
Research Article

Coping with Objectification: Female English Literature Students' Physical Identity Development as Emerging Adults

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Abstract

Emerging adulthood is a stage where identity exploration is one of its developmental tasks. As most emerging adults of the modern era enroll in higher education, the educational context becomes crucial for comprehending their identity development, including the physical identity (body image) of female college students, especially in light of the rising participation of women in higher education, which demonstrates the need to address their educational and developmental needs. of four female college students at an Islamic university in an urban area of Indonesia, specifically those majoring in English literature. By employing the feminist theory of objectification and the concept of emerging adulthood, this study seeks to comprehend how female college students experience objectification in their educational context and how this affects the development of their physical identities as emerging adults. This study finds that objectification is experienced by female college students through the curriculum; learning contents, media, dress codes, and students-lecturers, students-peers, as well as students-staff relationships. The experiences reveal negative views of their body during their college years, reflected in negative subjective experiences (shame, anxiety, disrupted peak motivational states, and diminished awareness of internal bodily states), as well as eating disorder risks. Nonetheless, an overall positive body image is observed in the current time once graduating which reveals a rather non-appearance-focused physical identity—physical health, comfort, and safety—accomplished via contextual and reflective thinking. Thus, this study suggests the implication of college or higher education as a facilitator of emerging adults' physical identity exploration.

Keywords

Objectification; higher education; emerging adulthood; physical identity; body image

Introduction

Emerging adulthood represents a distinct phase of development characterized by a series of ongoing changes experienced by individuals who have surpassed adolescence but have not yet fully transitioned into conventional adulthood. This period manifests itself across multiple domains, including careers, education, relationships, and most notably, identity formation in particular (J. Arnett, 2000). Notably, individuals aged 18-25 comprise a significant portion of the modern emerging adult population, as this age range is typically dedicated to pursuing higher education. This trend is also evident in the context of Indonesia, where the age group of 18-24 is prominently associated with college enrollment rates. Accordingly, in Indonesia, the college-age of gross enrollment rate falls in the age range between 18-24 years old (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). Consequently, the significance of educational institutions as pivotal environments for emerging adults to acquire knowledge, engage in social interactions, cultivate relationships, and investigate varieties of ideas and paradigms is becoming increasingly apparent.

However, a recurrent issue that has received consistent attention in the field of higher education pertains to the experiences of female college students. During their time in college, women are particularly susceptible to sexual harassment and assault (Klein & Martin, 2021; Mumford et al., 2020). Numerous global statistics also attest to the prevalence of sexual violence in higher education. In the United States, for instance, a staggering 26.4% of female undergraduates have reported experiencing rape or sexual assault, in contrast to 6.8% of male undergraduates (Cantor et al., 2020). Similarly, a situational analysis conducted in Bangladesh as cited by Bhagani (2015) found that a significant 76% of female students at eight universities reported incidents of sexual harassment in 2013. In addition, 62% of students in Spain have either witnessed or experienced gender-based violence on campus (Valls et al., 2016).

Indonesia also demonstrates this disconcerting reality. According to reports submitted to the National Commission on Violence Against Women, between 2015 and 2020, a staggering 27% of sexual violence cases occurred in higher education, the highest proportion of all levels of education (CNN Indonesia, 2022; Kemendikbud, 2023). Moreover, according to data from 2015, approximately 77% of lecturers acknowledged the occurrence of sexual violence on campus, with 63% of them opting not to report such incidents to university authorities (Kemendikbud, 2021). Hence, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology has implemented strategic steps to prevent and address sexual violence, especially in higher education settings by issuing the Ministerial Regulation No. 30 of 2021 concerning the Prevention and Handling of Sexual Violence. These unsettling statistics and circumstances vividly illustrate the inherent danger that women may encounter within the college setting, emphasizing the pressing need for comprehensive actions to mitigate these risks.

Indeed, extensive research on objectification has focused heavily on the experiences of female college students. This focus stems from the recognition that emerging adulthood, along with the adolescence stage, represents a crucial developmental phase characterized by heightened exposure to sexualizing encounters and a greater likelihood of self-objectification due to developmental sensitivities (McKinley, 2011). Thus, it is evident that emerging adulthood can be a vulnerable period for college women not only in terms of possible disturbance to their quality of education at the social level, but also at the personal level of their physical identity.

As far as research is concerned, The issue of women's objectification in higher education or among college students has received considerable research attention, highlighting its negative consequences (Davis, 2018; Ertl et al., 2021; Gabriel, 2017; Linder & Daniels, 2018; Szymanski, 2020; Szymanski et al., 2021). For instance, Ertl et al. (2021) discovered that objectification among college women contributes to body surveillance, body shame, and depressive symptoms, thereby increasing the likelihood of substance abuse and sexual risk behaviors. Similarly, exposure to sexualizing media



among male and female undergraduate students has been associated with elevated levels of self-objectification (Linder & Daniels, 2018). Even beyond the internal matter, Davis (2018) examined how social media targeted college-aged individuals, perpetuating objectification and sexualization of female college students which may have broader societal repercussions. Indeed, this outward impact has also been shown in a study that highlights the intersectionality of race and gender in the objectification and dehumanization of black women in academia (Gabriel, 2017). Collectively, these studies show that objectification is a widespread problem for college women, affecting their mental and physical health and academic success. Thus, educational interventions to address objectification and mitigate its negative effects on women in college or campus environments are urgently needed.

