Re-representation: Addressing objectifying media portrayals of women in South Africa

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Abstract

Objectification imparts harm to women and sets a detrimental precedent for self-objectification. This is particularly true for young women who are seeking information to assist them in the process of identity construction. Experimental studies indicate that objectification in media causes negative body esteem, an unnecessary drive for thinness, eating disorders and related psychological problems. Globalised media trends emphasise and value women for their physical appearance. These trends de-personalise women, depict them as objects to be gazed at, and style them as decorative, rather than a person with a mind, aptitude, intellect, personality and a 'voice'. This often results in a situation where value judgements of women's physical appearance are made by women for women, and by others based on narrow definitions of beauty, including body type and shape, youthfulness and 'sexiness'.

Objectification has become so pervasive that it is the de facto design for a range of products such as cosmetics, perfume, and slimming products. The inherent medical danger of objectification and self-objectification, and the negative social outcomes, compel us to ask whether one should actively, (especially when knowing the harm it causes), participate in objectification design. Designers, by nature of their profession, use puffery, exaggeration, idealisation and prettification to present a product in the best manner possible to potential consumers. Whilst advertising regulation allows puffery as a legitimate marketing practice, objectified images have a hedonic appeal with potential long-term harmful effect on young viewers.

This paper is a theoretical study that looks at objectification and its practice through a feminist-ethical lens and questions the value of this design trend given its associated harm and poor communication effect, particularly in light of several calls for a more ethical and responsible visual communications practice. Extensive research is available on the negative portrayal of women in media – this contribution aims to extend the topic by highlighting alternate constructive approaches for media designers to consider. We recommend a contextually sensitive design approach that include responsible and critical practice for society; that do not exploit vulnerable consumers; that avoid exaggerated claims (puffery); that work toward content and meaning rather than 'prettying up'; and that break dichotomies through diversification of masculine/feminine, beautiful/ugly. Designers should critically re-evaluate objectification design, and consider alternative ethical design strategies to market products to young women. The aim of this paper is to create an awareness amongst design community about the destructive potential of objectification design, to re-instil the importance of designing with social responsibility in mind.

Keywords*: objectification; visual communication; women; ethics; representation*

Orientation

Portraying women as sexual or beauty objects is global and a widespread media practice. It is where the media use women as an object, or part of their bodies as an object to decorate a consumer item or to promote an idea. Objectification provides a visual scaffold and disregards the intellect, abilities,

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the 'voice' and individuality of the objectified. These portrayals include actions where models touch themselves in suggestive manners; where men are portrayed as active, and women as passive and submissive sexual or beauty objects for visual pleasure; to roles where women are portrayed as objects of sexual violence (Economou 2013). Objectification is not the mere explicit sexual portrayal of a model promoting a product, it is determined inter alia, by a number a variables such as the facial expression by a model, the emphasis of the camera angle on a body part, and even the way a model wears make-up. A model does not have to be scantily-clad to become an objectified image. A fully-clothed model with a sexually suggestive pose, for example, could qualify as being an objectified image (Stankiewicz and Rosselli 2008). Although objectification has bearing on both genders, we have delimited the scope of objectification to women due to the focus of this paper. Portrayals also tend to emphasise youthfulness, idealised facial features and body shape, and reproduce narrow and idealised notions of beauty. These images are by and large enhanced through digital manipulation.

Objectification imparts harm to women by assigning them to a subjugated position, trivializes sexual violence and sets a detrimental precedent for self-objectification. This self-objectification process emanates from Fredrickson and Roberts's (1997) Objectification Theory and posits that people internalise the objectifying gaze (self-objectification). The result is that they become unhappy about aspects of their own body. This unhappiness in turn causes them to experience anxiety and shame because they do not meet the ideals set by the media. Self-objectification in addition, contributes to feelings of inadequacy, cause victims to become alienated from their own internal cues, and trigger victims' preoccupation with self-surveillance leading to depression (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Moradi and Huang 2008). Internalization of beauty ideals can be described as the degree to which societal (and media) norms of appearance become the standard by which women or girls measure their own appearance (Vandenbosch and Eggermont 2012). Not only has self-objectification been linked to negative mental and physical health risks, including body shame, anxiety, depression, sexual dysfunction and eating disorders, exposure to objectifying media has been identified as predictors for self-objectification (Slater and Tiggemann 2014, p. 2; Fardouly et al. 2014).

