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Ripe for Consumption: Separating Women from Autonomy

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Abstract

This proposed position statement privileges the notion that the male gaze is a damning and damaging force for identifying women in both Western societies as well as within patriarchal societies. This particular exploration is driven by my perceived lack of the *true* effect that this gaze has socially and intrapersonally over women. The male gaze not only strips women of bodily integrity, bodily autonomy, but autonomy holistically. Beyond the stripping of autonomous worth, the male gaze, i.e. objectification and an autonomous reduction to body parts alone, all result in psychological and physiological damage for identifying women. Previous research in the Communication field focuses on the explicitness of women's appearances and the drive for objectification and the male gaze to occur; therefore, how and what objectification creates for women's realities is extremely neglected. In order to properly challenge, and hopefully dismantle: heteropatriarchy, heteropolarity, and heteronormativity which all motivate objectification, women's reality via the male gaze requires more study to deduce the exact ways in which such objectification could and should be challenged. The aforementioned negative and damaging effects of the male gaze are: belief in rape myths and other anti-women myths relating to violence, bodily surveillance, body monitoring, self-objectification, anxiety, depression, disordered eating, and more. It will require continual autoethnographic accounts from identifying women to gather more of these effects. This form of research and account has the potential to free *some* anticipation and anxiety surrounding the feelings of isolation which may come from enduring such an oppressive force alone.

Keywords: objectification, heteropatriarchy, heteropolarity, heteronormativity

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Through an analysis of relevant academic journals relating to the male gaze, and via this position statement, I'll be arguing that regardless of positive or negative interpretations of such "attention," the male gaze operates under toxic masculinity to effectively alter, and eventually damage, the psyche of those who identify as women, not only psychologically, but physiologically as well. Considering the body is a site of political action and/or power which operates as an embodiment of communication existing via providing and/or presenting various gendered performances, the act of the male gaze disembodies women's identities from their sites of political action and power, thus actively stripping them of any autonomous worth. By fixating on women's bodies and *only* their bodies, *that* is what they're reduced to and exist as: flesh, ripe for consumption. This appears to me as being common knowledge within Gender Studies (the prevalence of the male gaze), however, through personal exploration within the field, I've been driven to search for, and understand, the *effect* that this has *over* women, which is far less emphasized in comparison to its sheer existence. Before extrapolating the negative effects of the male gaze and thus objectification as a means to inch closer to dismantling this oppressive force, objectification, heteropatriarchy, heteropolarity, and heteronormativity must first be understood. Objectification can be defined as the action of degrading someone to the status of a mere non-autonomous object. Heteropatriarchy has a broader definition, considering it is a systematic force brought on by patriarchy. Heteropatriarchy is an overarching system of male dominance through the institution of compulsory heterosexuality. Heteropatriarchy functions as a social hierarchy based on gender as a means to secure male domination and female submission within the patriarchy. Heteropolarity manages to permeate both scientific and popular discourse and is a social construction composite founded upon the presumed complementarity between the two binary cis-genders. This complementarity functions scientifically due to the conception of the "natural fit" between a penis and a vagina. Finally, heteronormativity, which makes heterosexuality hegemonic through the process of

normalization. This process occurs when the view is that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate, authentic, and prescriptive sexual arrangements, which are ruled within social and cultural spheres. What can be understood from these terms in relation to objectification is the fact that female submission and degradation is prescribed as “natural,” justified, and ensures the procurement of male domination through acts such as objectification.

