

Article

Sexual Objectification and Two Notions of Denial[†]

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[†] This paper was recently rejected by a philosophical journal on the grounds that the editor feared it had the “potential to justify sexual gazes as part of a larger institution of oppression.” He added: “This is not your intention, of course, but it can have that effect.” As if writing philosophy requires us to restrain ourselves out of fear of being misunderstood. He then suggested: “Maybe you could write a paper that examines the more pressing political challenges that women presently confront. I think the readers would be more interested in such a paper.” Later, he went on to propose that I “take a survey of a representative sample of women to see how they feel when a man stares wantonly at them.” To be honest, I was shocked by this response, which fails to distinguish between philosophical inquiry and empirical research and, more importantly, between philosophical reflection and advocacy for social and political goals – important as these might be. This experience echoes a similar one I had when presenting an earlier draft at a prominent political philosophy seminar in Frankfurt. Many participants were hostile to the point of being uncivil, accusing me of “mansplaining.” I suspect we’ve reached a point where any attempt to interpret feminist concerns differently from the mainstream view is automatically perceived as a moral failing.

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Abstract: Following Martha Nussbaum’s influential work, it is widely assumed that objectification, mainly *sexual* objectification, often includes what she calls “denial of autonomy” and “denial of subjectivity.” The purpose of my paper is to offer a critical examination of this assumption. I start with a distinction between two notions of denial, epistemic and performative. I then argue that when applied to the sexual gaze – the paradigmatic case of objectification – neither of these notions can make sense of the claim that objectification means, entails or leads to a denial of women’s autonomy or subjectivity.

Keywords: objectification; denial; misogyny; Nussbaum; Kant

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1. Introduction

Following Martha Nussbaum’s influential 1995 article on objectification, it’s now widely assumed that sexual objectification often includes what she terms “denial of autonomy” and “denial of subjectivity.” In her view, these two are particularly significant among

the seven features of objectification she outlines (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 257). Since objectification has become a central notion in feminist theory, this link makes denial a pivotal concept as well.¹ My purpose in this paper is to demonstrate that employing the expression “denial of autonomy (or of subjectivity)” obscures rather than illuminates the notion of objectification and, more generally, the problematic attitudes of men toward women. The primary reason for this lack of clarity stems from what I call the absolutist character of the concept of denial. To say that certain actions amount to a denial of X imputes an unequivocal attitude toward, or effect on, X. However, the attitudes expressed and the results caused by sexual objectification are far more nuanced, complex, and context-dependent. The language of denial risks losing sight of this complexity.

My criticism of this part of feminist theory follows in the footsteps of others who have expressed reservations about what I recently called “The Objectification Hypothesis” (Statman, 2024).² While my target in that paper was the claim that sexual objectifiers deny women’s *humanity*, the target of the present paper is the claim that objectifiers deny women’s *autonomy* and *subjectivity*.

I should clarify from the outset that the paper is in no way an anti-feminist one. Although it criticizes a central idea in feminist thought, namely, that objectification involves a denial of autonomy and of subjectivity, it does so in order to encourage a better understanding of feminist concerns, not in order to undermine them.

The philosophical literature on objectification is vast, and I can’t do it justice here (for a helpful survey, see Papadaki, 2024). Instead of defending any specific definition, for the present inquiry, I’ll focus on a paradigmatic case that everybody would recognize as objectification – the male sexual gaze at women.³ This is also how the concept has been operationalized in empirical studies over the last decade, which aimed to test the relation between objectification – illustrated by such sexual gaze – and increased hostility toward women.⁴ The central question of this paper, then, is whether objectification, thus understood, can plausibly be said to deny the autonomy or subjectivity of women.

Although the notion of sexual objectification – as well as the concept of denial supposedly entailed by it – are clearly rooted in the Kantian tradition, there’s a crucial difference between how feminists employ these notions and their meaning in Kantian philosophy. For Kant, *all* immoral behavior (more precisely, all immoral maxims) – whether breaking promises, stealing, murdering, or sexually harassing women – are instances of treating people as objects or as mere means rather than as ends in themselves. Wrongdoers fail to treat the targets of their actions with the respect due to them qua rational beings, and, in that sense, they can be said (albeit somewhat

¹ A Google Scholar search in July 2025 yielded 1,100 results for the combination of “feminist” and “denial of autonomy” and 1,130 for “feminist” and “denial of subjectivity.”

