study 1 and Study 2. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the proportion of appearance-related responses among the participants who read the objectifying and participants who read the non-objectifying version of the narrative. There was no significant difference between the control group ( $M = .08$ ,  $SD = .16$ ) and the experimental condition ( $M = .11$ ,  $SD = .17$ ),  $t(292) = -1.36$ ,  $p = .17$ . An independent samples t-test was also conducted to compare the proportion of appearance-related responses among the participants who viewed the objectifying and participants who viewed the non-objectifying version of the ad. The difference between the control group ( $M = .10$ ,  $SD = .17$ ) and the experimental condition ( $M = .09$ ,  $SD = .16$ ) was not significant,  $t(292) = .21$ ,  $p = .84$ . Thus, the manipulation of participants' state self-objectification levels did not produce the intended results.

Bivariate Pearson's correlations were computed among key study variables (Table 3). Each of the four modes of narrative engagement was strongly correlated with the remaining three modes, consistent with the literature that oftentimes fails to draw clear lines between different narrative engagement modes, especially identification and transportation (Green et al., 2004; Talor & Cohen, 2010; Wissmath, Weibel, & Groner, 2009) and transportation and enjoyment (Hall and Bracken, 2011; Johnson & Sangalang, 2017).

Table 3 Correlations among key study variables

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Comprehension					
2. Transportation	.451***				
3. Identification	.530***	.506***			
4. Enjoyment	.439***	.475***	.644***		
5. State self-objectification	.117*	.033	.088	.076	

Note. \*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$

To address *H1a-H1d* and *H2a-H2d*, between-subjects two-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine the effects of exposure to an online ad (control vs. objectifying) and exposure to an online story (control vs. objectifying) on comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment. Participants' age, relationship status, and race/ethnicity were also entered as factors. There were no significant main effects of ad or story exposure on any of the four narrative engagement modes (see Table 4); therefore, *H1a-H1d* and *H2a-H2d* were not supported.

However, there was a significant interaction between the effects of the ad and story on comprehension,  $F(1, 282) = 5.32, p < .05$ . Among the participants who read the control story, those who saw the objectifying ad seemingly experienced decreased comprehension. Among the participants who read the objectifying story, those who saw the objectifying ad seemingly experienced increased comprehension. There was also a significant interaction between the

effects of the ad and race/ethnicity on enjoyment,  $F(1, 282) = 4.65, p < .05$ . Among the participants who identified as White, those who saw the objectifying ad seemingly experienced increased enjoyment. Among participants who identified as non-White, those who saw the objectifying ad seemingly experienced decreased enjoyment. Lastly, significant interactions were observed between the effects of the ad and participants' relationship status on comprehension,  $F(1, 282) = 12.2, p < .001$ , identification,  $F(1, 282) = 5.32, p < .05$ , and enjoyment,  $F(1, 282) = 9.84, p < .05$ . For single participants, seeing the objectifying ad seemingly increased narrative comprehension, identification, and enjoyment. For participants in a relationship, seeing the objectifying ad seemingly decreased narrative comprehension, identification, and enjoyment. Planned comparisons with Bonferroni correction were performed for the detected interactions; there was no significant effect of ad exposure on comprehension for either of the conditions, i.e., control vs. objectifying story. This result rejects the possibility of ad-story congruity effects (*RQ7a - RQ7d*).

In terms of the tested moderations, there was no significant effect of ad exposure on narrative enjoyment for either White or non-White participants. Participants' relationship status did not moderate the relationship between exposure to an objectifying ad and participants' comprehension of the story or identification with the protagonist. However, planned comparisons showed that relationship status did moderate the link between objectifying ad exposure and participants' enjoyment of the narrative. As mentioned above, exposure to an objectifying ad increased the single participants' enjoyment of the story; for those in a relationship, seeing the objectifying ad decreased narrative enjoyment. In conclusion, investigating the moderations described in *RQ1a - RQ6c* yielded no significant results; investigating *RQ6d* showed a significant moderation.

