

Increased Effect of Misogynistic Sexism on Women's Physical & Psychological Health

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Abstract. Misogyny, along with internalized misogyny, can be defined as the hatred or devaluation of women, through both the perspective of both men and women. It is explored in this literature review through psychological, cultural, and societal dimensions. The increased abundance of misogyny present in everyday media and the extent to which it affects women's body image dissatisfaction and increasing bodily dysmorphia are both topics studied. Particular focuses are set on media and technological advances which amplify and promote sexist behaviours and speech, including studies analysing increased sexist music prevalence and online pornography users over time. The subject of objectification of women and the effect of this on the psychological harms of women will be explored, as well as the "backlash" movement and details regarding disordered eating following (internalized) misogyny. Misogynistic influences and impacts on men will also be briefly addressed. Penultimately, the paper covers both the potential psychological but also physical harms imposed on women experiencing misogyny, addressing not only the issue but also promoting the urgency for media literacy and feminism awareness.

Keywords: (Internalized) Misogyny, Body Dysmorphia, Psychological Effect, Media

1. Introduction

As of 2024, misogyny can be defined as the hatred towards women according to the premise that they are inferior to – worse than, or less than – men [1]. Internalized misogyny, on the other hand, is when women apply sexist, patriarchal behaviors towards themselves and fellow women [2]. It is believed that internalized misogyny is often tied with feelings of self-hatred [1] which can lead to negative thoughts about one's appearances. Societal, traditional, and cultural factors incorporating gender beliefs have influence over women's concerns over her body image. Young girls are often taught to observe themselves from the point of view of an outsider, as suggested by objectification theory. Consequences following the former can include constant fret over body image, eating disorders, psychological anxiety and depression, sexual functional issues and shame [3]. Women often compare themselves to societal standards as they perform processes of self-objectification [4] hence causing them to alter and control their appearances to hold the "ideal" standards set and normalized by society [5,6].

2. Increase in the abundance of misogyny on media

As modern technology and the usage of social network partaking in one's daily routine increases, it has developed into more and more of a tool for us to experience. From the invention of the first online social network Classmates 30 years ago, not soon after followed by SixDegrees in 1997 [7] to 2017, where about 70% of elders from the United States use at least one Social Networking Service [8], the augmentation is evident. People thereby went from messaging and texting to becoming producers of content. This amplification on social network utilization not only guarantees larger exposure and access to content, but also provides an opportunity for media consumers to be creators of these posts themselves. Supported by such, Campbell suggests that "about five years and four months is spent by an average person on accessing social media" [9]. The prevalence of misogynistic content too has increased. Modern and traditional feminist perspectives both suggest that music and lyrics act as expressions or reflections of a particular status [10] that could maintain stereotypical gender roles [11] or contribute towards fostering an empowered self [12]. When examining music and its lyrics, violent metaphors, which can verbally express rights, values and traditions of individuals or communities, should not be dismissed as mere figures of speech [13]. To this end, lyrics contribute towards creating reality that has a high chance of influence behaviour [14], particularly through its emotional impact [15]. According to Christenson & Roberts et al, music can affect an individual's values. They found that lyrics serve to promote changes in attitudes as people reflect on their feelings and emotions afterwards [16]. A follow-up was done in 2019, where it was found that lyrics mirrored one's take on social norms, the way they perceive life, worries and concerns [17]. Sánchez González concluded that music can improve and alter one's perspective on global issues by promoting changes in behaviour and the activation of social norms [18]. This was supported by the claim that music can be the driving force behind powerful messages according to individual musical tastes [19]. A study conducted in 2024 by Casanovas-Buliart et al. compiled Spain's most listened to song lyrics from 1960 – 2022, identified as either "sexist" or "non-sexist" based on lyric words or phrases. The methodology consisted of frequently used words in sexist lyrics identified through scatter text visualizations by researchers – successfully highlighting patterns of hyper sexualization and objectification. Main themes included pleasure, the human body, sensual movement, and acts suggestive of possession or control – highlighting patterns of hypersexualization and objectification. The results suggested that sexism levels remained stable (37%–50%) until the 2000s, then rose sharply, reaching 77% among songs from 2000 [20]. In 2022, Lewczuk et al conducted an online self-report study in Poland. Every once 2 years, individuals reported their usage of online pornography. Researchers found a 310% increase in population who used online pornography 7.7% in October 2004 to 24% in October 2016 [21]. Online pornography is connected with sexism and misogyny in the following ways: not only does it depict unrealistic beauty standards, it also encourages forms of violence and abuse against women [22].