² See (Cahill, 2012; Frederick, 2016; Manne, 2018).

³ See (Nussbaum, 1995), 272 (referring to a man looking through the pages of *Playboy* as a clear example of objectification); (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 175) (“The most subtle and deniable way sexualized evaluation is enacted – and arguably the most ubiquitous – is through the gaze or visual inspection of the body”); (Szymanski et al., 2011, p. 24) (on how “the acknowledgement and approval of male gaze” is a “core criterion for an environment to be sexually objectifying”); (Vasquez et al., 2018, p. 6) (“gazing at women is a key aspect of objectification”), and (Hollett et al., 2022) (“Body-biased gaze has long been recognized as an important feature of sexual objectification”). A sexual gaze is often referred to as an “objectifying gaze.” See, for instance, (Gu & Zheng, 2025)

⁴ See, for instance, (Vasquez et al., 2018; Bevens & Loughnan, 2019).

hyperbolically) to be “denying” the latter’s humanity. Yet, such statements reveal nothing about the wrongdoers’ psychological mindset or motivation. In particular, Kant did not attribute to them the belief that their victims were not fully human. In other words, for Kant, the notion of objectification (and of “denying” humanity) is not meant to *explain* wrongful behavior, but to point to its *meaning*. Regardless of their beliefs or psychological drives, wrongdoers’ actions reveal a failure to treat their addressees as full human beings.

The point is that if this were the notion of objectification or denial that feminists had in mind, it would be difficult to understand what is unique about sexual misbehavior, which would be objectifying and humanity-denying (to an extent) just like any other wrongful action. Thus, the notion that feminists employ is far more descriptive than evaluative or normative. They seek to reveal the beliefs that underlie the actual behaviors of many men towards women – like the sexual gaze, unwanted touching, and so on – beliefs they contend are best captured under the heading of objectification and what it involves.

The challenge, then, in substantiating the idea of denial within the context of many men’s attitudes toward women is to demonstrate: (i) that it can illuminate a central factual aspect of this attitude; (ii) that this aspect marks a significant difference between the sexual realm and other realms; and (iii) that it is used in a way that is distinct from the way it is used, within the Kantian tradition, to characterize any unethical behavior.

In Section 2, I introduce two notions of denial that will underlie the subsequent discussion. In Section 3, I turn to investigate what might be meant by a denial of autonomy, followed, in Section 4, by a discussion of the relation between such denial and objectification. In Section 5, I run a similar line of argument for the denial of subjectivity. Section 6 concludes.

2. Two Notions of Denial

Inspired by Isaiah Berlin, countless philosophical papers have distinguished between “two notions of X,” and I realize readers might find yet another one hard to tolerate. Nonetheless, I can’t resist the temptation: I’d like to propose two notions of denial – epistemic and performative. I’ll then explore how this distinction impacts the relation between objectification and the assumed denial of women’s autonomy and subjectivity.

According to the epistemic notion, the object of denial is some proposition (or some theory or worldview), the denial of which means *believing that it is false*. Note that to deny X in this sense is stronger than *not to believe* X. When we say that a person denies the allegations made against her, we don’t merely mean that she *abstains* from believing them, but that she thinks they are false. To deny X is not to be *agnostic* about X, but to actively *reject* it.

In contrast to the epistemic notion, according to the performative notion of denial, to deny somebody X is to *disallow* her to do (or receive) X, or to *prevent* her from doing or receiving X. Thus, when a person is denied entry to some country, she is not allowed to enter into that country, and when people complain that they were denied a decent education, they mean that such an education was not given to them (not necessarily that they were not *allowed* to have it).

This means that, in typical cases of performative denying, the deniers have either normative authority or causal power over the denied person; the power to allow or to disallow her to do X (e.g., to enter the country), or the power to give or withhold giving X to her (a good education). Similarly, to deny somebody’s request, a person must be either

in a position of authority over the requester, like an immigration officer with authority to decide who may enter the country, or a person in a position of power, e.g., the bully who denies my request to let me pass through the corridor.