Such intense focus on the issue is especially apparent ever since the emergence of the objectification theory. Objectification theory is a feminist psychological framework (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) that explores the unique experiences of women in patriarchal societies, where they are frequently viewed as objects for the pleasure of others. This objectification can manifest in a variety of ways, including subtle gazes, body scrutiny, evaluative remarks, sexualized assessments, sexual harassment, violence, and the excessive emphasis placed on women's physical attributes, beauty, and appearance (Calogero, 2012; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Morris et al., 2018). It effectively separates women from their intrinsic qualities by reducing them to mere external objects. This treatment induces self-objectification, increased body monitoring, negative interactions, and mental health risks (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). While it is acknowledged that objectification can also affect men in the modern era, the pervasiveness and chronic nature of women's experiences cannot be ignored, as they encounter it almost daily (Holland et al., 2016), to the extent that it becomes normalized.

Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that certain aspects have been neglected in the existing corpus of research. First of all, there is a notable lack of developmental concern which leads to the neglected focus on developmental tasks female college students deal with in relation to their bodies, one of which is physical identity formation. As proposed by Erikson, one of the developmental tasks faced by emergent adults is the challenge of identity versus identity confusion. While some scholars argue that this task primarily belongs to adolescence, others contend that identity exploration predominantly takes place during emerging adulthood (J. Arnett, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2013) due to modern times' prolonged exploration periods. In this light, Arnett's concept proposes identity exploration as one of the indicators that make emerging adulthood a distinct stage (J. Arnett, 2000), and his theory gives credence to the prolonged period of independent role exploration grounded from the Erikson, Daniel Levinson, and Keniston's developmental theories. Similar to objectification theory, the emerging adulthood theory emphasizes the socially constructed nature of this life stage, underscoring the need to approach young people within the context of their culture, including the college culture they inhabit..

Secondly, given that these phenomena occur in educational settings, hardly previous studies consider the crucial role of the specific context under which these emerging adults are studying. Such attention is especially scarce since most objectification studies are concerned with correlation, experiments, or quantitative designs in general. For example, a study showed that U.S. female college students' sexual objectification experiences are related to fear of men, body shame, and appearance anxiety (Szymanski et al., 2021), as well as depression through body surveillance and self-blame (Szymanski, 2020). A study review of objectification studies also found that state self-objectification in college students shows declining in women's cognitive functioning, quantitative reasoning, spatial perception, and selective attention (Winn & Cornelius, 2020). However, as previously mentioned, the majority of these studies have paid little attention to the specific educational context and its implications, often treating female college students merely as sample participants which makes qualitative research a necessity. Consequently, with the contextual and educational focus, a deeper understanding of the objectification experienced by female college students within their departmental context can be attained, as well as its impact on their physical sense so that educational implications can be derived to reflect and improve



educational practices that help women's developmental process. Therefore, this study aims to understand how objectification is experienced by female college students in their college or department context, and how these experiences contribute to their physical identity development.

Method

Methodological Underpinnings

In accordance with the research objective which is to have an in-depth exploration of people's experiences, this study underlies the interpretivist paradigm (Mack, 2010). Based on the worldview, this study implements qualitative phenomenology research or IPA (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis) by understanding the particular experiences of the people, and their shared experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Furthermore, the feminist approach is also applied by grounding it on feminist theory (Marshall & Young, 2006) which in this study is the theory of objectification that takes cultural context into account. In addition, the concept of emerging adulthood (J. Arnett, 2000; J. J. Arnett, 2016) helps to distinguish the developmental characteristics discovered in female college students' objectification experiences and their physical identity development. By incorporating these approaches and theoretical frameworks, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between objectification, the cultural context of the educational environment, and the physical identity development of female emerging adults.

Research Context

This research was conducted in June 2022 within the context of Indonesia, specifically in an urban area of Banten province. The acknowledgment of this specific context is of utmost importance as urban areas tend to expose women to a higher prevalence of objectifying ideas through interpersonal interactions and pervasive exposure to technology and media, including within educational institutions. Moreover, since the developmental emphasis indicates emerging adulthood is culturally constructed, and that industrialized society is more likely to facilitate such a prolonged phase, the importance of contextual consideration is asserted even further. In specific, this research studied female college students of *Dream High Islamic University* (pseudonym), an Indonesian Islamic university in the specific department of English Literature where the students not only study the English language, but also its culture and art integrated throughout the curriculum. This focus is drawn upon the objectification theory itself which proposes Western culture as an objectifying milieu in a given manner (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study were collected through interviews with four female college students, identified by pseudonyms as Dini, Mila, Nada, and Bilna regarding their four-year college experiences as 18-23 years-old emerging adults. It is important to note that the participants had recently completed their undergraduate studies at the time the data was collected. The selection of participants was guided by Arnett's (2000) conception of emerging adulthood, with the goal of maximizing the suitability of individuals who exhibited the defining characteristics of this developmental stage. Specifically, the criteria required participants to be between the ages of 18 and 25 and unmarried, signifying a less conventional stage. As for the final selection of the four participants, their availability during the research period was the determining factor. Through in-depth interviews with these participants, this study aims to obtain valuable insights into their experiences as emerging adults, shedding light on objectification and physical identity development in the context of their college journey.

