

## The Impact of Communication Mediators on Self-Objectification among Malaysians

Madiah Abdul Razak  
Kulliyah of Languages and Management  
International Islamic University Malaysia  
*dihahrazak@gmail.com*

Al Amirul Eimer Ramdzan Ali\*  
Assistant Professor  
Kulliyah of Languages and Management  
International Islamic University Malaysia  
*dral@iium.edu.my*

\*Corresponding author

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### Abstract

In recent years, numerous issues related to body image have risen all around the world both traditional and media consumption become more accessible over time including in Malaysia. This causes an increase of existing negative body perception concerns in society, specifically self-objectification. Past studies have demonstrated a significant impact of communication mediators on self-objectification regarding interpersonal relationships and social interaction. Therefore, this study aims to identify the level of the impact of communication mediators and self-objectification among Malaysians. This current study examined four communication mediators (social comparison, social networking sites consumption, appearance anxiety, and internalization of beauty standards) and how it affects the level of the participants consisting of Malaysians who experienced issues of objectifying themselves. A set of questionnaires was developed by adopting and adapting instruments from previous studies and distributed to the respondents to gather data. A total of 100 responses were recorded from the sample which was the citizen of Malaysia. The data was then analysed by utilizing Cronbach's Alpha to measure its reliability while using SPSS for the statistical analysis of the data. The results of this study suggested that social comparison and appearance anxiety exhibited a significant relationship with self-objectification. The practical implications and future directions of this study were discussed for upcoming research related to communication mediators and body image issues, specifically self-objectification.

**Key words:** Communication Mediators; Self-Objectification

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### Introduction

Over the years, the media, both traditional and modern, has grown significantly accessible for all ages. As media consumption increases over time, body image issues, including self-objectification happen "when individuals treat themselves as objects to be viewed and evaluated based upon appearance" (Rollero & Piccoli, 2017). The self-objectification theory postulates that valuing one's physique or physical form instead of performance causes multiple detrimental psychological effects such as the desire to be thinner, muscular, or going out of one's way to obtain a more attractive appearance (Oehlhof et al., 2009). Some of the self-objectification behaviour includes excessive observation of oneself in the mirror, being over-conscious regarding self-appearance, frequently criticizing one's appearance in photographs, and always comparing oneself with celebrities or representations in the media. In short, all of the actions mentioned will ultimately lead a person to "be hypercritical of their body and parts of their body" (Chan, 2022). Subsequently, Frazier et al. (2004) defined mediators as a way to establish "how" or "why" one variable predicts or causes an outcome variable. Meanwhile, communication is defined as "the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium" by Karemore (2018). In this study, the aim is to investigate the relationship between the impact of four communication mediators on self-objectification

which are social comparison, social networking sites (SNS) consumption, appearance anxiety, and internalization of beauty standards, and their impacts on communication in the aspect of interpersonal relationships and social interaction behaviour as there are only several studies that highlight the relationship between the two.

The main concern of this research is regarding the rising issues of self-objectification specifically affected by communication mediators. Self-objectification, like many other body image issues, is linked to various mental and physical health problems. This involves the victim experiencing mental health issues such as shame, guilt, appearance consciousness, and many more. Not only that, but victims would also suffer physical health problems such as eating disorders, excessive exercising, and participating in an unhealthy diet to achieve the objective of feeling satisfied with their bodies and appearance. Subsequently, findings reported an increase in psychological issues such as depression, eating disorders, and anxiety due to the obsession with achieving cultural beauty standards and body expectations where it was stated in a study made by Wilson et al. (2013), “higher body image dissatisfaction was significantly associated with increased anxiety, stress, depressive symptoms, mental HRQL impairment, and decreased self-esteem”, hence proving the relationship between body image issues, including self-objectification, with mental health problems. Hence, this study aims to identify the level of the impact of communication mediators (social comparison, social media consumption, appearance anxiety, and internalization of beauty standards) and self-objectification among Malaysians and also to identify the relationship between the impact of communication mediators (social comparison, social media consumption, appearance anxiety, and internalization of beauty standards) and self-objectification among Malaysians.