Note how denial as disallowing and denial as preventing differ with regard to the actual effects on the denied party. In the former, being denied X does not necessarily prevent the denied from doing or from getting X. If a person is denied entry to some country, she might still be able to sneak in illegally. In the latter, being denied X necessarily implies that the denied did not get X (e.g., good education). In other words, the preventative meaning of denial is a *success notion*. To say that somebody was denied X in this sense is conceptually inconsistent with saying that in the end she did obtain X.

An important aspect of denial in both notions is that it is not a matter of degree but an “absolute” notion. To deny X in the epistemic sense is to believe that X is false and that non-X is true.⁵ Of course, we can deny just part of X, but then we would be totally rejecting that part. Whatever it is that we’re epistemically denying, we are committed to believing that it is *false*. The same with denial in the performative sense. If somebody is denied entry to a country, she is totally denied it, namely, denied entry from any port, at any time etc. And if somebody was denied good education, then it cannot be the case that the education she got could qualify as good.

3. Denying Autonomy

With the above distinctions in mind, what could it mean to deny somebody autonomy, understood as reflecting critically on one’s life and deciding how to live (sometimes referred to as a “thin conception of autonomy”; e.g., [Stoljar, 2018](#))? On the epistemic notion, it would mean believing that somebody (or something) lacks autonomy. Following a point I just made, denying autonomy in this sense is denying it *tout court*, not merely proposing that the autonomy of the denied is limited or partial. Thus, when Western culture is criticized for denying animal autonomy ([Bridgeman, 2020](#)), the claim is that it mistakenly believes that animals *lack* autonomy. The same is true of claims denying the autonomy of babies; to deny the autonomy of babies is not to think that they are less autonomous than adult human beings, but that they are not autonomous at all.

By contrast, according to the performative notion, to deny somebody autonomy is to disallow or make it impossible for her to be autonomous, again in the sense of reflecting critically on her life.⁶ But to talk about *disallowing* in this context sounds rather odd. We don’t need permission to engage in the sort of critical reflection which constitutes the core of autonomy, and it is hard to see how forbidding us to engage in such critical reflection could prevent us from doing so. Such a prohibition would simply become one more factor

⁵ Subjects might be in psychological denial about X, a denial that “involves the emotionally motivated rejection (or embrace) of a factual claim in the face of strong evidence to the contrary” ([Bardon, 2019](#), pp. 1–2). In such cases, it is unclear whether they genuinely deny X (in the epistemic sense). I’ll leave this complication to one side.

⁶ This “procedural” notion of autonomy has been challenged by some feminists who have proposed more “relational” notions (e.g., [Mackenzie, 2014](#)). Nonetheless, I think that the procedural, “thin” notion of autonomy, offers the best reading of the argument at hand. I might be wrong on this, but that will not make a difference to my main argument. This is because on substantive theories of autonomy too – theories that focus on evaluative attitudes such as self-respect and self-trust – objectification cannot plausibly be said to *deny* such attitudes, in either the epistemic or the performative sense.

that we'd have to consider when we reflect on our lives. It is therefore hard to think of a sensible analogy in the domain of autonomy to the case of denying entry to a country.

That leaves the causal understanding as the only plausible reading of the performative notion in the context of autonomy. On this reading, to deny somebody autonomy is to *prevent* her from being autonomous as in the example of denying somebody a good education.

Note first that denying autonomy under this understanding is not a matter of preventing the denied from *realizing* her life plan, but of preventing her from exercising self-government over her decisions. To be autonomous is to govern oneself "from within." To deny it is somehow to disable or destroy this ability. In other words, what we're talking about is the denial of positive rather than of negative liberty.

Yet autonomy-denial in this sense is rare. To be sure, in cases like brainwashing and addiction, agents are prevented from governing themselves. The tools for self-governance are sabotaged, so to say. But when these tools are left intact, it is unclear under what conditions agents might be said to genuinely lose – be *denied* – autonomy. Advertisements, social media, education, peer pressure, all these are the material upon which an autonomous person reflects when authoring her life-story. They don't destroy the autonomy of the agent but rather assume it (see Buss & Westlund, 2018).⁷

Talking about the denial of autonomy in the sense of negative liberty would also be misleading. People are rarely totally prevented from doing they want. Instead, the constraints are far more focused: on traveling to specific places, saying certain things, having sex under particular circumstances, and so on. Thus, people's autonomy, when understood in terms of negative liberty, is hardly ever *denied*.