In *An Experimental Analysis of Young Women’s Attitude Toward the Male Gaze Following Exposure to Centerfold Images of Varying Explicitness*, Wright et al. (2015) utilizes their analysis to come to the conclusion that it is exceedingly important to identify the social sources that undermine the efforts presented by feminists, psychologists, and other scholars, as a starting place to educate identifying women in regards to sexualization and its damaging, thus severely negative, personal and collective impacts. This conclusion is reached by first identifying that, “sexualizing cultural practices teach women that their worth is inherent in their appearance and that men’s sexualization of their bodies is appropriate and inevitable,” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This process of indoctrination occurs through an oversaturation in media of sexualized female bodies, and is carried out by the hegemonic process that is normalization, a source of *violence*, which is present and well established within heteropatriarchy. As such thought processes are normalized and transformed into a ubiquitous system of violence targeted against feminine bodies, comes the negative and damaging effects created as a result of such normative violence. These effects operate both psychologically and physiologically. From their experimental analysis, Wright et al. (2015), deduced that, “Women exposed to sexualizing images were less likely to support feminism and more likely to believe in rape myths [and] to agree with anti-women myths about sexual violence,” (p. 3). What this says about the psychological effects is that with increased exposure, i.e. normalization of sexual un-truths about women, the more likely men *and* women are to believe in them. The issue here though is this: who does this truly harm? For me as a scholar, the answer rings clear, but to our

social and cultural world, maybe not so much. Of course, those who are damaged, *the most and most severely*, are women. Aside from the physiological damage left to potentially arise from believing in false myths relating to violence, there's more to this complex issue of negative effects which stem from an objectifying male gaze. These issues do and can easily encompass identifying women existing in, finding themselves in, and/or being trapped or coerced into compromising and dangerous situations as a result of beliefs in such misogynistic and violent myths. Along with external real-world harm to come from these myths, women also inflict self-damaging behaviors because of them. Through this particular analysis, Wright et al. (2015) outlines how increased frequency of women's acceptance of men's sexualizing behavior leads to an increased psychological and physical presence of body monitoring. This self-objectification then increases the risk for shame, among other psychological conditions such as anxiety, disordered eating, and depression. Therefore, it seems the psychological and physiological both transcend each other as well as combine with one another; psychological beliefs about violence and sexual perception seem to inextricably link to varying physiological effects, implications, and harms. Also, certain psychological effects, correlate and/or either exist with, or turn into, physiological effects. For example, depression and anxiety concerning these topics may lead to disordered eating, a physiological impact. Nearing the end of their analysis, Wright et al. (2015) leaves us with a piece of information I find, and will implore later, as a key finding particular to my analysis, and that is this, "Women are not responsible for sexualization and its adverse effects. Men are responsible, as they are the agents of sexualization," (p. 8). Both as a scholar and as a woman living within a heteropatriarchal society and culture, I find this extremely ironic; *not* untrue, just ironic. I see things this way because all of Western culture pivots violence against women, especially if it's inflicted on themselves or against other women, as a fault of their own and their "competitive" and "comparing" "nature." Thus, per our culture's beliefs, it's the fault of women that we're sexualized in the first place. As this simple quote reminds us, we are not, seeing that the agents of this objectification are virtually *exclusively* men.

Traveling down a line of blame and correlating it to the fact that women use the objectifying gaze as well, it's capable of being deduced that the gaze men have over women, is that of far more inherently violent than when women implore the "same" gaze. Here's a hint: it is *not* the same, and actually, when women utilize such a gaze, it says more about their psychological damage coming from the male gaze, then it does about women enacting psychological and physiological damage over other women *or* men. In *If you look at me like at a piece of meat, then that's a problem' – women in the center of the male gaze. Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis as a tool of critique*, Glapka (2018) ties in beauty and its perceptions to women's individual relationships and interpretations of the male gaze, and their stories; the results regarding such interpretation are shocking and disheartening, yet simultaneously eye-opening and educational for understanding the damaging effects and implications of the male gaze. Glapka (2018) considers her interviewees as, "vulnerable to patriarchy," (p. 100). As such, regardless of interpretation of objectification, women holistically, but in this particular case, are persistently "at risk" of the patriarchy and its damaging effects. Through such a lens, I see patriarchy and the male gaze operating hand and in hand, as do they also function alongside heteronormativity and heteropolarity. These cultural and oppressive frameworks remind us that, "[...] the sense of accountability for looking pretty to men is a position of internalized submission," (p. 97). Women's subordination is key for patriarchy to continue to function, hence it's no surprise that female appearance, regardless of or including beauty, is a stasis of oppression, at least under patriarchy; however, on the male-end of things, the appearance of women is a stasis of righteous access and viewing, as well as a simple platter for consumption and violence. What this means is that physical appearance is a "condition" that invites and allows oppression by the dominant group, i.e. reinforces the master/slave nature of patriarchy. This then results in a positionality that makes men feel entitled to subordinate women based on appearance, or as I like to see it, off simply *having* a body. In patriarchy women existing equals a condition deserving of violence. This idea is reflected as

