

The Impact of Childhood Trauma on Self-objectification in Female College Students: The Mediating Role of Self-esteem

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Abstract: In order to explore the effects of childhood traumatic experiences and individual self-esteem level on female college students' self-objectification level and the functional mechanism, this study proposed hypotheses and constructed a model based on self-objectification theory and self-schema theory, and then used an online questionnaire to investigate 530 female college students. The results indicated that: (1) the traumatic experiences of female college students in childhood have a significant positive effect on their self-objectification level, which means that the more likely an individual is to objectify himself if he has experienced a traumatic event in childhood. (2) Female college students' self-esteem level has a full mediation effect between childhood trauma and self-objectification level. According to the results, this study has supplemented and proved the inducing factors of female self-objectification.

Keywords: Self-objectification, Childhood trauma, self-esteem, Female college students.

1. Introduction

The concept of self-objectification is derived from sexual objectification. Sexual objectification refers to the concept of separating the female body or body parts from the individual as a whole, as a physical object to be used for entertainment or for the use of others. Subsequently, Fredrickson and Roberts built on this foundation by proposing a definition of self-objectification: an individual withdraws from himself/herself and evaluates his/her own body from the perspective of a third-party observer, as evidenced by an excessive focus on his/her own appearance and a neglect of his/her inner needs and feelings, and monitoring one's own body over a long period of time [1]. Chinese scholars Qingqing Li argued that women who live in a sexually objectified environment pay more attention to visible body attributes from a third-person perspective (e.g., "How do I look?"), rather than the internalized attributes from a first-person perspective (e.g., "What can I do?" "How do I feel?") [2].

In recent years, with the awakening of feminist consciousness, research on women's cognition has become more and more abundant, and the attention to women's self-objectification in the field of women's psychological research has increased. As a kind of negative cognition, self-objectification may lead to passive psychological emotions, such as increased anxiety, decreased mental flow, and body shame; It may also jeopardize physical health, such as eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, etc. [1,2]. While female college students are in the critical period of individual growth and development, they need to pay extra attention to their psychological and physiological status. Therefore, it is important to explore the triggering factors of self-objectification, for it is conducive to recognizing the causes of women's mental problems from the root, providing a basis for explaining women's self-objectification, and help female college students to establish a healthy sense of self. At the same time, it can make a certain supplement to the theory of objectification.

Scholars have already pointed out that one's growth background factors will affect the individual's self-objectification [3]. For example, Katz wise found that a good mother-child relationship was a predictor of adolescents' self-objectification and body esteem, and that a positive relationship could reduce the occurrence of self-objectification in individuals. Conversely, it can be hypothesized that negative mother-child relationships, such as mother's neglect, mother-child conflict, etc., are more likely to increase the occurrence of self-objectification. Furthermore, in research on father bonding, it was found that when a parent does not take enough care of his daughter in her upbringing, women who grow up in that environment will perceive their self in a more negative direction [4]. Therefore, this study attempts to introduce childhood trauma as an antecedent variable of individual self-objectification to conduct the study. Different scholars have defined childhood trauma differently, and the World Health Organization defines childhood trauma as "a situation in childhood in which a person who is responsible for the child's upbringing, supervision, or manipulation of the child, actually or potentially does something that is harmful to the child's health, survival, growth, and development, including physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect and deprivation". Given that childhood trauma is something that individuals encounter as they grow up, this study proposes Hypothesis 1: Individuals' self-objectification is positively influenced by their childhood trauma experiences.

There are many existing studies on the outcome variables of childhood trauma, among which the personality trait of self-esteem is often mentioned. The concept of Self-esteem was first articulated by the American psychologist James, who argued that self-esteem is equal to the ratio of personal achievement to self-expectation, and represents an individual's perception of self-worth. Rosenberg argues that self-esteem is the individual's stance toward a particular object, which is expressed in the individual's positive or negative attitude toward the self as a special object.

Researcher Vitriol et al. proposed that childhood trauma may lead to low self-esteem levels in individuals[5]. Chinese scholars also found that childhood trauma negatively affects an individual's personality traits of self-esteem, which is included in the core self-evaluation[6]. Meanwhile, low levels of self-esteem lead to higher levels of self-objectification. Tylka and Sabik also showed that self-esteem can negatively predict an individual's level of physical surveillance and body shame, and that individuals with low self-esteem exhibit more frequent self-objectifying behaviors[7]. In studies of adolescents, self-esteem has also been found to be associated with adolescent females' dissatisfaction with their appearance and their tendency to compare themselves to others[8]. While individuals experience negative childhood events, especially traumatic events, may lead to self-cognitive dysfunction, resulting in cognitive deviations[9]. Thus, this study proposes Hypothesis 2: Self-esteem mediates the role of childhood trauma and self-objectification.

In summary, this study attempted to construct a mediation model (Figure 1), introducing childhood trauma as the independent variable, self-objectification as the dependent variable, and self-esteem as the mediator, to explore the influence paths of the three.

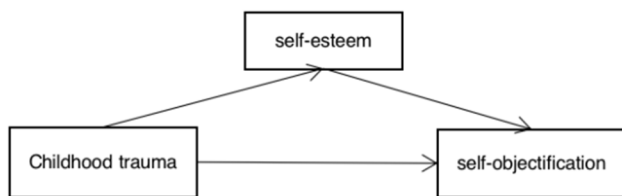


Figure 1. Research Model.

2. Research Method

2.1. Research subjects

The survey subjects of this study are female college students from various regions, aged 18~24 years old; The data were collected by means of online questionnaires. A total of 530 questionnaires were distributed, and finally 502 valid questionnaires were recovered, with an effective recovery rate of 95%.