4. Objectification and Autonomy-Denial

Given these preliminaries, how should one interpret the claim that sexual objectification entails a denial of women's autonomy?

Within the epistemic notion, it would amount to saying that objectifiers believe that women are not autonomous. On this interpretation, objectifiers don't deny autonomy in general (e.g., on the basis of some incompatibilist view of the free will problem), but just deny the autonomy of *women*. But it is unlikely that the typical objectifier in Western societies (the locus of most current criticism against objectification) genuinely believes that women are non-autonomous creatures. After all, all objectifiers have mothers, sisters, daughters, and female colleagues, and it seems incredible that they see these women as completely lacking in autonomy while assuming that almost all men *are* autonomous. It is equally incredible that they believe that, while all the women they happen to know personally *are* autonomous, all others, qua women, are not.

⁷ My distinction between epistemic and performative readings of autonomy-denial seems close to Papadaki's distinction (respectively) between non-reductive and reductive objectification (2010, p. 32). But note some important differences: (i) To *ignore* x (ignoring humanity in Papadaki's proposal) is much weaker than to deny x in the epistemic sense. To ignore a proposition is not to believe that it is *false*, and to ignore some fact is not to deny its existence. (ii) Papadaki's notion of *reductive* objectification has to do not merely with the limiting of some person's autonomy but with "reducing her status" as a being with rational capacities. This reduction, however understood, is not part of my performative notion of denial.

The same applies to objectifiers' beliefs about the autonomy of the specific women that they supposedly objectify by gazing sexually at their bodies. It is hard to believe that while they focus attention on the female body, or afterwards, the male objectifiers truly believe that the women at whom they are gazing completely lack the ability to govern themselves.⁸

In response, one might suggest that while objectifiers rarely hold the explicit belief that women (in general, or the specific woman they objectify) lack autonomy, they might hold this belief implicitly or subconsciously. However, nothing in the objectifier's behavior forces us to attribute such a subconscious belief to him. The paradigmatic example of objectification used here – sexual gazing – can be sufficiently explained without having to assume that they hold such an implausible belief about women.

The epistemic notion, therefore, seems inadequate to capture the meaning of the claim that, in objectification, women's autonomy is denied. Does the performative notion of denial fare any better? The normative version is clearly not fitting because, in the paradigmatic cases of objectification, (i) objectifiers have no authority over the objectified such that they can allow or disallow her to exercise autonomy in the same way immigration officers can deny entry to a country, (ii) the behaviors under discussion are not speech acts of the required kind, acts that *forbid* something to somebody by saying the appropriate words at the appropriate time, or signing the right form and so on. In the regular sense of the word, a sexual gaze can neither allow nor disallow anything.

We are left with the causal version of the performative notion. In the present context, this version would mean that objectification makes it the case that women lose their autonomy. But that can't be true. Objectification clearly does not *destroy* autonomy, but, at most, limits it, making it harder for some women, in some contexts, to engage in the sort of critical reflection which is at the core of autonomy. This is more common in severe cases of sexual assault or oppression, but then it is probably not the very objectification that undermines autonomy, but its oppressive or violent nature.

Thus, whatever exactly is meant by objectification, it does not include or entail a denial of autonomy. In the paradigmatic cases of objectification, male objectifiers neither *believe* that women (in general, or specific women) lack autonomy, nor can be plausibly said to *disallow* women to exercise autonomy or to *completely undermine* their ability to do so.

It might help at this point to go back to Nussbaum's paper and notice how equivocal her use of the expression autonomy-denial is. When she says that slavery entails a denial of autonomy (p. 264), this most probably means a denial of negative liberty; slaves by definition are seriously limited by their owners in what they can *do*. This is also compatible with what she says about the treatment of young children, namely, that it "almost always involves a denial of autonomy" (p. 262). But then when Nussbaum refers to denying the autonomy of a pen (p. 259), it is the epistemic notion that she has in mind. Finally, when she says that in Kant's view sexual desire involves a denial of autonomy (p. 266), this can neither mean that a man having sex with his wife genuinely believes that she is non-autonomous, nor that by sexually interacting with her, he disallows or prevents her

⁸ My objection to ascribing autonomy-denial in the epistemic sense to objectifiers is close to the objection I develop in (Statman, 2024, pp. 121–122), to ascribing to them the belief that women are "mere objects."

from being autonomous. What Nussbaum has in mind here is something having to do with the man's disrespect towards his wife.