one of Glapka's interviewees details her experience pre and post being raped, to which they believed their outfit, one that was "modest" and covered most of their body, meant that something like this wouldn't and/or couldn't happen. According to Moffett (2006), "rape is a way of keeping women in their place," and not only are they denied autonomy in this "place" they "belong," but they also are punished for their existence as a consumable entity, which has been defined by the patriarchy. This vulnerable bodily location within patriarchy concurrently is always seeking ways to punish women's morality and holistic choices in relation to their physical appearance *and* sheer existence as women with bodies. Of course extreme acts of violence such as rape and murder are the most violent of the potential punishments, however, I project that the male gaze is a primary stepping stone that invites further acts of violence such as rape and murder.

In *Sexualized Branded Entertainment and the Male Consumer Gaze*, McAllister et al. (2014) remind us that there's a "tendency of cosmetic ads to fragment women's bodies—such as eyes and lips into isolated parts," (p. 300). I propose through my own research, women's bodies are fragmented in far more ways than only their eyes and lips. I understand that this discovery is specific to cosmetic ads, but with a title of "sexualized branded entertainment," I feel as though one of the largest sexualized entertainment sources is being neglected—this source is pornography. In terms of what body parts or features of which become isolated, these are: rear ends, breasts, someone's physicality, i.e. their weight and/or size, hair color, race, presence of hair on the body, and feet. My discovery, like that of McAllister et al., also included in eyes, but not lips. Extending beyond this specific isolation, each body part is then itemized by its *nature*. Here I will list these subsequent itemizations. Rear ends: big, fat, round, and small. Breasts: big, small, busty, natural, perky, huge, tiny, and fake. Weight and size: massive, thick, chubby, curvy, skinny, petite, little, and fit. Hair: bald, hairless, hairy, and shaved. Eyes and feet are their own categories, and for race and hair color, *every single* existing race and existing hair color are listed. It would be remiss of me to deny that these categories favor societal ideals: such as slim,

busty, curvy, etc. However, I believe it would be *remiss of culture* to ignore that while yes, those are the more “prevalent” and “favored” categories, the complete spectrum of possibility is enacted here. From big to small rear ends, huge to tiny breasts, massive to little size, and bald to hairy, women of what appear as existing on either end, or perhaps anywhere in between, are at immediate risk of objectification. What this means to me is that: *no woman or feminine body is safe from scrutiny and the projected damage caused by being categorically itemized on a basis of objectification, thus the male gaze*. This also goes to show that no *part* of a feminine body is safe from this practice, because according to pornographical itemization, any body part can be selected, itemized, and then objectified. Since this scale is so large and all encompassing, I can firmly and with confidence state women *are not* granted *any* autonomous worth within a patriarchal society, and that is because the precedence within this culture demands male consumers to strip this autonomy off and away from women as soon as they exist and are available to them. As a response, arrives Vandenbosch et al. (2017) in, *The relationship between online pornography and the sexual objectification of women: The attenuating role of Porn Literacy Education*, who emphasizes the need for media literacy within institutions such as pornography so that individuals can better understand said media and its effects. In this case, the effect of pornography is one that is isolating, as well as psychologically and physiologically damaging for women. Vandenbosch et al. (2017) claims that, “Advertisements, television shows, magazine articles, and social media content regularly present women as decorative objects whose appearance is their most valuable asset,” (p. 1018). This reasserts the aforementioned notion that the appearance of women is a “condition,” which invites objectification due to the hegemonic normalization of female subordination within heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy. This statement also privileges the notion that sexualizing cultural practices inform women that their worth is wrapped up solely in their appearance, and that the objectification of said appearance from men is both appropriate and inevitable, which specifically leads to the intrapersonal damaging effects of objectification against women.