Upholding an (unrealistic) ideal slim figure and the pursuit thereof is one of the major reasons for eating disorders amongst young women (Hawkins et al. 2004; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Eating disorders and unhappiness with one's appearance and weight has permeated even the body image perception of school children. A large survey in the Netherlands for example (Bun et al. 2011), obtained the body mass index (BMI) and the body image perception of 10 767 primary and secondary school children. What is revealing is that 27.5% of 2 097 secondary school girls with a normal BMI regarded themselves as too fat. This became somewhat less in the primary school, where 6.9% of 2083 girls with a normal BMI index regarded themselves as too fat. In South Africa, it is significant that young black women are increasingly pressurised to conform to Western beauty ideals of slenderness in contrast to African cultural ideals that value plumpness as a sign of beauty, fertility and prosperity (Morris and Szabo 2013; Ogana and Ojong 2012).

It is not surprising that a person will experience anxiety and shame when confronted with objectified imagery. Most women and young girls will not be able to achieve the unrealistic and medically unhealthy ideals set by objectified images. Apart from the slenderness and specific body shape of models used in media representations, features, complexion, youthfulness and sexiness are additional beauty ideals endorsed and normalised via repeated representation in the media. Internalising media's prevailing beauty ideals and working towards achieving these, i.e. 'being beautiful', has become an accepted part of what 'being a woman' means today (Vandenbosch and Eggermont 2012 Lazar 2011).

We posit that the media by and large portray idealised models in objectified imagery; that these models project a medically irresponsible BMI, and 'perfect', idealised and/or digitally manipulated complexions and features; that this ideal is unrealistic and unattainable for most healthy persons; and that the internalisation and pursuance thereof will invariably lead to health and psychological

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problems. Apart from the negative effect of objectified images on some viewers, we can rightfully ask whether sexualised images are effective variables in marketing endeavours. Whilst we acknowledge that suggestive imagery, through its arousal effect on men, does attract attention (LaTour 1990; Bongiorno, Bain and Haslam 2013) and that objectification is a standard marketing practice for some products, the question about its value as an effective marketing communication agent still remains. Evidence from a number of experimental studies indicates that objectification may not be that affective, in particular when marketing products to women (Bongiorno et al. 2013). In addition, a study in Australia conducted amongst students, reports a desire amongst consumers for more diverse and average size body media depictions in addition to general dissatisfaction with women being largely valued for their appearance (Diedrichs, Lee, and Kelly 2011).

It is against this background, and the reality of this entrenched design trend, that we evaluate the notion of objectification and its practice through a feminist-ethical lens. Given that objectified imagery imparts harm to young women, and that its communication value is questionable, we are confronted with pragmatic and ethical reservation in terms of design and design education, particularly considering the call for a more ethical and responsible visual communications practice. We aim to create awareness in the design community as to the destructive potential of objectification design, to re-emphasise the importance of socially responsible design and design education, and to suggest a contextually sensitive design approach for the responsible portrayal of women that seeks to instil a sense of gender equality and respect in society.

As design educators we use a dual-authored feminist-ethical approach in this qualitative study, blending theoretical findings from local and international sources in a range of disciplines, including media and marketing studies, visual communication, feminism, philosophy and psychology. We recognise that the media in South Africa are affected by globalising influences, as such validating our use of international sources within our local context, in combination with localised studies.

In what follows, we explore how the objectification as a theoretical construct, with gender implications has been understood by Feminist studies.