The initial phase of data collection consisted of individual interviews conducted via Zoom video calls. In the interviews, the researcher explored the participants' exposure to objectification during their four years of college. Building on these, the interviews discussed further how these experiences influence



their psychological well-being and their sense of physical selves. Each interview lasted approximately sixty minutes and was recorded using a Zoom video recorder and field notes with the participants' permission. The researcher ensured that participants were aware of confidentiality and the discussion's purpose.

In addition to interviews, various data acquisition methods, including participants' reflection papers, academic transcripts, and photo documents, were utilized in this study. Following the interviews, participants were required to submit reflection papers within one to three days as soft file documents. These papers served multiple purposes, including facilitating deeper reflection on their experiences and enabling them to include any additional insights they desired to share. This strategy is intended to avoid haste and ensure a deeper comprehension of their experiences. Furthermore, participants were required to submit their academic transcripts, which served as evidence for supporting the participants' discussions regarding courses learned during their study. Additionally, when available, participants were encouraged to provide and explain relevant photos during the interviews to provide visual documentation that further supported their narratives. The purpose of employing these diverse data collection methods was to facilitate triangulation, enhance the consistency of the findings, and obtain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences within the research context.

To analyze the data, the interviews, which served as the primary source of data, were initially transcribed. As the participants spoke both English and Indonesian during the interviews, the original transcriptions were maintained and subsequently translated from Indonesian to English by the researcher as necessary. The analysis consisted of identifying emerging themes that were prevalent throughout the discussions, while also focusing on the distinctive details and nuances of the participants' experiences. To ensure a comprehensive comprehension, these interview data were triangulated with information obtained from the reflection papers, academic transcripts, and photographs of the participants. To preserve the authenticity and originality of the participants' perspectives, verbatim excerpts from the interviews were presented alongside descriptions and interpretations of the data to enhance comprehension and meaning.

Finally, it is essential for the researcher to provide positionality statements as an insider which facilitated access to the participants. This circumstance called for the utilization of triangulation, which this study employed in order to produce evidence-based findings and minimize potential bias during the research process. On the other hand, this relationship did give merit as it allowed participants to feel comfortable sharing their experiences and establishing trust with the researcher.

Results and Discussion

The Objectifying vs. The Empowering College Milieu

Throughout the experiences of the participants, a distinct pattern emerges: objectification is prevalent in their undergraduate studies as English literature students. This objectification focuses primarily on the physical appearance and sexualization of women and manifests itself in a variety of ways, including curriculum content, media used in their studies, and social interactions with lecturers, peers, and campus staff. According to the participants' narratives and academic records, their English literature program included a variety of topics, such as English history, film, poetry, drama, and literary theories. One of the participants, Dini, spoke about her experience studying English history, shedding light on the presence of objectifying depictions of women in the curriculum content.

Women are like temptations for men to do something illogical... there was one of the English kings who was known, not for his greatness, but because he had many wives... and those women, he valued them for, first, physical attractiveness or as symbols that are like, difficult to be owned. So, he became motivated to get them, and after that, yeah, left them just like that, or the third one is the women's capacity to give them offspring, especially male heirs. (Dini, 24 years old).



Dini's discussion of King Henry VIII provides a compelling illustration of how he objectified his wives and mistresses, valuing them primarily on the basis of their physical attractiveness, sexual appeal, and ability to conceive children. If these suggested functions were not fulfilled, women were easily replaced by others, particularly when considering Dini's emphasis on women's inability to produce male heirs. This phenomenon aligns with Nussbaum's (1995) concept of fungibility, which involves treating humans as interchangeable objects.

Interestingly, Dini goes beyond the king's behavior and analyzes how the media presents historical content, particularly in history books describing King Henry VIII's wives. These books tend to focus on the women's physical attractiveness and the gender of the children they bore while neglecting to highlight their personalities, achievements, or contributions. According to Dini, this depiction in English history reinforces the objectification of women as objects of sexual delight or mere reproductive vessels, disregarding their intrinsic qualities, abilities, and uniqueness. Such exposure to objectifying media, though Dini was not the one being objectified, is also a form of objectification that results in a chain of internalization and negative consequences (Calogero, 2012; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

This history of Henry VIII and his wives was not only encountered through written texts, but also visual media, as demonstrated by the viewing of "The Other Boleyn Girl" in the cinema course. This example illustrates the reinforcement of objectification experiences through additional audiovisual media consumption. Moreover, participants in the study mentioned that many films included in their curriculum, such as "The Favourite" and "I, Tonya", sexualize women through cinematography and camera angles that accentuate the male gaze. Nada, one of the participants, noted that such encounters with objectification are bounded to be encountered or "unavoidable" when studying Western culture. This insight highlights the pervasiveness of objectification in the educational context and raises concerns about the extent to which such media portrayals perpetuate and normalize objectifying behaviors and attitudes.

Another form of objectification found is in the form of social interaction within the department. It is worth noting that objectification is not confined to interactions among peers, but also manifests in relationships with lecturers and staff members, both inside and outside the classroom setting. Notably, Mila shared her encounter with a lecturer from another department who taught a compulsory course, revealing instances of overt sexualization and inappropriate behavior directed towards women, raising concerns about power dynamics, gender dynamics, and the establishment of a safe and inclusive learning environment.

Even the lecturers, not only were they sexist, but some of them also talked about sexual things... the lecturer from another department... I remember moving my head and looking at him at one point because he talked about his daughter's underwear... he said something like, "Yes, my daughter's underwear is bla-bla-bla"... I remember turning my head, and thinking inside my head like, "Wow! It is inappropriate to talk about that in a classroom!" (Mila, 25 years old).