Continuing with the notion that patriarchy, i.e. masculine domination and presence, results in a complete autonomous stripping for women, comes in Karsay et al. (2018) in, *Adopting the Objectifying Gaze: Exposure to Sexually Objectifying Music Videos and Subsequent Gazing Behavior*, who emphasizes that, “Although objectification does not affect all women equally, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) have posited that almost no woman can avoid the objectifying gaze due to its subtle nature and ubiquity,” (p. 28). Through my analysis of pornographical itemized bodily categories, we know not all women are affected equally, especially considering these categories encompass virtually any living, breathing, and existing woman. So, when we encounter intersectionality, categories such as race are going to greatly alter, and perhaps increase, the violence to come from objectification; however, *no woman* can entirely avoid such objectification in a patriarchal society, because even if it’s not being enacted directly against them, it’s more than likely women with similar or the “same” bodies are being categorized as autonomous-less objects in the media they’re being exposed to. Karsay et al. (2018) paraphrases the effects of the male gaze already listed in some of the other scholarly articles I’ve mentioned, which are, but not limited to: self-objectification, bodily surveillance, body shame, social physique anxiety, and clarifies that the sole anticipation of such gaze results in these effects as well. The notion of sole anticipation ties directly to my position that the male gaze both psychologically and physiologically damages women; anticipation is going to enact both of these effects together as well as separately. Objectification changes the way women move, talk, walk, and function in order to avoid such violence, and there are locations where said anticipation is increased. Dealing with anticipation in or outside situations of gaze and its violence, is likely to cause stress and anxiety. As Karsay et al. (2018) states, “Exposure to sexually objectifying media can affect how individuals perceive not only themselves, but also [other] women,” (p. 27). Thus, the anxiety projected from sexual gaze and objectification encompasses how women feel about themselves, but also how men, and other women, create a space for all identifying women to feel in these various damaging ways.

Within the duration of this literature review and position statement, I've detailed the male gaze and its operation within patriarchy, how that affects women both psychologically and physiologically, and how that effect is both enacted by women and men, however men are the primary agents of such sexual objectification via this gaze. This matters in the context of Gender and Communication Studies as a whole for the reason that damaging effects are simply more neglected compared to that of many analyses regarding explicit images of feminine bodies. This encompasses a need to categorize and itemize the female body and list the ways in which it becomes and is objectified, which frankly just leads to more itemization and thus objectification, as opposed to what that objectification causes or why it's there in the first place. The effects result in identifying women having their psyche damaged and altering their literal autonomous location within society and culture. Such violence causes women to move and act differently as a means to protect themselves to avoid both the anticipation and violence from this damaging gaze. For this study to expand itself, I see fit that scholars focus on various intrapersonal and intercultural forms of autoethnography to further deep dive into personal experiences with the negative effects that come from the male gaze. Through sources of autoethnography, women's perceptions and experiences with this violence can be extrapolated from a personal level to a mass communicative level, and much more can then be understood about how women as a social, cultural, and minority group are negatively affected, and thus subordinated on the basis of objectification through the male gaze.

The National Communication Association's Learning Outcomes in Communication addressed in this paper are: LOC #2 (Employ Communication Theories, Perspectives, Principles, and Concepts), LOC #3 (Engage in Communication Inquiry), LOC #4 (Create Messages Appropriate to the Audience, Purpose, and Context), LOC #5 (Critically Analyze Messages), and LOC #7 (Apply Ethical Communication Principles and Practices).

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