Feminist conceptions of objectification

The concept of objectification is key to the work of contemporary feminist theory, and simply put, involves treating a person (woman) as an *object* (Papadaki 2010, p. 16, emphasis in original). For McKinnon and Dworkin, who write as anti-pornography feminist activists, when a woman is objectified, she is reduced to a ‘thing’ and her humanity is seriously harmed. These feminists relate objectification to the removal of rational capacity, autonomy and subjectivity – as such, objectified women exist solely to be used and are in great danger of being violated and abused (Papadaki 2010, p. 21). Nussbaum, a feminist philosopher, highlights the notion of ‘instrumentality’ as the core of McKinnon and Dworkin’s conceptions and supports their ideas, indicating that treatment of people as instruments for others’ purposes is most always morally problematic (Nussbaum 1995, p. 286). Nussbaum expands on the idea of objectification, outlining seven ways in which a person can be seen or treated as an object (Nussbaum 1995, p. 257; Padakadi 2014):

1. Instrumentality: the treatment of a person as a tool for the objectifier's purposes;
2. Denial of autonomy: the treatment of a person as lacking in autonomy and self-determination;
3. Inertness: the treatment of a person as lacking in agency, and perhaps also inactivity;
4. Fungibility: the treatment of a person as interchangeable with other objects;
5. Violability: the treatment of a person as lacking in boundary-integrity;
6. Ownership: the treatment of a person as something that is owned by another (can be bought or sold) and

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7. Denial of subjectivity: the treatment of a person as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.

Langton (2009, pp. 228-229) later expands Nussbaum's list, adding:

8. Reduction to body: the treatment of a person as identified with their body, or body parts;
9. Reduction to appearance: the treatment of a person primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses;
10. Silencing: the treatment of a person as if they are silent, lacking the capacity to speak.

Nussbaum's view on objectification is not as narrowly focused as McKinnon and Dworkin. She believes that 'objectification' may occur in benign ways and may not necessarily always involve destructive consequences (Nussbaum 1995, p. 273) For example, Nussbaum explains that when she uses her lover's stomach as a pillow while lying in bed, it is not difficult to see that this type of instrumentality ('objectification') is not necessarily harmful, as it occurs within the context of a loving relationship where there is consent, or in the case of her lover being asleep, at least implied consent (Nussbaum 1995, p. 273, 265). The context of the loving relationship provides an understanding that the individual is not being treated as purely instrumental, but that additional dimensions and variations, other than that of subject-object, exist within the relationship. In this way, Nussbaum highlights the possibility for some form of positive 'objectification' and indicates that it can occur in contexts where equality, respect and consent are present (Nussbaum 1995, p. 251). Papadaki (2010, p. 28) finds Dworkin and McKinnon's conception too narrow and Nussbaum's list too broad to describe adequately the concept of objectification. Several activities in everyday life involve treating people instrumentally, which does not necessarily lead to harm, for example our interactions with taxi drivers, bus drivers, waiters, till operators and with even with our partners. Context needs to be considered as integral in order to delineate adequately objectification as a harmful practice, which for Papadaki (and Nussbaum) occurs when the person's humanity is undermined. Within the context of 'morally safe' relationships, where equality and respect for one another are present, humanity cannot be denied. Therefore Papadaki (2010, p. 32, 35-36) provides an adaptation of Nussbaum's definition:

> Objectification is seeing and/or treating a person as an object (seeing and/or treating them in one or more of these seven ways: as an instrument, inert, fungible, violable, owned, denied autonomy, denied subjectivity), in such a way that denies this person's humanity. A person's humanity is denied when it is ignored/not properly acknowledged and/or when it is in some way harmed.

In terms of the theme of this conference, the focus of this paper permits us to define objectification from a design and ethics perspective as follows:

Objectification in design is an unethical process whereby a designer deliberately or unintentionally visually represents another person, and in particular women, in ways where mutual equality and respect are not evident and subjectivity and humanity is denied, constituting the person's role instrumentally as solely for visual pleasure and for sexual gratification of a consumer market and/or for commercial advantage of a third party.