Indeed, when Nussbaum defines denial of autonomy, she doesn't do so in terms of the objectifier's belief that the objectified person is non-autonomous, but rather in terms of a way of *treating* her (1995, p. 257). However, treating someone like an X is clearly not tantamount to believing she is an X. For example, if I tell a friend about my wonderful vacation, praising the hotel for treating me "like a queen," I don't for a second think the hotel staff literally believed I was royalty. This is simply a metaphorical way of describing the excellent service I received. Similarly, to say Bill treated John as if he were "air" doesn't mean Bill believed John was literally *air*. In the same vein, to say Bill treated Liz as if she lacked autonomy doesn't mean he genuinely believed she lacked autonomy; it means he failed to show proper *respect* for her autonomy.

Responding to Nussbaum's analysis, Rae Langton (2009) suggests a distinction between two things to which the expression "autonomy-denial" might refer: (i) an attitude, (ii) "a more active doing, perhaps one that prevents someone from doing what they choose" (p. 233). Based on this distinction, she proceeds to argue that these two meanings don't necessarily entail each other. A person can have an attitude of regarding X as non-autonomous without preventing her from doing what she chooses to do (without, in Langton's words, *violating* her autonomy; *ibid.*), and she might regard X as autonomous and nonetheless violate her autonomy. An example illustrating the former is that of a doctor who adopts an "objective attitude" to some patient, viewing her "as something ... to be managed or handled or cured or trained," yet makes sure to obtain her consent and not to violate her autonomy. An example illustrating the latter is that of a sadistic rapist who obviously violates his victim's autonomy but does so while attributing autonomy to her; he "attributes to her a capacity for choice and desires precisely to overcome that choice" (p. 234).

I believe Langton is right about the rapist example, but the same logic applies to the doctor example as well. When a doctor focuses on a patient's body in order to study or cure it, she doesn't for a second believe the patient has no autonomy or is a "mere body." It is just that concentrating solely on the patient's physical state optimizes her job performance. More generally, when people narrow their attention to one aspect of an individual – her chess skills, her philosophical sophistication or her unusual height – it doesn't mean they deny the existence of other aspects.

Hence, of Langton's two notions of autonomy-denial, the only one worth worrying about is the "active" one. But with this notion too I find her analysis wanting. First, "preventing someone from doing what they choose" is not a violation of *autonomy* but a limitation of the liberty to *exercise* it; a violation of negative rather than of positive liberty.⁹ Feminists are especially clear on this because their main charge in this context is not that Western societies prevent women from *doing* what they choose (though, needless to say, they often do that too), but that they undermine their capacity *to choose* – to freely decide whether to stay in a relationship, to apply to some job, to study mathematics, and so forth – by undermining their self-confidence and self-respect (Govier, 1993).

Second, if the problem with objectification is preventing people from doing what they choose, then – once again – this is almost always a matter of degree and of

⁹ For similar criticism, see (Stoljar, 2011).

context, definitely in the paradigmatic cases of objectification about which Langton talks. As suggested above, in normal circumstances, negative liberty is never *denied*, only constrained.

In Kate Manne's view, denying autonomy may be the result

of an agent being *ignorant* of a subject's fully autonomous and minded nature, or perhaps just not caring about what (or, rather, who) she really is. Women may then be envisaged as vacant, naïve, inarticulate and stupid; they may be treated with condescension, as if they are children, as well as manhandled and exploited in ways painful and demeaning. (Manne, 2018, p. 85)

Indeed, to say that objectifiers are ignorant of women's fully autonomous nature makes more sense than ascribing to them the belief that women are completely non-autonomous. But obviously, such restricted ignorance is ill-described as a *denial* of autonomy. To be ignorant of the full extent of a person's musical talent is not to *deny* her talent. Also, following a point made above, to treat women *as if* they are children is not to believe that they *are* children.