## **Literature Review**

### **Self-objectification**

Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) objectification theory has been referred to in this paper as the framework to understand deeper the topic of self-objectification. This theory asserts that objectification occurs when a person primarily views their bodies as separate objects from their selves thus making them oblige and assimilate into an internalized belief to view their physical selves (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Self-objectification is categorized as one of many body image problems that is discovered to be more prevalent in the past few years as more and more objectifying outlets are growing such as traditional and modern media including magazines, social networking sites, and so on that invite consumers to undergo objectifying experiences such as observing beauty standards set by the media, receiving downwards appearance comments, or societal influences (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; McKay, 2013). Not only that, these experiences often result in negative physical and mental health consequences with studies reportedly proving an increase in issues such as negative body image, body dysmorphia, eating disorders, anxiety, and depression (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Register et al., 2015).

### **Communication Mediators**

The definition of communication according to Karemore (2018) is the process of transmitting and interchanging information through several processes such as words, texts, and other methods. Meanwhile, as affirmed by Frazier et al. (2014), mediators were described as the way or the process a variable in a study may influence or provoke an after-effect of a variable. Therefore, communication mediators can be understood as a way of any means of communication as variables in a study affect the outcome of a result.

## **Social Comparison**

Past studies have found that both positive and negative social comparisons have an impact on one's interpersonal perceptions. For instance, people tend to give positive reactions to upwards comparison comments towards them which results in beneficial interpersonal consequences such as an increase in self-esteem and social inclusion as well as decreased ego threat (Vohs & Heatherton, 2004) while Ding et al. (2018) affirmed that feedback with positive social comparison made people incline towards providing help to others. Similarly, when the subjects were compared to the ones ranked lower than them, they tended to be more cooperative as they were ranked higher than the people they were being compared to. Adding to these findings, any action of unprovoked downward comparison from a person will result in negative social consequences such as not being liked by others as people tend to dislike those who devalue others while also taking offense of being made inferior by the person they interact with (Vohs & Heatherton, 2004). Thus, it is clear that the act of social comparison provides several impacts on communication, interpersonally and socially.

## **Social Networking Sites (SNS) Consumption**

Social networking sites allow a person to build and portray an entirely new self on its platforms that might not be 100% truthful and similar to real life. According to Lim & Yang (2015), it was stated that human communication through electronic devices, or as known as computer-mediated communication allows social media users to focus on their positive traits rather than the negative ones while portraying themselves on the platforms. In doing so, they are subconsciously asserting dominance and competitiveness towards others just as one would in real life to appear highly among the people in their surroundings. Additionally, Subramaniam (2017) highlighted three important points regarding how SNS affect an individual's communication styles such as communication through social media influences people to be more trusting thus leading to a more upfront conversation among social media users. Secondly, face-to-face relationships provide deeper bonds among people compared to relationships on social media as there is less meaningful social interaction on SNS. Finally, social media users are prone to follow and interact with fellow users who have the same opinions and insights as they do rather than those who do not.

## **Appearance Anxiety**

People with social anxiety have issues communicating properly as some of the effects of social anxiety are avoidance of eye contact, behaving inhibited, fear of being negatively judged, and many more (Schneier et al., 2011; Jiang & Ngieng, 2020) as communication involving social interaction between individuals and the people in their surroundings happens almost all the time. There are similar findings regarding appearance anxiety where it was proven that people who perceive their body negatively which caused them to have a negative body image are linked to lower self-esteem and increased social anxiety. More importantly, in a study made by Levinson & Rodebaugh (2011), social appearance anxiety is related to neuroticism, which causes an individual to be easily upset, self-conscious, and suffer from emotional instability (Mehl et al., 2012; Widiger & Oltmanns, 2017). On that account, it can be concluded that appearance anxiety has a significant implication for communication.