Mila's account of the lecturer's inappropriate discussion regarding a woman's sexual issues, without her consent, left her appalled. It reveals a disturbing tendency to treat women's bodies and sexual functions as objects for public consumption and evaluation. The fact that the lecturer was discussing the experiences of his own daughter made the situation more distressing for her. This incident demonstrates that objectifying attitudes toward women can permeate even within familial relationships, showcasing the normalization of such attitudes.

At first observation, it appears that the expressed disagreement is a result of the objectification occurring during teaching and learning hours as if a different response would have been given if it had



occurred outside. However, Mila's subsequent stories challenge this notion as she addresses and confronts objectification perpetrated by her male classmates outside of the classroom. Nonetheless, such contrasting responses reveal the evident imbalance of power between students-lecturers and students-peers, indicating how much power lecturers possess to prevent Mila from voicing her opinion. Moreover, it emphasizes that the experiences of students within a department's culture cannot be completely isolated from external factors, as they are part of a larger faculty and university culture.

Unfortunately, objectifying treatment within the English department's lecturer-student dynamic is an unfortunate reality. Mila also recounted an incident where a male lecturer in the department made derogatory remarks about women's bodies during a class session. This observation is consistently supported by Dini's narrative, which highlights the prevalence of such objectifying behavior within the department.

He said in a playful manner, but also serious, that giving birth through c-section is not actually giving birth. He considered it as not giving birth. So, women who went through that procedure are considered as not having the experience of childbirth at all. That made me like, "What? What?". But I just stayed quiet in the class since he was not asking for my opinion. (Dini, 24 years old).

The view of women's bodies as valuable only for their reproductive function indeed reflects an objectifying view considering how they are seen as instruments that produce other things and are expected to have a universal running and execution system. Consequently, their bodies are seen merely as means, tools, or mediums for something else. An instrument, which unless its physical childbearing of vaginal birth is fulfilled, they are less of a woman. Such views that reflect instrumentality and denial of women's autonomy of their bodies are some of the ways women are objectified (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Nussbaum, 1995). In addition, Dini's choice to remain silent in response to the degrading comment made by the lecturer underscores the power dynamics previously mentioned between lecturers and students. It highlights how the authority held by lecturers can silence students, particularly in cases of objectification. Interestingly, Dini later mentioned that she speaks out when objectification occurs among her peers, suggesting that this phenomenon is not solely perpetuated by men but is also upheld by women as they stay quiet and validate the objectifiers' views to some extent. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that such silence can rather reveal the severeness of objectification one has experienced since objectified women talk less or act more object-like (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Papadaki, 2019).

On the basis of this discussion with the students, it is clear that objectifying social encounters is predominantly practiced by male peers and lecturers. Meanwhile, their point of view is rather contrasting when it comes to female lecturers, specifically their contents and ways of teaching. In addition, the participants also mentioned that such characteristics can also be identified in female movie directors and writers in the literature who portray women as more empowering, humane, and less object-like by moving beyond a narrow focus on sexual attractiveness. For that reason, it is not that objectification is completely absent, but it is no longer the sole or predominant representation of women in the teachings of female lecturers or the works of the female directors and writers studied. Nada also expressed agreement with this notion.

Because what I learned there is first, from what I saw, ok? Women are degraded, but I also learned that women have their rights, like in feminism. I was enlightened more by that idea, I think since Ms. Ana discussed feminism and my undergraduate thesis was also about that. (Nada, 25 years old).

Nada particularly mentioned Ms. Ana (pseudonym), a female lecturer who was instrumental in her introduction to feminism. Upon discovering feminism, Nada felt a sense of relief and empowerment, a sentiment echoed by the other three participants, who also acknowledged the positive influence of



gender-critical female lecturers. In contrast, the male lecturers were viewed as less engaged with such critical perspectives, with Mila stating that it was "trivial for males." However, it is essential to recognize that there are still male lecturers who promote critical and gender awareness, as evidenced by the diverse course content presented in a male lecturer's cinematography class.

The noticeable preference for female lecturers, however, warrants a critical interpretation due to the pervasive influence of an objectifying culture, wherein even women like the female lecturers may internalize objectifying perspectives to some extent (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Surely, it is essential to recognize that despite their influential roles, female lecturers continue to operate within a patriarchal system prevalent in the faculty as a whole. Bilna, Dini, and Milna recounted instances in which the female head of the English literature department urged female students to assume leadership roles in the student association, only for the faculty to reject them. Despite the department's stated commitment to nondiscrimination, this highlights the ongoing conflict against patriarchal power dynamics at the faculty level. Indeed, it is argued that many female lecturers, with the exception of the head of the department, tend to remain silent, adhere to the rules, and do not actively advocate for the social activism rights of female students. This passive posture demonstrates a lack of interest in recognizing women's competence, a trait consistent with the propagation of women's objectification.

Lastly, the most pervasive form of objectification is found in the participants' interactions with peers, especially outside of the classroom. This form of objectification was characterized by the expression of sexualized remarks and comments centered on physical appearance. These behaviors were observed to be normalized among peers, which contributed to a hostile environment for the participants.