As for denying autonomy in the sense of autonomy-violation, in Manne's view, this form of objectification has to do with

An agent positively *desiring* to disrupt a subject's peace of mind, or to "get inside her head," by overriding her will, causing her to suffer, or violating her bodily integrity. (Ibid., p. 85)

But in standard cases of objectification, particularly in the sexual gaze, it is unreasonable to assume that the objectifier "positively *desires*" (italics in the original) "to disrupt a subject's peace of mind" in the ways Manne describes, a fortiori that he desires to make the objectified suffer.

5. Objectification and the Denial of Subjectivity

My analysis of autonomy-denial also applies to the denial of subjectivity. In the epistemic sense, a denier of subjectivity genuinely believes that the object of their denial lacks subjectivity – meaning no mental states such as thinking, feeling, or wanting. But such a radical belief cannot be seriously ascribed to objectifiers, like men sexually gazing at women or sexually harassing them.

To be sure, objectifiers could be said to treat women *as if* they had no subjectivity, but again that would just be a way of saying that they unjustly ignore their subjectivity, namely, their feelings, desires, and so forth (Langton, 2009, p. 230). As argued above, the fact that in specific circumstances, and typically for a short duration, people "fail to attribute mental states" to somebody (to use Langton's expression; *ibid.*, p. 237) does not mean that, in the epistemic sense, they deny the existence of such states.

Interestingly, Langton (*ibid.*) says that subjectivity-denial could mean not only a failure to attribute subjective mental states, but also "systematically attributing the wrong subjective states" or "manipulating someone's mental states." But it sounds odd to include these categories under the heading of subjectivity-*denial*. If Jacob is mistaken about Rachel's mental world, he does not deny that she has a mental world but the opposite; he assumes the existence of this world, yet errs in interpreting it. All the more so with

the manipulation of somebody's mental states, which obviously assumes a belief in the existence of such states (those which are the object of the denier's manipulation).

Therefore, for the claim that objectification includes a denial of subjectivity to make sense, it must be understood within the performative notion of denial, not within the epistemic one. But what could that mean? As you recall, one version of this notion is normative and refers to some authority (the denier), disallowing somebody (the denied) to do something or get something, as in the example of denying entry to a country. The analogy in the case of subjectivity-denial would be that objectifiers disallow those they objectify from having (or expressing) mental states – which sounds wholly bizarre. Even if somebody had some kind of authority over us, it would make no sense for him to require us to “give up” our mental states.

In the other version of subjectivity-denial, objectifiers *prevent* those they objectify from having “subjectivity,” namely, from *having mental states*. But this again sounds ridiculous. A more plausible reading would be to say that objectification has adverse effects on women's inner, psychological world.¹⁰ However, these effects do not *deny* women's subjectivity. To the contrary, they point to a whole repertoire of emotional hurt that is assumingly brought about by objectification. These harmful effects to women's mental health can only be described in terms of the very subjectivity that objectification is said to deny.

6. Conclusion

Despite its widespread use in feminist writing, the claim that sexual objectification means or entails a denial of women's autonomy and subjectivity is misleading. Objectifiers cannot plausibly be ascribed the belief that women lack autonomy or subjectivity. Furthermore, it makes little sense to claim that men's objectifying behavior *forbids* women from being autonomous or having an inner life. And while it's true that some forms of male behavior – such as certain types of sexual gazing – can undermine women's ability to govern themselves (i.e., to exercise autonomy), describing this effect as a “denial of autonomy and subjectivity” is far too strong.

It's also worth noting that such undermining or weakening of autonomy is widespread and extends well beyond men–women relationships. People's autonomy is weakened by factors like advertisements, peer pressure, religious education, and oppressive regimes, among others. Yet, in these other contexts, one rarely hears the claim that those subject to such pressures are “denied” autonomy or subjectivity.

To be clear, I'm not denying that women in misogynic societies (which include all, or almost all, human societies) face conditions that undermine their ability to decide for themselves how to live and how to carry out their life plans and dreams. However, the nature of these conditions and their precise effects on women are matters for careful empirical study rather than philosophical investigation. At any rate, the notions of objectification and denial will probably not be particularly helpful in this inquiry. As Manne demonstrates in *Down Girl* (2018), the logic of misogyny offers a more promising path to comprehending how women's autonomy is constrained in misogynic societies,

¹⁰ This claim is central to objectification theory. See (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and the vast literature that followed.

compared with the path offered by the notion of sexual objectification that supposedly denies women's autonomy and subjectivity.

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