Lastly, Model 4 of Hayes’s PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) was used to address *H3*. The experimental condition was coded as 1. The control was coded as 0. The relationships between ad exposure and state self-objectification, and story exposure and state self-objectification were not significant. Thus, the mediation models were not significant; *H3* was not supported.

Table 4 ANOVA results

	Comprehension	Transportation	Identification	Enjoyment
Ad	.256	.134	.449	.385
Story	.017	.321	.052	1.71
Race	.009	.645	.204	.781
Age	.138	.545	1.90	1.39
Rel. status	.335	.382	.442	.002
Ad*Story	5.32*	.805	1.92	1.83
Ad*Race	.040	.045	2.35	4.65*
Story*Race	.259	.048	2.08	.226
Ad*Age	.748	1.48	.750	1.56
Story*Age	2.16*	1.67	2.25*	1.02
Ad*Rel. status	12.2***	1.35	5.32*	9.84**
Story*Rel. status	1.04	4.59*	.585	.448
Overall model	1.37*	1.47*	1.39*	1.30

Note. \*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$

#### 4.4 Discussion

The present study aimed to expand the knowledge on the nature and extent of women's comprehension of written entertainment media narratives, transportation into the narrative world, identification with the protagonist, and enjoyment of the narrative when engaging with the narrative in a self-objectifying state. Drawing from the literature about the influence of state self-objectification on task performance (e.g., Dimas et al., 2021; Fredrickson et al., 1998; Hebl et al., 2004; Quinn et al., 2006), prior research on individuals' engagement with written narratives (e.g., Green & Brock, 2000; Hoeken et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2015; Lynch et al., 2008), and Study 1 and Study 2, I hypothesized a positive effect of participants' exposure to an objectifying online story and a positive effect of participants' exposure to an adjacent objectifying online ad on participants' comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment, via state self-objectification. Women's age, race/ethnicity, and relationship status were tested as potential moderators. Lastly, given the conflicting findings on ad-story congruity in the existing research, I also explored whether there will be any ad-story congruity effects on participants' narrative engagement.

Despite the elaborate design and pretests of both the visual and the textual stimuli, the manipulation of participants' state self-objectification levels was not successful. Unlike Study 2, in which the effect of condition on self-objectification was significant, albeit in an unintended direction, the manipulation of participants' state self-objectification levels in Study 3 yielded no significant difference between the participants who were exposed to the objectifying vs. control ad. It is possible that the ad failed to capture participants' attention; according to some studies, ads that do not include any text are less likely to be noticed than those who do include text (Benway, 1998). Participants were not instructed to direct their attention toward the ad. Perhaps participants' attention was, therefore, fully directed toward the short story they were reading.

Future studies could include specific instructions about viewing the ad. However, this could potentially affect the external validity.

The difference in state self-objectification levels in participants who read the objectifying version of the narrative and those who read the version without any appearance descriptions was also not significant. It is possible that the unsuccessful manipulation was due to low *trait* self-objectification levels among the study participants; for comparison, the mean trait self-objectification score in Study 2 was 7.61, while the mean score for the same measure in Study 3 was only 2. According to the self-objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), objectifying stimuli are more likely to induce state self-objectification in women scoring high on trait self-objectification than those scoring low.

Participants' exposure to an objectifying ad produced no significant direct or indirect effects on participants' comprehension, transportation, and identification levels. In terms of participants' enjoyment of the narrative, seeing an objectifying ad had a positive effect among single participants and a negative effect among participants in a relationship. In Study 1, the increase in participants' narrative enjoyment levels was explained with the "escape from self" idea; participants were assumed to be escaping the negative thoughts about their appearance. The "escape from self" could be used as an appropriate theoretical framework for explaining the moderation findings in Study 3 as well. Most individuals perceive being in a relationship as positive. If being single is typically perceived as a negative self-state, it is possible that participants viewed their engagement with the short story as an escape from the reality of being single. However, this assumption should be further tested. It is also unclear why participants' relationship status moderated the effects on enjoyment, but not on other modes of narrative engagement, especially given the correlations between enjoyment and other engagement modes.

Future studies should explore in more detail why objectifying ads are likely to increase single individuals' enjoyment, but not comprehension of and transportation into an adjacent narrative or identification with the narrative character(s).