He said, "Why don't you go out?" "No, I don't feel like it", "Why don't you go to a hotel?", and then I was like, "Who the hell do you think you are?". Since I hung out with a student club which is mostly males... and their jokes were really, uhm, there was one senior who asked me about a girl... "It's not like I am interested, it's just I am sure if I took her to a hotel, she must be down for it." (Mila, 25 years old).

Inevitably, these statements depict Mila and her female friend as sexual objects available for the sexual enjoyment of male peers. Mila's tone became more agitated and she emphasized each word of the incredulous queries as she recounted her story. These treatments are also consistently found in other participants' stories where male peers frequently talk about fellow female peers' breasts, hips, bodies, and physical attractiveness, even when female students are parts of their peer circle. This focus on women's bodies and body parts is what is referred to be the compartment view or "body-ism" that perceives women's bodies as capable to represent them as persons (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Similar to Mila, Nada expressed her frustration at the fact that boys feel compelled to verbalize their objectification of females or to let them know.

It is important to note that experiences of objectification can vary across different peer groups. In the case of Bilna and Dini, whose social circles primarily consist of females unlike Nada and Mila, they did not directly encounter explicit instances of sexual objectification. Instead, they became aware of such experiences indirectly through conversations with their friends. This circumstance is unsurprising given that women are objectified more by men instead of by women (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005). Meanwhile, objectification experiences among female students are found to be exhibited more in the form of appearance or beauty-based objectification, such as comments on the bodies labeled as fat, the face inspections of acne, blemishes, spots, and the dress or outfits they wear.

In addition to experiencing appearance evaluations from their peers, the participants noted instances in which they were evaluated by campus personnel. The cleaning-service staff was a topic that was frequently brought up by all participants, including Nada. It appears that these interactions contribute to the participants' overall objectification experiences.



And that cleaning-service guy, he was like, “What’s with you? Very westernized!”. He said it repeatedly and irritably. So, towards us the English literature students, they always nagged at us like that (Nada, 25 years old).

According to Nada's account, the female college students in the English literature department had the distinct and specific experience of being designated as "Westernized" by the campus staff. Occasionally, they are even labeled as non-Islamic. Not only is it attributed to them due to their enrollment in the English department, which focuses on Western culture, but their dress styles that differ from those of the other faculties and departments are also viewed as problematic. In terms of appearance, if the campus strongly encourages female students to wear long skirts, long shirts, and long hijab, the English literature female students are less conforming, as evidenced by the photographs they provided in which a large number of them choose to wear denim, pants, shorter veils, shorter shirts, etc. Consequently, objectification appears to be interconnected with social, cultural, and even religious concepts.

While the discussion so far may portray the English literature department as an educational milieu with a significant presence of objectification, it is essential to recognize the existence of multiple worldviews within this context. In contrast to departments that impose discriminatory dress codes on female students, this department has never enforced specific attire requirements, granting participants a sense of freedom and equality. This indicates a level of awareness and respect for individual autonomy within the department. Furthermore, the availability of content related to feminism theory, gender issues, psychoanalysis, and other enriching subjects during the participants' study is worth highlighting.

Like, I became more aware of patriarchy, also about misogynists. Things like that. Or toxic masculinity, and what defines masculine and feminine... what we learned, is women’s aspects, what is it? As in feminism, not degraded or considered inferior. For example, in the play “Hedda Gabler”, she was not like that. And also, in the film “It”, in Anne Boleyn, also the “Phantom Thread” film, and others. (Bilna, 24 years old)

From these experiences, it can be seen and confirmed that what these college students encountered were not only objectifying treatments, but also other diverse experiences. Thus, though objectification encounters took place in the forms of contents learned, media used, and social encounters, it cannot be denied that there was the availability of varying worldviews they perceived as empowering, especially gender study and feminism. Such incorporation that the department implied equips students with the skills and knowledge to navigate and challenge encountered objectifying practices.

Beyond Negative Consequences: Physical Identity Exploration

The objectification experiences discussed in this study demonstrate the susceptibility of female college students to the prevalent objectifying culture in their academic environment. These experiences extend beyond social interactions, as the findings indicate that female college students internalize objectifying views, which influence their intrapersonal self-perception throughout their college years. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that despite the objectifying influences the participants encountered, their physical identity development followed an overall positive trajectory. After graduation, this positive change becomes evident in their comprehension of their physical selves, as they abandon an appearance-centered perspective. Instead, they place an emphasis on physical health, comfort, and safety in their self-perception. This demonstrates an increase in self-awareness and a rejection of objectification as they transition out of college.

As mentioned before, internalization of objectifying views is found in the participants, and particularly in the case of Nada and Mila, it has been previously highlighted. This internalization can be understood within the idea that women internalize cultural ideals to a different extent (Fredrickson &



Roberts, 1997). Accordingly, it is intriguing to observe contrasting responses between the stories of Nada and Mila in contrast to Dini and Bilna, which may be attributed to the heightened exposure to objectifying behaviors from male peers within their respective social circles.

Yes, I have got to the point where my body confidence is very low. I think, no matter how we question beauty standards, we must be following them, aren't we? At least for me, for me. I was like, uhm, when I had acne, I was horrified. Like that. I also did diets... it was repetitive. So, I got thin, and then I ate, I got thin, and I ate (Nada, 25 years old).