## **Internalization of Beauty Standards**

According to Rohner & Landsford (2017), interpersonal rejection or being excluded from social interaction leads to several negative consequences such as loneliness, jealousy, sadness, and more due to the absence of interpersonal relationships. However, some parts of a society are only keen to accept people they perceive as attractive and socially acceptable which causes the people in said society to accept that only certain physical looks can be socially accepted due to the internalization of beauty standards in that community. In particular, a study stated that an individual would feel less loved, valued, and accepted when they perceive their physical appearance negatively (Buote, 2010). Evidently,

it is acceptable to say that there is a notable relationship between the internalization of beauty standards and communication in the sense of social interaction.

## **The Relationship Between Communication Mediators and Self-Objectification**

### **The Relationship Between Social Comparison and Self-Objectification**

Regarding the relationship between social comparison and self-objectification, comparing oneself to others, especially physically, encourages self-objectification as it involves body surveillance where in a study made by Feltman & Szymanski (2018), it was stated that there is a relationship between engaging in social comparison and self-objectification. Therefore, based on past studies, social comparison is an essential perspective to look from as one of the communication mediators and thus should be investigated further. Not only that, past literature suggests that being pressured into creating an idealized self for people to be accepted by their surroundings causes them to have low self-satisfaction, jealousy, and low self-esteem (Lup et al., 2015) as they face negative comments about themselves in real life from peers or family members, as well as receiving demeaning feedback on social media as they compare themselves to others.

### **The Relationship Between Social Networking Sites Consumption and Self-Objectification**

The growing number of social media users, specifically 2.7 billion active monthly users on Facebook, 1 billion active monthly users on Instagram, and 300 million active monthly users on Twitter (Farsi, 2021), increases the risk and possibilities of issues rooted in social networking sites consumption such as addiction, cyberbullying, or particularly for this study, body image issues including self-objectification. Also, it was confirmed in a study made by Fardouly et al. (2015) that substantial exposure to both traditional and new media results in a greater self-objectification where the negative effects of being an avid social networking sites consumer have a notable link to the issue of self-objectification, thus amplifying the need to study this particular communication mediator further. Also, past studies by Feltman & Szymanski (2018), Lup et al. (2013), and Piccoli et al. (2022) have proven that social networking sites increase the chances of appearance evaluation and comparison, sexual objectification, drive for thinness, social overload, vulnerability, and self-consciousness to occur as they strive in achieving irrational standards of being on social media.

### **The Relationship Between Appearance Anxiety and Self-Objectification**

The self-discrepancy theory by Higgins et al. (1987) where it was confirmed in various research that if an individual fails to achieve a standard they envision for themselves or their 'ideal self', negative outcomes are expected including anxiety, guilt, and others (Trekels & Eggermont, 2017; Vartanian, 2012). Appearance anxiety and self-objectification relate to each other in regards to the constant need for individuals to observe their appearance out of fear of being negatively perceived or judged by their surroundings where studies made by Szymanski & Henning (2007) and Hart et al. (2008) link the behaviour to several negative consequences such as eating disorder, body monitoring, body shame, social impairment, and many more including one of them being self-objectification.

### **The Relationship Between Internalization of Beauty Standards and Self-Objectification**

In every society, there is a certain benchmark for people to attain to be regarded as attractive and desirable including in Malaysia where the internalized idea of beauty standards or ideals are usually viewed as having Western-like features to be considered conventionally attractive even though the society here is built consisting of people with various kinds of skin colours. Significantly, the media is also responsible for pushing these beauty ideals through the content they portray especially regarding how beauty has its privilege that would improve an individual's love life, social skills, and overall life

satisfaction (Termizi & Herwan, 2021) thus creating these societal pressures in adhering to the strict and often unrealistic standards (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018). In addition, past studies suggest that the need to have constant validation and upward comments from their surroundings as well as the fear of being shamed or unlikeable also have direct links to the internalization of beauty standards (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Piccoli et al., 2022; Dakanalis et al., 2014) where this behaviour of being hyper-aware of one's body is undoubtedly unhealthy for a person's well-being and mental health. Finally, the relationship between the internalization of beauty standards and self-objectification can be seen in a study made by Guizzo & Cadinu (2017) where self-objectification was one of the many negative outcomes of internalized beauty ideals.