Feminist conceptions of beauty objectification

The conception and portrayal of women as beauty objects – as objects to be gazed at, and for visual pleasure, has been widely documented. Historically, 'beauty' and feminism have shared an uneasy, sometimes even antagonistic, relationship. In the United States, as early as 1914, as part of the First Wave Feminist Movement, "the right to ignore fashion" was included as a right to ensure women's freedom and equality (Murnen and Seabrook 2012, p. 438). Second Wave feminism, from the 1960s onwards, earnestly began to question the socialised role of women's bodies and that of

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accompanying beauty practices in limiting their life experience. Many remember Second Wave feminism in relation to anti-beauty pageant protests theatrics: such as "crowning a sheep Miss America and throwing 'oppressive' gender artifacts, such as bras, girdles, false eyelashes, high heels, and makeup, into a trash can in front of reporters" (Krolokke and Sorenson 2006, p. 8). Radical feminists such as Dworkin, McKinnon, and Rich, question and protest the notion that women are required to 'improve' their bodies and incessantly work towards achieving societal norms of beauty, referring to 'beauty work' such as the elimination of body hair, wearing makeup, conforming to fashion standards, and dieting (Murnen and Seabrook 2012, p. 438). Expanding on this concept, Brownmiller (in 1984) draws attention to the differences between men and women's relationships regarding their appearance and bodily behaviour, and exposes these as relating to patriarchal structures of dominance and submission. While men's fashion during the industrial revolution becomes more functional and adaptive to encourage freedom of movement, women's fashion remains restrictive and either hide or emphasise sexualised body parts, as such enforcing women's position as submissive sex objects (Murnen and Seabrook 2012, p. 438). Similar arguments regarding women's subjugated position in society and the feminised body have been raised. In her acclaimed book *Unbearable Weight, Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Bordo (1993) emphasises the unrealistic thin ideal of beauty portrayals as detrimental to women's self-concept and as perpetuating serious physical and mental health risks (in Murnen & Seabrook 2012, p. 438). Bartky (1990, p. 66-82), a postmodern theorist combining gender studies and philosophy, draws on the Foucault's conceptions to demonstrate how women's bodies are 'disciplined' by culture through beauty practices. Women internalise the idealised beauty portrayals in media and these become the measure by which women constantly 'police' – monitor and regulate, their appearance and behaviour. Women learn to see themselves as objects, through the eyes of an "anonymous patriarchal Other", as objects to be gazed at and as 'decorative' for men's visual pleasure (Bartky 1990, p. 72). In this way, women are constituted as docile bodies that are "controlled and disciplined in accord with prevailing sociocultural discourses of attractiveness", invoking the concept of gaze theory (Tyner and Ogle 2007, p. 77):

> Key here is the notion that docile bodies engage in a perpetual surveillance process, in which they monitor the physical self for fit with cultural ideals and invoke disciplinary practices (e.g., diet and exercise regimens, beauty and health care procedures, wearing of fashionable clothing) to manipulate the body to conform to the given ideal.

Bartky (1990, p. 69-74) outlines the ways in which beauty objectification is harmful: the practices socially inscribe the feminine gendered body as needing to be smaller (thinner) and more restrictive in its occupation of space and range of movement than men's, and as needing to be visually pleasing (decorative) and sexually appealing (women's faces should not show any signs of deep thought or wear). Cultural beauty standards direct women to keep their skin soft, smooth, wrinkle and blemish-free, relating to the infantilisation of women's bodies and faces (Bartky 1990, p. 71-73). Ultimately these beauty practices, as socially inscribed 'disciplining', support patriarchal notions of women's submissiveness to men (Bartky 1990, p. 74). Feminist authors, Faludi (1991) and Wolf (1991) have similarly criticised social and cultural ideals of female beauty for fostering discourses about woman's bodies that encourage unrealistic and narrow definitions of beauty defined as slenderness and youthfulness, and for promoting the idea that "a woman's physical appearance is an appropriate measure of her social worth" (Tyner and Ogle 2007, p. 76).