3. Misogyny relation to psychology

3.1. Objectification of women and the psychological/mental health issues of women experiencing (internalized) misogyny

Misogyny is related to psychology in a variety of ways. Such said ways includes consequences from reducing women to mere objects, a process known as objectification. To our knowledge, objects cannot be harmed. If you dropped a human, it would hurt, but what if you dropped a ball? People consider objects to not have feelings, therefore justify doing "hurtful" things to them. Women are no

longer seen as individuals, thus the harm inflicted upon them loses its significance. What's more, violence against women appears to be normalized or seen as acceptable in our society. Around 28% of men in a questionnaire considered domestic violence (a man beating his wife) justifiable in some situations [23]. Objectification is not exclusively enacted by men toward women; rather, women may also partake in activities of self-objectification. Women modifying physiques and appearances to match the perfect "model" standards society has so often emphasized and normalized [5,6] do so from comparing themselves to societal standards as they perform processes of self-objectification [5]. There are many effects of this on both the psychology and mental health of women, and of men. Such effects include lowered self-esteem and self-worth, higher levels of or higher risk of psychological disorders: anxiety, depression, imposter syndrome (feeling undeserving of success despite working hard for it), body dysmorphia, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), internalized misogyny. The effects on men include emotional suppression and strained relationships from unhealthy, unbalanced power dynamics. An analysis by Hackett et al. sampled 3,081 women all above the age of 52 years old from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA). Their levels of discrimination were measured in 2010/11, by self-report of five "everyday discrimination" experiences (e.g., being treated with less respect). If they experienced any, they attributed the reason(s) and those who chose sex were coded as perceiving gender discrimination (binary yes/no). Wellbeing outcomes (depressive symptoms, loneliness, quality of life, life satisfaction) were measured at both the beginning of the study 2010/11 and the end: 2016/17. Data in 2021 determined women reporting gender discrimination had signs of higher depressive symptoms and loneliness and lower quality of life and life satisfaction than those who did not. Longitudinal results collected in 2016 suggested perceived gender-based discrimination predicted higher solitude and lower quality of life and life satisfaction six years later. It was concluded that women above Middle Ages, including the elderly, who claim experiencing sexual inequality have reported states of more inadequate mental wellbeing than those who have not [24].

3.2. Disordered eating as an effect of women experiencing (internalized) misogyny

Eating behaviours including bingeing, restricting, or purging – the active excretion of food out the system, through either self-imposed puking or the utilization of medication such as diuretics and laxatives [25] – the allowance for the substance of food [26] have all been considered signs as disordered eating. Although this phenomenon has recently been underestimated in males, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, both types of eating disorders, have a clearer prevalence in females [27]. Hypotheses regarding women having higher dissatisfaction with their bodies have been formed based on the beliefs that there are 1, a culturally almost impossible perceived ideal "skinniness", and 2, a difference between a woman's actual weight and this model thinness they sought to achieve [28]. Misogyny has not only enforced unreal beauty standards upon females; it has also put societal pressure and normalized women having an "ideal" look on their faces on bodies. An analysis by Borowsky et al. of Project EAT-III studied the correlation between female bodily image dissatisfaction and abnormal eating habits. Sampled in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area of Minnesota, a total of 4,746 middle and high school students enrolled in 31 public schools partook in the study by completing questionnaires [29]. They were questioned on the following categories: feminism [Question: "Select the declaration that most closely represents your opinion concerning feminism."; Answer choices: "I identify as a feminist," "I concur with majority of the objectives of the rightist movement but do not identify as a feminist," and "I do not identify as a feminist."], socio-demographic variables, body mass index (BMI) [weight: kg; height: m²], body satisfaction [tested by collecting data assessed by the Body Shape Satisfaction Scale [30] about how subjects felt

about 13 areas or elements of their body: “height, weight, body shape, waist, hips, thighs, stomach, face, build, shoulders, muscles, chest, and overall body fat” classified on a 5-point Likert scale from “very dissatisfied” to “very satisfied”, then calculating an overall average score], eating disturbances (split into “binge eating” [Questions: “Within the past 12 months, have you experienced episodes of overconsuming quantities of food that you would consider excessive and prefer to keep confidential?” and “During these episodes when you behaved this way, to what extent did you experience a loss of control over your eating, specifically amount wise?”], “dieting” [Questions: “During the past year, how often have you intentionally modified your eating patterns to achieve the goal of weight loss?”; Answers: “never; 1-4 times; 5-10 times; 10+ times; and I am almost always dieting”, participants were then classified as non-dieters (never) or dieters (all other responses)] and “unhealthy weight control behaviours” (UWCBs)) [this was done by naming an activity which was associated with weight loss/gain and asking participants whether they had or had not done the behaviour in the past year. Such activities included fasting, using laxatives, taking diet pills, smoking more and less, etc.]. Results found that women self-identifying as feminists had higher satisfaction rates towards their bodies and lower rates of performing UWCBs, although there is not a significant correlation between feminist or non-feminist identification and disordered eating. Instead, 57.3% of women at an average age of 25.2 diet, and 51.7% of them perform less extreme UWCBs [31]. We can summarize that many factors, in turn, whatever the reason, lead to women performing unhealthy dietary eating, which long term wise can lead to many health issues both physically and mentally. Physical health issues include, but are not limited to, gastronomical problems and obesity, which can lead to diabetes, whereas mental disturbances take form in unipolar & bipolar depression, sleep disturbances, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, etc. [32]. Evidence supporting the claim on the effect of disordered eating influencing depression is found such: the abundance of depression amongst eating disordered patients was 93.3% [33].