Participants' exposure to an objectifying story had no direct or indirect effects on participants' comprehension, transportation, identification, and enjoyment levels. It is possible that the objectifying version of the cat narrative was, in fact, not "objectifying enough", thus failing to affect participants' state self-objectification levels. Although the manipulation included descriptions of the female protagonist's body shape and size, the descriptions may have been overlooked or overshadowed by other elements of the story. Other types of objectifying descriptions might have been a more suitable choice; for example, descriptions of sexual behavior or sexualized remarks (Szymanski et al., 2011). It is important to keep in mind that the measure introduced following the objectifying stimuli exposure was a measure of *self*-objectification, not a measure of how objectifying the ad and/or story was. Thus, it is possible that the stimuli were objectifying enough, but failed to prompt self-directed body-monitoring thoughts, perhaps due to low identification levels. Future studies should account for these limitations by employing more carefully designed visual and textual stimuli.



## Chapter 5 Conclusion

### 5.1 Summary of Dissertation Studies

This dissertation aimed to empirically examine how individuals engage with entertainment media narratives in a state of self-objectification. Comprehension of the narrative, transportation into the narrative, identification with the character(s), and enjoyment of the narrative were investigated as dependent variables in three online experimental studies. Narrative format and self-objectification manipulation varied between the studies.

In Study 1, self-objectification was manipulated prior to viewing a narrative with a low presence of ideal-looking bodies by asking participants to take a selfie (or not). Results showed that participants in the self-objectifying condition subsequently experienced increased narrative comprehension, transportation, and enjoyment via state self-objectification; there were no significant effects on identification. After accounting for the positive indirect effect of the self-objectifying condition on transportation, there remained a significant negative main effect of condition on transportation.

In Study 2, self-objectification was manipulated via the narrative itself; participants were exposed to either an ideal-body video or an average-body video. Contrary to the intended manipulation effects, participants in the control group experienced higher state self-objectification levels than participants who viewed an ideal-body video. There was a positive correlation between participants' trait self-objectification levels and the levels of transportation into the narrative, as well as a negative correlation between trait self-objectification and state self-objectification levels. Mediation and moderation analyses yielded no significant results.

Finally, in Study 3, the focus shifted to written narratives and online advertisements. The aim was to manipulate state self-objectification by exposing participants to a (non)objectifying short story and a (non)objectifying ad. Despite the extensive pretesting of stimulus materials, the manipulation produced no significant differences between the groups. Nevertheless, participants' relationship status was found to moderate the effects of participants' exposure to an objectifying ad and story enjoyment.

## **5.2 Implications**

The above findings extend the knowledge of engagement with entertainment media narratives. The findings also provide insight into individuals' task performance in a self-objectifying state.

First, individuals seem to perceive the world of entertainment media narratives as an avenue for escaping negative self-thoughts and temporarily suppressing negative self-states. Whether deliberately or subconsciously, audience members attempt to alienate themselves from their inner universe by immersing themselves in a fictional universe. It is possible that engaging with the entertainment media in a negative self-state may increase both the length and depth of media engagement; the latter was demonstrated in the current line of research.

Second, while it is likely to temporarily abandon one's own identity when engaging with a narrative in a self-objectifying state, that does not necessarily mean that the identity of a narrative character will be adopted. It is also likely that, after escaping the self, individuals will remain in a state of "non-identity". If, to a certain degree, audience members lose touch with who they are during media exposure, it might mean that the advertising strategies relying on

identification could be less effective when embedded in entertainment media content than, perhaps, news or documentaries.

Third, unsurprisingly, taking a full-body selfie is likely to increase state self-objectification levels. In other words, selfie-taking is likely to be followed by an increased focus on one's physical appearance. This may inform the companies that advertise clothes, supplements, and other appearance-related products on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, given that selfies are frequently posted on those platforms.

Fourth, average-looking and/or overweight bodies in entertainment media narratives are likely to capture viewers' attention, sometimes maybe even more so than ideal-looking bodies. One potential factor of influence is the unusualness of seeing average-looking people in entertainment media, given the prevalence of ideal bodies in TV shows, movies, and other types of entertainment media content. This insight is valuable for the entertainment media industry in terms of considering higher representation of non-ideal bodies on screen.

