

Objectification Theory and the Significance of Skin Tone among Mexican Americans

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Objectification theory is a framework developed by Frederickson and Roberts (1997) to understand the shared social experiences that women and girls face as a consequence of being acculturated in a society that sexualizes women's bodies. The theory posits that as women internalize society's messages about their bodies they begin to self-objectify and habitually monitor their appearance, resulting in body shame. Research has linked objectification to a host of adverse psychological outcomes including substance abuse (Carr & Szymanski, 2011), sexual dysfunction, depression, and eating disorders (Tiggemann & Williams, 2012).

Recently, scholars have recognized that women of color may have experiences uniquely different than those of the mainstream society (i.e., White women) for whom the theory was developed (Moradi, 2010). Thus, the experiences of women of color may not be fully captured by objectification theory as it currently exists. In fact, a central tenet of the theory is that women's judgments about their appearance are shaped according to the dominant culture's (i.e., Eurocentric) indicators of attractiveness. While the theory takes into account body shape- and size-related concerns, there is a lack of focus on the salience of skin tone to women's self-appraisals. This paper seeks to explore the applicability of objectification theory to Mexican American women with a focus on the significance of skin tone.

A review of the literature on colorism (i.e., within-group prejudice toward darker-complexioned members of ethnic minority communities) suggests that much social value is placed on skin tone among Mexican Americans. Children have a preference for lighter complexions before they even reach elementary school age (Kaufman & Wiese, 2012). Furthermore, darker skin tones in the Mexican American community have been linked to lower

educational attainment, lower economic status, and more instances of discrimination (Arce, Murguia, & Frisbie, 1987; Espino & Franza, 2002). Thus, in addition to body shape- and size-related concerns, Mexican American women may also experience self-objectification related to skin tone. Findings from this literature review are pertinent as Latina/os are the largest and fastest-growing ethnic minority group in this country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Of particular cause for concern is the evidence that Latina adolescents self-objectify to a greater degree than White girls (Hirschman, Impett, & Schooler, 2006) and exhibit higher rates of body dissatisfaction than their White counterparts (McComb & Clopton, 2002). Recommendations for future research to address skin tone-related concerns for Mexican American women in the context of objectification theory are highlighted.