## Framework

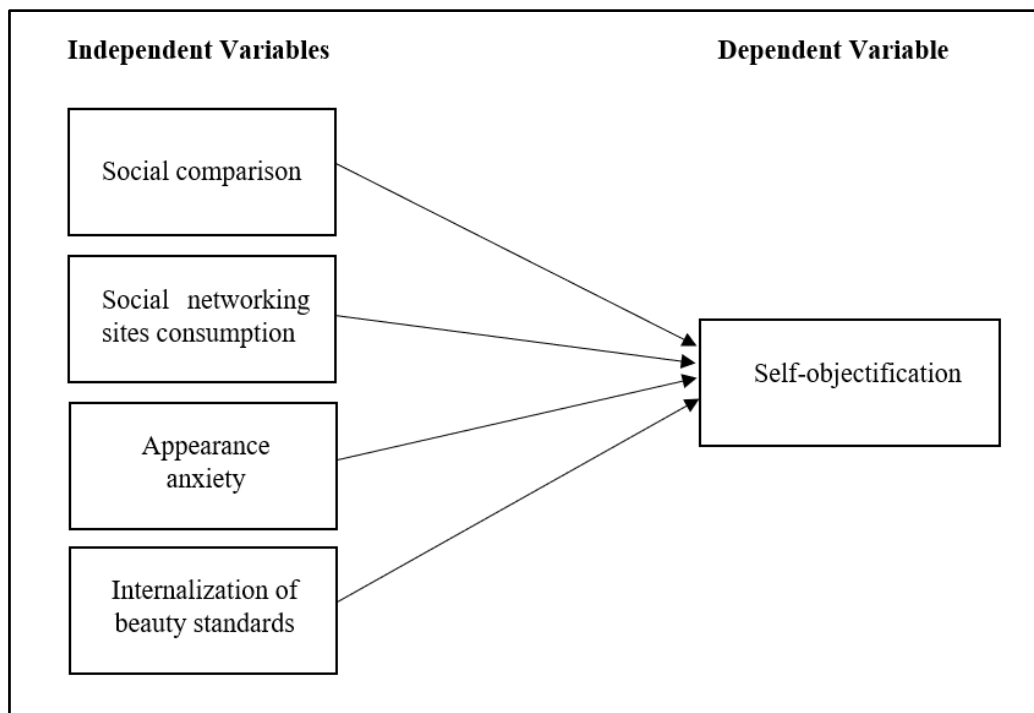


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

(Source: Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Lup et al., 2013; Hart et al.; Guizzo & Cadinu, 2017)

## Research Methodology

This study used correlation research design to analyse the relationship between independent variables and dependent variable which are Communication mediators and Self-objectification. The population of this study was citizens of Malaysia.

## Results of the study

Table 1: Demographic profile of the respondents

Variable	Descriptive	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	30	30
	Female	70	70
Age (years old)	18-25	72	72
	26-30	11	11
	31-45	5	5
	Above 45	12	12
State of origin	Johor	9	9
	Kedah	6	6
	Kelantan	3	3
	Melaka	5	5
	Negeri Sembilan	7	7
	Pahang	3	3
	Perak	23	23
	Pulau Pinang	3	3
	Sarawak	2	2
	Selangor	21	21
	Terengganu	11	11
	W.P. Kuala Lumpur	5	5
	W.P. Putrajaya	7	7
Occupation	Government Servant	5	5
	Private Sector	20	20
	Executive	2	2
	Business/Entrepreneurship	4	4
	Student	58	58
	Others	11	11