Currently, these types of feminist beauty criticisms are arguably considered 'out-dated'. Many young women today do not necessarily want to be associated with feminism due to a perceived link between feminism and 'anti-beauty' or 'anti-feminine' appearance. A 'postfeminist' sentiment is popularised in consumer culture, under the assumption that women have indeed gained equality and freedom, and young women are expressing this "with a celebration of all things feminine, including the desire for self-aestheticisation" (Lazar 2006, p. 505). Radical and Second Wave Feminism's so called anti-beauty advocacies seem no longer relevant to many young women. It is within this context that Third Wave Feminism has emerged, gaining ground from the 1990s onwards,

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and, influenced by postmodern and postcolonial conceptions of individuality and concerns for diversity, adopts an inclusive attitude that advocates for individual woman's right to choose and avoids categorical thinking. The Third Wave feminist movement, as such, becomes a splintering of diverse variations of more personal feminist approaches, of which many embrace beauty and sexual displays, symbols that older feminists consider inextricably linked to male oppression. Third Wave 'Lipstick Feminists' such as 'Pinkfloor', 'Grrrls' and 'Riotgirls' position themselves as sex and beauty subjects rather than objects – claiming power by appropriating terms such as 'slut' and 'bitch', with the aim to subvert and neutralise these weapons of patriarchy using mimicry and irony (Krolloke and Sorensen 2006, p. 17). What is concerning for us, is that the critique within these uninhibited sexual and beauty displays may go unnoticed for contextually unaware or uninformed audiences, or that the critique may become diluted if the cycle of mimicry continues.

This current embrace of sexual and beauty display as empowering has not gone uncontested. Within current feminist theory, there are still strong currents of criticism against beauty idealisation, which exist alongside neoliberal, Third Wave or 'post-feminist' embrace of beauty and sexiness. Jeffreys (2005, p. 28-29), a British feminist scholar, condemns beauty practices, including cosmetic surgery, as harmful cultural practices which are detrimental to women's health, constituting gender performance for men's benefit, which serve to reproduce gender stereotypes. The 'pornification' of culture, together with the neoliberal postmodern and 'post-feminist' ideas of 'choice' and sexual freedom, are criticised for having paved the way for extreme body modification beauty practices, such as breast implants, and have popularised exaggerated display of sexual objectification and self-objectification for women (Jeffreys 2005, p. 67, 77-78).

There seems to be no easy way for women to negotiate this current socio-cultural environment that concurrently condemns and celebrates women's beauty and sexual expression (which as we argue can constitute sexual objectification). Women and young girls are faced with an impossible range of diverse, and often competing ideologies to navigate in daily life regarding their appearance and bodies. As authors, we acknowledge that the expression of sexuality, and rightly so, is an integral part of society and culture. In fact we delight in the notion that women today have more freedom to express themselves confidently and in more diverse ways than what past conservative histories have allowed, including their right to be beautiful and sexually attractive. Nevertheless, we criticize the cumulative effect of a system of media images that emphasize womanhood as being necessarily appearance-based and sexual, and as false empowerment. We contend that objectifying sexualised images of women have in no small measure been encouraged by neoliberal and capitalist profit-making interests and serve to reinforce gender inequality and sexism.