From Nada's account, it appears that she acknowledged her efforts to conform to cultural beauty ideals, particularly her belief in the superiority of thinness and unblemished complexion. This leads her to experience shame as she lacks in conformation to the ideal flawless skin and thin body shape. Moreover, the extent of beautification practices reached a critical point for Nada, leading to heightened appearance anxiety. This concern for her physical appearance had significant implications for her mental health, as evidenced by her engagement in appearance-based diets that were primarily driven by external validation. Notable is the fact that Nada abandoned these regimens once she reached her target weight, underscoring the fleeting and superficial nature of her motivations. Similarly, Mila recounted a specific incident during her college years where she internalized beauty standards that emphasized appearance and subsequently began to self-objectify.

During my study, I experienced low self-esteem because I encountered a girl who always said things about the physique and the physique... So, I thought, I did not need to do anything... "She is right, I am indeed ugly, I am indeed fat." I also had moments where I did not want to eat. The most severe one was only when my gastric acid went up until I needed to be admitted to a hospital and then, cut. Stop. Like, it's enough. (Mila, 25 years old).

It can be seen how repeated exposure to evaluative comments was internalized by Mila as she came to agree with her lacking physical attractiveness which led her to treat herself in the same way as the objectifier. Her acknowledgment of the primacy of such ideals and the fact that she fell short of them indicate a feeling of helplessness. In addition, this internalization appears to cause Mila to experience the deleterious effects of an eating disorder, as evidenced by her eating patterns, and disconnection with her internal body, as evidenced by her physical collapse. Indeed, objectified women may have a diminished capacity to perceive or experience their internal bodily conditions, such as hunger, health issues, etc., because they are conditioned to suppress their physical demands (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The fact that Mila used the word "only" underscores that the experience was not significant to her, a normalized phenomenon among many women.

Up to this point, it can be seen that objectification results in negative consequences on women's internal experiences, specifically their physical views during the participants' college years. When contemplating their current selves, who have recently graduated after traversing the complexities and dynamics of college life, a shift in perspective becomes apparent. The participants' current body images reveal a more positive outlook where the objectification experiences, along with the discussed concepts of feminism, psychoanalysis, religion, and others, are treated as one of the references in forming their current physical identity. In other words, the participants did not passively take in objectifying self-view that they were exposed to, but they also actively and purposefully sought other alternatives. It is especially apparent through films and literature consumed in their leisure time, their internet and social media explorations, and discussions with fellow women. These explorations became ways to alternative ideas as references to further negotiate and form their physical identity.

Not only was feminism perceived by all participants as crucial in cultivating a more positive approach to body image, their exposure to diverse portrayals of women extended beyond feminism and encompassed modern literature as well. The study of Old English and modern English literature in the department provided them with a broader perspective, introducing a range of options for understanding



the female body. These literary explorations presented the idea that women's bodies are to be loved, to have connections with, and to function in social participation, among other possibilities.

The participants' exploratory nature became even more evident as they delved into various readings and sources while selecting their undergraduate thesis topics. It is noteworthy that three of them chose to investigate the discourse encircling women's bodies in their research. This deliberate engagement with the topic demonstrates their developing awareness of the various worldviews regarding the understanding and interpretation of their own bodies.

On top of that, maybe, balanced by being in an Islamic university in which we still got religious studies. Thus, we have more diverse perspectives. The Islamic perspectives were not conservative as well. (Bilna, 24 years old).

The references were not limited to the feminism they learned in their department, but the larger university culture as an Islamic university had an undeniable impact. In further discussion, Bilna explained how such a culture also became another perspective for her in understanding women's bodies and appearances. For instance, the perspective that women are socialized to protect their bodies from the leering eyes through *aurat*-covering, women's appearance is a site of debate of what to show and what to cover, how women are considered Islamic or not can be evaluated based on their apparels, and how women's bodies somehow became more of a public property instead of their own where there is little control of privacy despite being covered in loose long Islamic clothing and veil.

The exploration mode showcased demonstrated that these female college students are no longer mere recipients of the cultural values they encountered, but they actively look for more references for physical identity development. Particularly, Nada mentioned the importance of *Twitter* and verbal discussions with other women in order to learn about others' experiences, obstacles, and coping mechanisms. Similarly, Bilna discussed how she investigated the body positivity discourse on social media and body diversity in films.

I think, recently, the body positivity movements are very apparent... Like, the definition of beautiful is very relative... Because I consumed campaigns on social media, I came to such a conclusion... or like in films, actors and actresses cast are not always strictly conforming to the social standard of beauty anymore... and these days, the representation is more diverse (Bilna, 24 years old).

It is clear that Bilna's engagement with social media and films has enhanced her perception of beauty as a concept that goes beyond physical attractiveness. She was able to study and appreciate the complex nature of beauty through her conscious consumption of numerous media formats, which she pursued autonomously or by choice rather than as a fulfillment of her academic demand. This investigation process enabled her to transcend and question the conventional concept of beauty as being purely based on physical qualities, as well as to challenge and transcend the established beauty standards.

Expanding on the idea that college exposes students to a variety of body perceptions and the autonomous quest for alternatives, these students participated in a complicated negotiation process to construct their physical self-perception. This negotiation, however, was not without difficulties, as the students dealt with conflicting viewpoints regarding women's bodies, particularly in reconciling traditional religious notions with progressive feminist ideals. Mila, for instance, encountered confusion when attempting to reconcile her understanding of women's agency derived from feminism with the Islamic perspective promoted on her campus. She discovered contradictions between her beliefs and the promoted Islamic way of clothing, which imposed restrictions not only on those who wear pants and short veils, but also on those desiring to wear face veils or *niqabs*. The clash created a sense of contradiction and perplexity in Mila's negotiation process.