Table 1 provides the demographical data gathered from the respondents in this study. Pertaining to the gender aspect, the majority of respondents that answered this study were females, which sums up to a number of 70 respondents (70%), while the other 30% of respondents are males. Additionally, the data stated that most of the respondents came from the age group of 18-25 years old, totalling up to 72% of the respondents, followed by 11% of respondents aged 26-30 years old. Subsequently, 5% of the respondents were from the age group of 31-45 years old, and finally, the rest of the respondents were above 45 years old (12%). Moving on to the state of origin of our respondents, most of them originated from the state of Perak with a number of 23 respondents, followed by Selangor with 21 respondents, and Terengganu with 11 respondents. Next, the state of Johor contributed to 9 respondents, Negeri Sembilan and W.P. Putrajaya with 7 respondents each, and then Kedah with 6 respondents. Both Melaka and W.P. Kuala Lumpur have 5 respondents each, while Pulau Pinang and Kelantan each have 3 respondents, followed by Sarawak with the least number of respondents which is 2. Finally, based on the occupational aspect of the respondents, the result suggests that students accounted for the largest group of respondents at 58%, along with people who are working in the private sector at 20%. Additionally, government servant totals up to 5% of our respondents, while people who are working in the business/entrepreneurship sector were 4% and executives with 2%. On top of that, the remaining 11% of our respondents are made up of other types of occupations including pensioners, self-employed, and housewives.

Table 2: Correlation between Communication mediators and Self-objectification

No	Variables	SD	Mean	1	2	3	4
1	Social comparison	0.800	3.36				
2	Social networking sites consumption	0.582	3.62	0.643**			
3	Appearance anxiety	0.902	3.52	0.726**	0.634**		
4	Internalization of beauty standards	0.772	3.21	0.584**	0.530**	0.590**	
5	Self-objectification	0.698	3.13	0.643**	0.415**	0.631**	0.498**

Table 2 presents the result from the relationship between Communication mediators and Self-objectification. According to the findings, it is demonstrated that there is a high positive relationship between social comparison and self-objectification ( $r = 0.673$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and appearance anxiety and self-objectification ( $r = 0.631$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Following this, there is a moderate positive relationship between social networking sites consumption and self-objectification ( $r = 0.415$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) as well as between internalization of beauty standards and self-objectification ( $r = 0.498$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The findings showed that the degree of influence from Internet slangs toward English language learning was very strong. In addition, the result also demonstrated that the respondents were aware of the effects of communication mediators on the level of self-objectification.

Table 3: Regression Analysis

Model	Standardized Coefficient Beta
Social comparison	.475**
Social networking sites consumption	-.150
Appearance anxiety	.314**
Internalization of beauty standards	.115
R	.716
R <sup>2</sup>	.512
Adjusted R	.492
F change	24.964
Significant F change	.000
Durbin Watson	2.024

Table 3 illustrates the findings of multiple regressions between Communication mediators and Self-objectification. As shown in the table, the significant F score ( $F=24.964$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) shown in the regression table indicates that the independent variables of this analysis have a significant collaborative effect on the dependent variable. The R<sup>2</sup> value of 51.2% in the table can be understood as the variations that exist in the dependent variable that is provided by the independent variables. Based on the results, two of the hypotheses are supported where two communication mediators had a significant impact on the dependent variable which is firstly, social comparison. According to Feltman & Szymanski (2018), there is a significant relationship in engaging with social comparison and self-objectification in the sense that the action of comparing oneself physically would increase the probability of self-objectification as it causes an individual to perform body surveillance on themselves. Not only that, but appearance anxiety was also a communication mediator that had a significant relationship with the dependent variable as supported by Terán et al. (2021) where it was stated that “a higher level of self-