Fifth, seeing an objectifying online ad next to a short story is likely to have a positive effect on story enjoyment for single women but not for women in a relationship. More research is needed in regards to this finding to fully understand its implications. This finding has a potential of being useful to the advertisers of products and services targeting single individuals (e.g., dating websites).

### **5.3 Limitations and Future Directions**

Although this dissertation adds to the narrative engagement literature and the self-objectification literature, it is not without limitations.

First, a short version of the Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) was used as a measure of state self-objectification in all three experimental studies. The self-objectification score was calculated as a proportion, i.e., the number of appearance-related traits relative to the total number of listed traits. Thus, while participants' responses were quantified, the responses were not coded in terms of valence. It is important to note that, when listing a trait pertaining to their physical appearance, participants could be describing their appearance in a positive (e.g., "I am beautiful") or negative (e.g., "I am ugly") way. Likewise, participants' comparison between their own bodies and the bodies seen or described in the narrative could be upward (e.g., "I am less attractive than her") or downward (e.g., "I am more attractive than her"). The measure of state self-objectification used in this dissertation does not account for the described differences; it gives us an approximate of the degree to which participants were likely to evaluate their body from an outsider's perspective but does not offer any insight into the "outcomes" of that evaluation. However, research shows that individuals' comparison with the bodies shown in the media is usually *upward* comparison, given how unattainable the media-projected appearance standards are for most individuals (Groesz et al., 2002; Hendrickse et al., 2021). According to the theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954), upward comparisons may result in negative self-states such as hopelessness and low self-esteem. Thus, the main line of reasoning presented in this dissertation (i.e., drawing upon the "escape from self" idea) seems justified. To further bolster the "escape from self" hypothesis in the context of entertainment media narratives and self-objectification, future studies should include a measure of the degree to which participants "escaped from the self" during exposure to a narrative.

Furthermore, it is unclear if the findings of this dissertation could be generalized to individuals' engagement with other types of narratives. So far, I explored engagement with

fictional entertainment videos, real-life entertainment videos (i.e., vlogs), short fictional stories, and online ads. It could be worth exploring how audience members engage with other types of media content depicting or discussing (non)ideal-looking bodies, for example, documentaries or audiobooks.

Lastly, manipulating state self-objectification levels in an online experiment proved to be an extremely challenging task. Several existing studies (e.g., Fredrickson et al., 1998; Hebl et al., 2004) showed that an in-person manipulation may be more effective (e.g., wearing a swimsuit or a sweater). While the COVID-19 pandemic ruled out the possibility of conducting in-person experiments for this dissertation, in-person data collection for studies looking at self-objectification and narrative engagement should be possible in the future. For example, participants could be asked to watch a short entertainment narrative in a lab setting wearing a more or less revealing outfit. Alternatively, state self-objectification levels could be manipulated by receiving a neutral vs. appearance-related comment from a confederate prior to narrative exposure. Finally, a successful manipulation of state self-objectification in Study 1 implies that inducing self-objectification may be more effective when a task includes participants' self-focused involvement. In the future, researchers should consider study designs that specifically ask participants to focus on their own appearance (e.g., compare their appearance to the appearance of others).

Regardless of the limitations, this dissertation is the first to bring together two major lines of research – self-objectification and narrative engagement. As such, this dissertation lays a solid foundation for future scholarly research and has the potential to inform the work of advertisers and entertainment media producers.

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## Appendix A. Narrative Engagement Measures

### Comprehension

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

I understood the reasons why the characters did what they did.

I could understand why the characters felt the way they felt.

My understanding of the characters was unclear.

It was difficult to understand why the characters reacted to situations as they did.

The video/story was logical and convincing.

I understood why the events unfolded the way they did.

At some points in the video/story, it was not quite clear why something happened.

At points, I had a hard time making sense of what was going on in the video/story.

### Transportation

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

While I was watching the video/reading the story, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind.