3.3. Effect of men’s backlash psychologically on women

Backlash in feminism refers to hostile or “wild” reactions—often angry and uncivilized—against contemporary feminism, representing resistance to social progress on gender equality [34]. This can be explained by a number of reasons, one of which is the Social Dominance Theory, which suggests that when an individual or group feels threatened, it often resulted in a push back to protect their position [35]. Masculinity, fittingly, has associations with dominance and control, stereotypes titling back to tens of thousands of years ago. Another possible explanation is the Defensive Attribution Theory, where people defend themselves or others when they feel blamed, and men, who could potentially view feminism as accusing them of harm, may choose to enact this behavior to reject and avoid guilt or responsibility [36]. Furthermore, the “manosphere” is an online group of communities where people men’s issues are discussed, but often many in the way of spreading negative or hostile propaganda about women [37]. These communities authorize and encourage sexist attitudes and behaviours to be held against women [38,39]. Such algorithm platforms, Reddit and YouTube for example, often expose young men and sometimes even women to “manospheric” content, passively engaging them to carry out these sexist beliefs [40]. According to researchers, the currently growing manosphere has shown to be increasing in toxicity [37,41]. A shocking example of the manosphere could be the 70000 men incident in December 2024, where a German investigation found that over 70000 men partaking in a Telegram online group chat shared views on how to perform sexual assault on women, filming not only videos of assaults of for some, their own sisters, wives, and other family members, but also sharing advice on how to “get away without getting caught” [42].

4. Discussion

There are a few limitations to be addressed in the identification of lyrics study in 2024 by Casanovas-Buliart et al. The detection of sexism based solely on isolated lyric fragments may limit accuracy. Informal expressions and ambiguous words too may lead to possible misclassification due to lack of context. For example, the word “woman” may be associated with different connotations in different contexts; hence classifying it as either “sexist” or “non-sexist” may cause a bias in the other. A plausible solution to this is to feed more code and to further train the automatic model, and when met with ambiguity or unfamiliar phrases, a group of researchers sampled equally with no bias should be to judge. Furthermore, the subjectivity of “sexist words” when classified can lead to possible researcher bias – while one may regard the lyric “hot” as “sexist”, another may not. To address this issue, a separate study can be performed to classify words as sexist or non-sexist. A sample of at least 50 people should be collected. They should then be given a list of common words appearing in song lyrics of the past 60 years. These results should then be combined and sorted, with “sexists” or “non-sexist” words going by majority. The sample should consist of equal numbers of males and females, alongside generalizable ages groups.

Lewczuk’s self-report online pornography consumption measures has some weaknesses that ought to be brought to attention. First is the effect of social desirability. Social desirability bias can be seen when individuals engage in more responses they regard as more “likeable” to project their own self-presentation [43]. Normally, due to our societal norms, it is not the most appropriate and acceptable to be flaunting the abundance of watching online pornography, and particularly in more repressive cultures. Secondly, pornography, like most non-empirical data, is highly subjective. While some people may report a movie scene consisting of female bodies on a beach, others may not, per se, leading there to be lots of room for misreport. Next is the lack of generalizability in this study – it was conducted in Poland. For future actions, any similar studies should be repeated and sampled in different countries and regions. Lastly, the study’s time periods focused on 7 specific months, October 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016, meaning that eleven out of twelve months of the year were missed. Therefore, some seasonal trends may be overlooked, e.g. the prevalence of online pornography may be higher during spring due to mating season, or summer due to the extended duration of summer holiday and the prolonged exposure to naked bodies. Also, data was collected every 2 years, which means continuation trends may be missed or overlooked.

Evaluating Hackett et al.’s study, we can criticize their flaws in the study design of perception. Discrimination being self-reported by respondents, lots of room can be found for reporting bias, of what participants classify as discriminatory behavior and whatnot. What’s more, discrimination was measured once at a single time-point. Data was not collected on the changes in discrimination over the six-year period, as well as missing short-term dynamics, where immediate fluctuations are not measured. It is plausible for participants to forget or perform memory omissions to interactions. Moreover, the study does not measure discrimination due to other factors (e.g. age, race, weight and other factors) but chooses its focal point to be on gender entirely. The sample is also biased – not only is it predominantly White English (only about 1.8% other ethnicity), which limits generalizability to wider populations, but it is also only consisting of women above 52 years of age – prevalence of discriminatory events may differ for younger cohorts of men.

Additionally, this review did not include the biological approach, making it less holistic. For future references, scholars can study the effects of misogyny regarding the biological nature of men and women.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can confirm that misogyny and internalized misogyny, proliferated by the media, do indeed inflict profound damage on women's mental and physical wellbeing states, supported by empirical data. It is evident that these issues are no longer individual cases but a collective matter influencing public health, therefore it is our expectation and responsibility as a society to inhibit them. Elevated body dysmorphia, disordered eating and depleting mental health, as well as anti-social interactions forming between men and women are all results of this dilemma, posing lots of concern for us all. Moving forward, psychologists and academic scholars should focus on promoting solutions to the given issues in the most effective way without enabling effects of backlash.

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