Visual Communication strategies to avoid objectification

From within the discipline of graphic design, the pervasiveness of objectifying portrayals has not necessarily met with enough scrutiny, but has neither been ignored. Barnard (2013), Berger (2003), Heller (2000), Jobling and Crowly (1996), Roberts (2006) and Sparke (1995), amongst others, have drawn attention to issues regarding gender and sexuality in design and graphic design. Amongst a call for a variety of social and environmental concerns to be foregrounded in graphic design, Berman (2009) focuses on the visual representation of women in *Do Good Design*. "The most familiar approach taken by designers who want to help sell more stuff is the misleading and manipulative coupling of sexy bodies with products", Berman (2009, p. 73-74) comments critically and asks, "what unreasonable expectations are we burying in the messages that we give our daughters today regarding the composition and use of their bodies?". The question that remains, and one that we attempt to answer in what follows below, is: what can we as graphic designers and as educators do to remedy the situation?

If we consider, as Nussbaum and other feminist do, that relationships or contexts of mutual equality and respect, where humanity is not denied, provide the key for defining approaches as non-objectifying, we may ask ourselves: how can we translate this idea within the limitations that visual

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media offers? This is complicated for a number of reasons. Images are only representations of real people, so by nature images involve a type of material objectification. In addition, static visual images, such as photographs in print media, ‘capture’ a model for a single moment in time, and as such tend to represent narrowly a limited version of ‘personhood’ within a freeze frame moment. While women in everyday life may have opportunities to express their sexuality and physical attractiveness alongside their many other qualities, skills and cognitive abilities, this is complicated with media images. Media representations have to get an idea across to a viewer in a relatively short time and space, and often, and unfortunately so, rely on ’visual shorthand’, common generalisations, and stereotyping. Relationships in real life are fostered through personal interactions that usually occur over time and through a variety of different experiences, and thus exist as complex and diverse understandings of, and between people. The context of ‘relationship’ becomes complicated within image configurations. There are many implied relationship possibilities within visual representations, for example the relationships between people or groups of people within an image frame or representation, as well as, and perhaps more relevant, the relationship between the model(s) represented in the image and the viewer(s) or consumer(s) of the image (see Mulvey, 2006) for an discussion on ‘relationships’ generated via ‘looking’ within cinema). These relationship configurations function as imaginative constructions and cannot necessarily involve Nussbaum’s ideal context of mutual equality and respect and support of humanity. In fact, it is often this escapism from the real that make these media images so very appealing and lucrative for the consumer markets. Generalising, when we consider South Africa’s patriarchal society and its reputation of violence against women, it does not generate much confidence for mutual equality and respectful relationships to exist potentially between media representations of women and a collective patriarchal ‘other’. Within the current context, we remain pessimistic about the possibility of representing any generalised notions of women’s attractiveness, beauty and sexual desirability in consumer media, without constituting these images as objectifying. Sensitive to the feminist conception of objectification and to the inherent challenges that visual media brings, we cannot recommend any essentially failsafe design strategies. We nonetheless recommend a contextually sensitive design approach and suggest a personal self-implicating ethical approach for designers and design educators.

This contextually sensitive design approach, proposes the following:

- Design must start disassociating women’s bodies and sexuality away from consumer products and services. We must endeavour to reverse consumer commodification of female sexuality (see Posel 2004 regarding consumer commodification of women in South Africa).
- Design must become more reflective of reality and of real and diverse women, rather than prescribing ideals for feminine beauty and sexual attractiveness according to narrow and generalised stereotypic norms. Creative potentials need not to be lost, but certainly should shift the focus away from the dematerialisation of feminine beauty (that has reached the point of simulated fiction through digital editing techniques) towards more realistic and diverse portrayals.
- We must critically re-consider how the current use of ‘accepted’ digital techniques, including cropping and digital manipulating, does harm by drawing away from reality and humanity (see Borgenson & Schroeder (2004, p. 14) regarding the relationship between cropping techniques and objectification).
- We must not exploit vulnerable consumers. Young women, seeking information to assist them in identity construction at a transitional stage in their lives, progressing from childhood into adulthood, are a particularly vulnerable group. These girls are particularly susceptible to idealised, attractive and sexualised media images. South Africa as a young developing democracy, remains in a state of identity flux, with many diverse ‘displaced’ and transitional identities (Wasserman and Jacobs 2003, p. 15), that may be potentially vulnerable to media images as examples to model behaviour and appearance.