So, the boundaries were kind of ambiguous when in the department, “you are free”... But, suddenly, when there is someone who wants to wear face veils, they are also not permitted. So, what are actually the boundaries? (Mila, 25 years old).

One evident thing is that Mila is aware of the Islamic way of clothing as intertwining with the culture on the campus. That the advocated regulations, in her perspective, are not pure Islam, making it simpler for her to subsequently negotiate what values to accept in perceiving her own body. Dini expressed similar perplexity, stating that a female professor forbade a female senior from presenting her interests in arts or painting human bodies, particularly women's bodies. She questioned why visual portrayals of women's bodies were regarded as such an issue in the context of learning, teaching, and knowledge purposes. Moreover, she argued that the senior delivered it in a non-sexual manner and relevant to the topic discussed. Although, based on objectification theory (Calogero, 2012; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), such exposure to visual media focusing on women's bodies itself still indicate objectification and susceptibility to its internalization. On the other hand, it confirms how Dini positions herself among various ideas where she negotiated, contrasted, and evaluated the views for her physical understanding.

In this investigation, the process by which female college students negotiate and construct their understanding of physical views is observed to rely on contextual and reflective thinking. These students understand the significance of situating women within their historical and cultural settings, as well as taking into account the gender of the producers, such as authors or directors. This allowed them to filter and select which views are relevant to their current time of living.

Because we cannot deny we learned many things about classical ones, and we need to acknowledge the context, where at the time, women are not relevant enough (Mila, 25 years old).

Mila also stressed the significance of understanding the context of what she consumed since, in her perspective, the literature and the films, while fictitious, might reflect the social, cultural, and economic elements of the period. It would be unwise for her to force herself and her body into an image from different times and places. It shows how there is awareness of the various aspects playing out in understanding her body. Furthermore, the awareness also includes the recognition of the interplay between nature and nurture, going beyond a narrow focus on appearance control. but also that there are aspects unable to be controlled. Mila, for instance, acknowledges that certain aspects of her body, like her height as an Indonesian, are beyond her control and cannot conform to Western body standards. This pattern of contextual and reflective thought is also evident in other participants' experiences.

Correspondingly, Bilna showed reflective thinking and contextual awareness by comparing an American adaptation of a Japanese comic. Not only was she interested in this topic in the first place, but she further took it as her undergraduate thesis which she examined systematically.

It seems like Hollywood cannot make films without good-looking female characters, and how these women nurture the main male character... Same thing with the sex scenes... So I compared a Japanese comic and its American adaptation. And in the American one, somehow, women are portrayed as, like, there are always sex scenes. Like those things are very needed. Meanwhile, the original Japanese version was not like that... it is not even crucial for the plot. (Bilna, 24 years old).

Similarly, Bilna exhibited a disposition for reflective thinking and demonstrated her contextual awareness through a comparative analysis of an American adaptation of a Japanese comic. It led her to fathom that the appearance-focused and sexualized portrayals of women are strongly embedded in the Western culture itself, which is in line with the objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Thus, she became more selective in adapting the views considering she comes from and lives in a



different culture and place, and seeks different goals in her life. She even further elaborated on these things as a political tool to sell films, to make women insecure and buy more beauty products, and to benefit the people in power.

Reflective thinking is also evident in the manner in which they interpret objective remarks not as the truth, but as individual bias or subjectivity. Instead of accepting what others say as the accepted truth, these female college students evaluated it in terms of possible bias, such as in the case of their lecturers, male authors and directors, as Dini stated that the fact that these individuals are educated does not mean that what they say is accurate. Dini found it difficult to accept their views because they are frequently patriarchal and made her feel inferior as a woman. This type of contextual, reflective, and provisional thinking is consistent with Sinnott's conception of postformal thought in young adults (Santrock, 2017).

This explains why, despite the presence of an objectifying environment, these women were able to develop predominately positive physical identities after completing their education. This is evident in their body image, which emphasizes non-physical attributes such as health, comfort, and safety. First of all, all participants prioritized health in valuing their physique.

If I can, I want to work more on it [my body image] because lately, in my family especially, we talk about health a lot... So, we focus more on health (Dini, 24 years old).

The matter of health is the very first thing Dini mentioned in describing her current body image. The significance of family or environmental roles is also reflected in this transition in physical comprehension. In addition, Dini and the other participants, who had recently graduated from college and were starting their careers while engaging in a variety of activities, regarded their health as essential to their appreciation of their bodies. When they are unhealthy or exhausted, it is impossible for them to function properly and live their daily lives in the best way possible, regardless of how good they appear. Such focus on bodily function instead of appearance is indeed the opposite idea of objectification (Alleva et al., 2015; O'Hara et al., 2014). In manifesting this focus on physical health, the emphasis is placed primarily on their hygiene of how they frequently clean their bodies and make efforts for a healthy lifestyle.

Second of all, their physical sense of self also reflects a focus on physical comfort. The concept of comfort is present in Mila, Nada, and Dini's body image discussion. Mila, for example, defined comfort as a state in which she is at peace with her body and unaffected by external disturbances.