I could picture myself in the scene of the events depicted in the video/story.

I was mentally involved in the video while watching it/story while reading it.

After finishing the video/story, I found it easy to put it out of my mind.

I found my mind wandering while watching the video/reading the story.

I was so involved in the video/story that I lost touch with the rest of the world.

I was so involved in the video/story that I lost track of time.

I was worried about how I look from the outside and how others would perceive me.

I found myself worrying about problems or concerns I am having.

I got so caught up in the video/story that I forgot about the worries and frustrations of everyday life.

### Identification

Please focus on one character/the female character from the video you have just seen/story you have just read and indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

I was able to understand the events in the video/story in the same way in which character X understood them.

While viewing the video/reading the story, I could feel the emotions character X felt.

During viewing/reading, I felt I could really get inside character X's head.

I felt I knew exactly what character X was going through.

When character X succeeded, I felt joy, but when they failed, I was sad.

Enjoyment

For each of the following attributes, please indicate how well it describes the video you have just seen/story you have just read on a scale from 1 to 10.

Enjoyable

Boring

Entertaining

Dull

Pleasurable

Interesting

Captivating

Well-made

## Appendix B. Study 3 Narrative

### Cat in the Rain<sup>1</sup>

There were only two Americans at the hotel. Their room was on the second floor facing the sea.

The American wife stood at the window looking out. **She was a classic beauty; young, a size 4, an hourglass figure, the kind that was sure to turn heads regardless of what she was wearing. Even now, in a pair of jeans and a plain blue t-shirt, she looked like a model.**

She looked at the rain falling. Outside a cat was crouched under one of the tables.

“I’m going down and get that kitty,” the wife said.

“I’ll do it,” her husband offered.

“No, I’ll get it. The poor kitty, out trying to keep dry.”

The husband went on reading, lying propped up with the two pillows at the foot of the bed.

“Don’t get wet,” he said.

The wife went downstairs and the hotel owner bowed to her as she passed the office. He was an old man and very tall.

“Il piove,” the wife said. She liked the hotel-keeper.

“Si, Signora, brutto tempo. Very bad weather.”

She opened the door and looked out. It was raining harder. The cat would be around to the right. Perhaps she could go along under the eaves. As she stood in the doorway an umbrella opened behind her. It was the maid who looked after their room.

“You must not get wet,” she smiled, speaking Italian. Of course, the hotel-keeper had sent her.

With the maid holding the umbrella over her, she walked along the gravel path. The table was there, but the cat was gone. She was disappointed. The maid looked up at her.

“Signora?”

“There was a cat,” said the woman.

“A cat?” the maid laughed. “A cat in the rain?”

“Yes,” she said, “under the table.” Then, “I wanted a kitty.

They went back along the gravel path. The maid stayed outside to close the umbrella. As the American girl passed the office, the padrone bowed from his desk. She went up and opened the door of the room. George was on the bed, reading.

“Did you get the cat?” he asked.

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<sup>1</sup> Sentences written in bold were included in the objectifying condition only.

“It was gone.”

“Wonder where it went to,” he said.

She sat down on the bed.

“I wanted it so much,” she said. “It isn’t fun to be a poor kitty out in the rain.”

George was reading again.

She went over and stood in front of the mirror. **She studied her perfect reflection in the mirror, her tiny waist and curvy hips.**

“Don’t you think it would be a good idea if I start wearing dresses?” she asked.

George looked up at her jeans.

“I like those.”

“I get so tired of jeans” she said. “I’d like to look more elegant.”

She went over to the window and looked out. It was getting dark.

“I want to wear a pretty dress,” she said. “I want to have a kitty to sit on my lap and purr when I stroke her.”

“Yeah?” George said from the bed.

“And I want to eat at a table with my own silver. And I want it to be spring and I want a kitty and I want some new clothes.”

“Oh, shut up and get something to read,” George said amiably.

His wife was still looking out of the window.

Someone knocked at the door.

“Avanti,” George said.

In the doorway stood the maid. She held a big cat pressed tight against her.

“Excuse me,” she said, “the padrone asked me to bring this for the Signora.”