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- Design must avoid the mimicry of globalised media trends. Copying this trend and stereotyping women is not a constructive strategy. Generalised media images that follow globalised norms, do not speak to the realities in South Africa, do not reflect the diverse and unique qualities of women in South Africa and has the destructive power to alienate what is local, unique and relevant.
- Design needs to shift focus onto content, communication and meaning-making as primary over surface and style. As designers, we should rethink the way that they portray women, given that messages in images influence society's understanding and perceptions of women. Here, the role of consumer images play to "produce meaning outside the realm of the promoted product or service" must be acknowledged (Borgenson & Schroeder 2004, p. 1).
- Design education must continue to emphasise and critically engage with cultural and visual theory and meaning-making as primary over aesthetics and style. One must guard against using 'dominant semiotics' i.e. one must guard against "grounding what categories, characteristics, or individual signs can mean within the dominant culture" (Borgenson & Schroeder 2004, p. 6).
- We should consider more nuanced and representative meanings and associations that heed against stereotyped representations that perpetuate ideological dichotomies. This is particularly relevant in the complex South African context.
- Lastly and fundamental within design ethics is the concept of sensitising, generating a deep personal awareness and a personal transformation process. Key to this is an emphasis on the role of graphic design as potentially constructive or destructive within the world, as Berman (2009, p.1) states:

    > Designers have an essential social responsibility because design is at the core of the world's largest challenges... and solutions. Designers create so much of the world we live in, the things we consume, and the expectations we seek to fulfil. They shape what we see, what we use, and what we waste. Designers have enormous power to influence how we engage our world, and how we envision our future.

In addition to the nine-point general approach to objectification, we propose a personal self-implicating ethical approach. This self-regulatory ethical design process, based on the ideas by Berman (2009), the work of Nussbaum (1995) and Langton (2009) is as follows:

Will I allow another designer to project myself or part of myself in a visual communication medium when I am portrayed as:

- A person without intellect, self-worth, determination and autonomy?
- A person worth less than a consumer product?
- A person without any standards and moral values?
- A person that is available to the highest bidder?
- A person that others may use for their sexual gratification?
- A person that has no value, one that may not speak and only be seen and utilised?

Conclusion

Our aim has been to evaluate critically and discuss the notion of objectification, as a theoretical feminist construct and as a design practice, in order to generate an awareness within the design education community regarding the destructiveness of objectification design.

Objectification design is a widespread and harmful practice that assigns women to a subjugated position, promotes negative self-perception, and is linked to a variety of mental and physical health risks. The notion of objectification as a theoretical construct through a feminist lens, led us to define objectification, from a design and ethical perspective, as (reiterating and simplifying our earlier definition): an unethical process whereby a person's subjectivity and humanity is denied, and their role is constituted as for visual and sexual gratification of a consumer market and/or for commercial advantage of a third party.

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Second Wave feminist conceptions of beauty practices as a 'disciplining' the body, as disempowering and linked with patriarchal discourse, contrasts more recent Third Wave conceptions of beauty and sexual display, arguably as personal freedom and choice within a postfeminist context. Reviewing the inherent material deficiencies of media images to constitute women as multi-dimensional diverse and real, we propose that designers and design educators adopt a self-critical and contextually sensitive design approach, a position that may assist to empower them to work ethically and represent women in more constructive ways.

What we do not know, and what requires some investigation, is the position and willingness of South African design lecturers to teach ethics in terms of objectification. Addressing objectifying media portrayals of women in South Africa may not be that simple, as this has become part of our media culture. Nevertheless, designers and design educators could address this problem at a personal level and take active steps to work towards visual meaning-making that aspires to meet the needs of society and culture in a more constructive way.

We hope that the proposed contextually sensitive design approach to design and objectification, and the self-implicating ethical process, may provide some guidance to designers and design educators when confronted with objectification in their work.

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