What is important is as long as we feel good, we feel comfortable, and that's it. For now, I am more confident. I am more like 'don't give a shit'. Like, I do not really care as long as I feel comfortable with my own body. (Mila, 25 years old).

Comfort becomes an essential concept that defies objectification because it emphasizes how the body feels rather than how it appears. This demonstrates an effort to connect with the body or to view it as an integral aspect of the self, rather than as a separate external manifestation of the self. This entire concept reflects the preservation of women from one of the negative effects of objectification, which is a diminished internal bodily state (Calogero, 2012; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Lastly, physical safety is an essential component of the physical identity of college students. The significance is notably reflected in how they ensure their physical safety by associating with the correct group of individuals. This circle should not pose a physical threat to them, such as harassment or intrusive physical contact. This priority is demonstrated by Dini and Bilna's preference for female peers, whereas Nada and Mila are more in being selective in choosing female and male peers who are non-objectifying.



College as Facilitator of Physical Identity Development in Emerging Adults

As evidenced by this study, identity exploration centered on the physical dimension is observed during emerging adulthood as one of the developmental duties. This mission, according to Mercia, an Eriksonian scholar, involves a dynamic process of exploration and commitment. In the context of this study, it is evident that the experiences of the participants reflect identity exploration or a state of moratorium regarding their body image, which represents their physical identity. To provide further clarity, physical identity (body image) pertains to an individual's perception and understanding of their body, as well as how they position it in relation to their environment (Garrett, 2004; Vasile, 2015). Notably, the participants in this study demonstrated the dynamics of investigating diverse discourses surrounding women's bodies and actively engaging in the negotiation of ideas, while displaying fewer discernible commitments to a single or definitive body image.

This study has shown that female college students' physical sense of self as emerging adults is contributed by objectification experiences they encountered in their educational context of the English literature department. This is consistent with the theory that objectification experiences contribute to women's low self-view (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). New to this research is the possibility of a counter-response in the formation of women's physical identity. It needs to be underlined that this is not to justify the objectifying treatment itself, but rather to put light on women's mechanisms that might hinder the negative effects which are through contextual and reflective thinking resulting in non-appearance-focused physical identity. Given this, it is evident that college, as an educational institution with a distinct culture, plays a role in the physical identity development of emerging adults. This study, thus, asserted Arnett's (2016) idea that college facilitates the exploration of these individuals' identity exploration.

Does this imply that all objectification experiences foster a positive outlook? Though additional research is required to answer this question, it cannot be denied that the participants' phase of emerging adulthood made this development possible. It is especially since the phase is characterized by frequent changes, dynamics, and exploration which were apparent in Dini, Mila, Nada, and Bilna's stories. Had these experiences occurred to adolescents, reactions might be different considering they are developmentally different in practicing contextual, reflective, and provisional thinking.

In educational human development research itself, this kind of discussion about physical identity has been receiving less attention compared to other dimensions of identity like religious, racial, sexual identity, and others. In contrast, the majority of studies that address physical identity focus on physical education subjects, students' physical activities, and athletic experiences and identity (Garrett, 2004; Proios et al., 2012; Walseth et al., 2017). Therefore, this research contributes to enriching the field by shining the light on the students' academic experiences in general, despite not in physically demanding educational activities, and how the curriculum and college culture influence their physical identity.

Considering the potential role of college as a site that facilitates physical identity formation, it becomes imperative to address the educational implications associated with this phenomenon. First, institutions of higher education must design and implement a comprehensive curriculum that takes into account both intended and unintended influences. It is essential to recognize that the facilitation of physical identity formation is not reliant solely on the course content, but also includes the lecturers, media, individuals, regulations, and peers within the educational environment. Furthermore, instructional strategies are of the utmost importance. In a college setting characterized by openness, diversity, and the fostering of critical thinking, educators should explicitly acknowledge their subjectivity, encourage students to engage in exploration, and avoid imposing values to allow them to explore and not have a foreclosed mindset of physical identity.



Conclusion

Objectification is a context-bounded experience where women are reduced from persons with internal qualities to mere appearances and sexual objects. This study found that in the specific academic culture of the English literature department, female college students encounter objectification through learning content, media, lecturers, campus dress codes, and peers. These experiences affected their psychological states negatively seen in the existence of shame, anxiety, diminished internal state and flow, and risks of eating disorders. However, at the same time, they were also exposed to various discourses, such as feminism, gender studies, modern film analysis and literature, religion, etc. Such varieties allowed them to have alternatives from which they make sense and negotiate an overall positive physical identity once graduated. The mechanism found in such an outlook is unique to the emerging adults' ability to contextual and reflective thinking. Consequently, the female college students' physical identity (body image) reflects an emphasis on the non-appearance aspects by valuing physical health, comfort, and safety.

Despite the valuable insights obtained from this research, its limitations must be recognized. Firstly, as this study utilized a qualitative approach, further quantitative assessments are needed to measure the extent of the positive physical sense among female college students. Furthermore, it would be advantageous to compare the experiences of students in departments that do not offer gender and feminism studies. Secondly, given the presence of religious aspects in the participants' experiences, it will be comprehensive if further research looks into this intersection between physical and religious identity. Future research should investigate the intersection between physical and religious identity in order to provide a more complete understanding. Lastly, while there is an abundance of research on objectification among adolescents and young adults, there are relatively few specific studies on physical identity. Therefore, further research is encouraged to elucidate the complexity and unique characteristics of these developmental phases in relation to objectification experiences.

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