objectification is accompanied with higher appearance anxiety” due to hyper-awareness of an individual’s appearance thus increasing the level of self-objectification in fear of being judged negatively by society. Next, social networking sites consumption was found to not have a significant relationship with the dependent variable. Kuss & Griffiths (2017) affirmed that social networking sites consumption has a more significant relation to symptoms of addiction instead of self-objectification as Carbonell & Panova (2017) stated that social networking sites addiction correlates with the component model of addictive behaviours including mood modification, salience, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, conflict, and relapse thus proving that social networking sites consumption is more suitable to play a role as a factor of social networking sites addiction rather than self-objectification. Finally, the internalization of beauty standards does not have a significant relationship with self-objectification. However, this result can be supported as stated by Xiaojing (2017), a person has a higher tendency to experience dissatisfaction towards their bodies when they take on the beauty standards set by their surroundings thus creating an internalized ideology for themselves which involves being defensive regarding their appearance, struggling to portray themselves in a socially accepted manner, and increased body image concerns, and trying to present themselves attractively on social networking sites out of fear of receiving negative comments and judgments on social media platforms (Xiaojing, 2017). From this study, it can be concluded that internalization of beauty standards relates more to being a factor of body dissatisfaction rather than self-objectification.

## **Conclusion & Recommendations**

In this study, there are four variables altogether under communication mediators starting with social comparison. It was proven that there is a significant relationship in engaging with social comparison and self-objectification, therefore, appearance comparison on media exposure including social media which includes the act of looking at more attractive pictures of others on social media and comparing the number of likes and comments under the post should also be highlighted. Regarding the second independent variable, in order to gather a significant relationship between social networking sites consumption and self-objectification, this study could focus on the usage of social networking sites to view social media influencers to observe the negative impacts of engaging in appearance-related content, such as consuming unrealistic lifestyles, body ideals, and expectations due to altered images which were proven to promote body image issues, appearance dissatisfaction, and eating disorders which where Brown and Tiggeman (2016) affirmed that an increase in body dissatisfaction issues is a possible negative effect of exposure to images of appealing social media celebrities. Next, social anxiety and social appearance anxiety stimulates fear of social interaction, fear of being negatively assessed, social evasion, and difficulties in functioning in public due to one’s perceived appearance (Sahin et al., 2014). Relating appearance anxiety to social anxiety can provide a clearer perspective on how it leads to a much greater impact on self-objectification including one’s persuasion to obtain an idealized body and appearance, such as being thin, tall, and muscular, through rigorous exercise routines and unhealthy excessive diet regimes. Finally, it is recommended to investigate the internalization of beauty standards in a less broad term as it was found that it had no significant relationship with self-objectification. According to Dakanalis et al. (2014), unrealistic body expectations promoted by media outlets such as social media or movies encourage various negative outcomes such as eating disorders, body image concerns, body dysmorphia, and many more towards society to obtain the ‘perfect’ body or appearance. Therefore, by looking into the detailed sub-topic of internalization of beauty standards, it was more likely to obtain a significant relationship between this independent variable and self-objectification.

It is highly recommended that further studies be carried out on different universities and departments of studies to see whether there is any similarity in the findings. Further studies are recommended to carry out a qualitative study on this topic to have higher possibilities of gathering deeper comprehension and awareness to explain the respondents’ behaviours. Moreover, future research should utilize interviewing respondents as the instrument instead of distributing a questionnaire to gather data for said research to collect detailed data especially by conducting an in-depth interview and observing the impact it has on the variables in the study as factors such as individuals’ beliefs and cultural cultivation are influential in shaping their behaviour. Next, it would be recommended to gather



information from a larger set of sample sizes including respondents from different nations and parts of the world to assist in creating a more authentic and significant study for researchers from around the globe. Last but not least, future studies should consider exploring other potential communication mediators to gain wide-ranging findings regarding this subject. For instance, aspects such as gender roles and attachment style can be applied to obtain more meaningful and important findings regarding the impact of communication mediators on the level of self-objectification.

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