2.2. Research Tool

2.2.1. Body Imagery State Scale (BISS)

The Body Imagery State Scale developed by Cash et al.

was used to assess the individual's current body image satisfaction, which contains 22 items and adopts Likert's five-point scale, the higher the score, the higher the individual's body satisfaction. In this study, the scale has good reliability and validity and is suitable for self-objectification research in the Chinese context.

2.2.2. Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ-SF)

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire developed by Bernstein and Fink was used in this study. The scale consists of 28 questions including emotional abuse, physical abuse, Sexual Abuse, Emotional Neglect, and Somatic Neglect 5 sub-dimensions and a validity question. Chinese scholars translated it into a Chinese version, which has good reliability and validity.

2.2.3. Self-esteem Scale (SES)

This study used the White Esteem Scale developed by Rosenberg. The scale consists of 10 questions and is scored on a scale from "1-very non-conforming" to "4-very conforming". The self-esteem score is the total of all questions, with higher scores representing higher levels of self-esteem. The reliability of the scale meets the measurement standards and is widely used.

2.3. Research procedures

First of all, the personnel involved in this study were uniformly trained on the contents of the relevant questionnaires and scales, testing requirements, precautions, etc., and ensure that the questionnaires used a consistent language of guidance. Before the test, we obtained the consent of the test preparers, informed the subjects of the true purpose of the study, and promised to maintain strict confidentiality. At the time of the test, data were collected by distributing online questionnaires to female college students from various regions.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1. Correlation analysis of each variable

The results of the correlation analysis of self-objectification, childhood trauma and self-esteem are shown in Table 1. The results show that self-objectification is significantly positively correlated with self-esteem satisfaction 0.582 (0.000***) and childhood trauma 0.615 (0.000***), and self-esteem is also positively correlated with childhood trauma 0.5 (0.000***).

Table 1. The Results of the Correlation Analysis

	Self-objectification	Self-esteem	Childhood trauma
Self-objectification	1(0.000***)	0.582(0.000***)	0.615(0.000***)
Self-esteem	0.582(0.000***)	1(0.000***)	0.5(0.000***)
Childhood trauma	0.615(0.000***)	0.5(0.000***)	1(0.000***)

3.2. Analysis of mediating effects of variables

By using SPSS software analysis, based on the correlation of the variables and the theoretical framework of this study, the structural equation model shown in Table 2 was tested after adding control variables, and the results showed that the model of the data in this study fit well. Under the precondition of controlling the gender as female, the mediating effect analysis of this study involves a total of 3 types of model analyses, namely: model 1: regression model analysis of the independent variable childhood trauma and the dependent

variable self-objectification, which can be obtained as self-objectification=37.034+0.343*Childhood trauma; Model 2: the independent variable childhood trauma and the mediator variable self-esteem for regression model construction: we can get self-esteem = 20.139 + 0.142* childhood trauma; and finally, the model 3: the independent variable childhood trauma and the mediator variable self-esteem together with the dependent variable self-objectification for regression model construction: we can get self-objectification= 22.538 + 0.24 * childhood trauma + 0.72* self-esteem. Comprehensive

analysis can be concluded that the mediating role of self-esteem is significant, and the mediating effect accounts for

100%-fully mediated.

Table 2. The Results of the Mediating Effect Analysis

	c	a	a(p)	b	b(p)	a*b	a*b (BootSE)	a*b (z)	a*b (P)	a*b (95%BootCI)	c'	Conclusion
Childhoodtrauma=>self-esteem=>self-objectification	0.343	0.142	0.000***	0.72	0.000***	0.102	0.012	8.384	0.000***	0.081 - 0.131	0.24	complete mediation

4. Discussion

According to the results of this study, female college students' childhood traumatic experiences positively affect their level of self-objectification. This finding is consistent with the Self-Schemata Theory, which states that when individuals process information related to the self, their past experiences constitute the individual's self-schema and guide or influence the individual's processing and handling of information at the self-cognitive level. Since childhood trauma is an individual's childhood encounter and self-objectification is a manifestation of an individual's self-cognition, which coincides with the self-schema theoretical framework, so this study attempts to construct an influential relationship between childhood trauma and self-objectification on the basis of the theory and to prove it. The exploration of the relationship between the two is still relatively lacking in previous studies for the time being, therefore, the findings of this study can add to and prove the inducing factors of self-objectification.

This study also demonstrated the mediating role of self-esteem between self-objectification and childhood trauma. That is, the childhood trauma experiences of female college students not only directly affect their level of self-objectification, but also indirectly affect their level of self-objectification through the level of self-esteem. Past research has shown that childhood trauma reduces individual self-esteem[6]. While the present study, after introducing self-esteem as a mediating variable was introduced, it was found that female college students who experienced childhood traumatic events instead had higher self-esteem, and women with higher self-esteem also had higher levels of self-objectification. This finding differs from the previous dominant view, and it is explored that the reason for this may be that individuals who have suffered a childhood trauma may receive more care and affection from others, thus increasing their level of self-esteem, which is consistent with the Sociometer Theory of self-esteem, which suggests that an individual's level of self-esteem varies according to the level of acceptance of other people in the society[10]. Female college students who gain higher levels of self-esteem in such a situation will care more about their bodies in order to maintain their level of self-esteem, coupled with the effects of their traumatic childhood experiences. And it has been found that women's level of self-objectification increases when they are in a state of prolonged "self-staring"[2].

Although some of the findings of this study are different from the previous leading conclusions, they are still logically self-consistent, which also makes the results of this study

valuable for future researchers.

5. Conclusion

This study found that (1) female college students' childhood traumatic experiences have a significant positive effect on their level of self-objectification, which means that the greater the likelihood that an individual will self-objectify if he or she has experienced a traumatic childhood event. (2) Female college students' self-esteem levels completely mediated the relationship between childhood trauma and self-objectification levels.

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