

The Person behind the Digit:

Objectification and Self-Objectification Online

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Introduction

Popular social media and dating apps provide opportunities for interaction between millions of users. While users feel free to interact with one another in seemingly any way they like, the design of such online platforms fundamentally predisposes users to behave toward each other in specific ways. In this chapter, the combined perspective of ethics, feminist philosophy, objectification theory, and philosophy of mind is employed to (1) explore how the design of online platforms may inadvertently sustain and propagate the occurrence of digital objectification and, thereby (presumably), of self-objectification, which is linked to several harmful psychological and behavioural effects, (2) suggest possible solutions that could alleviate the speculated digitally mediated objectification and selfobjectification, and (3) understand what society at large may need to do to improve the situation. Although, in places, the chapter draws on empirical research to explore these matters, it is important to emphasize from the outset that the following does not constitute a factual report; rather, it is exclusively offered as a philosophical analysis and speculative discussion of a complex issue, the comprehension of which may still benefit from such tentative theorisation.

Objectification

To start with, the notion of “objectification” must be clarified. In a seminal paper that has become one of the main points of reference on the topic, prominent contemporary moral philosopher, Martha Nussbaum (1995, p. 257), defines objectification in the following way: “One is treating as an object what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being.” This is a good starting point; Nussbaum (ibid., p. 258) further notes, however, that objectification is better thought of as a “cluster term”, with any of the

following behaviours possibly acting as sufficient indication that objectification is present¹:

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

(The phrasing of the above conditions is taken verbatim from (Papadaki, 2021). See also Langton (2009) and of course Nussbaum's (1995, p. 257) original phrasing.)

There should be little doubt that the above are important aspects of what we normally think objectification might consist in. As Lina Papadaki (2021) notes, however, Rae Langton (2009, pp. 228–229) has usefully added to Nussbaum's list the following three behaviours:

- 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.

(The phrasing of the above conditions is again taken verbatim from (Papadaki, 2021). See also Langton's original formulation (2009, pp. 228–231)).

As Langton notes, her additions are meant to point out that, although an object might well be—as Nussbaum's account highlights—something that has no agency, autonomy, or subjectivity, an entity that can be used as a tool that can be violated, owned, exchanged, or replaced, it may, in addition, be “something that is silent, something that is just an appearance, just a body” (Langton, 2009, p. 231).

In what follows, I focus mainly on two specific objectifying behaviours— i.e. Langton's 8 and 9—from the above list. One reason for this specific focus is that these two kinds of behaviours—i.e. treating and perceiving a person as identified with their bodies and looks—are likely to be among the most common objectifying behaviours online. Second, and relatedly, objectification theory and related studies in empirical psychology (which this chapter draws on in the sections to come) also approach objectification and self-objectification

along similar lines. For example, Bell et al. (2018, p. 83) define objectification and sexual objectification in the following way:

Objectification occurs when a person is deprived of their personhood to the extent that they are perceived as or behave in an object-like way relative to a human (Haslam, 2006; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2014). Sexual objectification, a specific form of objectification, occurs when individuals are reduced to, and valued for, their body parts or sexual function over their internal attributes and human worth.(Calogero et al., 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997)

Bell et al. (2018, p. 83)

Additionally, according to Bell et al. (2018, p. 83), objectification theory holds that “girls and young women who are repeatedly exposed to sexually objectifying cultural messages are socialised into” self- objectifying, which can be defined (ibid., 83) as

adopting an external viewer’s perspective of their own bodies and perceive themselves as objects (Calogero et al., 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Bell et al. (2018, p. 83)

Therefore, as the above indicates, being perceived and treated (even by oneself) as identified solely with the body and how it looks (i.e. (8) and (9) above) is a main focus of objectification theory. The above makes also clear what the link between the two behaviours is supposed to be: Objectification may induce to self-objectification; specifically, being repeatedly exposed to objectifying behaviours may prime one to self-objectify (see also Fredrickson & Roberts (1997), Koval et al. (2019)).

What is more, it is important to be aware that objectification may have several harmful psychological and behavioural effects on those who, after being exposed to objectification, are primed to self-objectify. As Bell et al. (2018, pp. 83–84) further note:

This tendency to habitually self-objectify (i.e. trait self-objectification) has been linked to a variety of deleterious psychological and behavioural consequences including low self-esteem and life satisfaction (Mercurio & Landry, 2008), negative body image (Calogero & Thompson, 2009; Steer & Tiggemann, 2008) and disordered eating behaviour (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012). Furthermore, objectification can also be temporally activated (i.e. state self-objectification) by a contextual factor, leading to more

Table 8.1 Negative Psychological and Behavioural Effects associated with Trait Self-Objectification and State Self-Objectification.

Trait Self-objectification	State Self-objectification
• Low self-esteem • Low life satisfaction • Negative body image • Disordered eating behaviour	• Object-like behaviour (short-term effect) • Reduced cognitive performance (shortterm effect)²

object-like behaviour in the short-term, such as talking less and reduced cognitive performance (Gay & Castano, 2010; Saguy et al., 2010)

Bell et al. (2018, pp. 83–84)

Table 8.1 offers a summary of the above negative psychological and behavioural effects that have been linked to trait self-objectification and state self-objectification.

Is Objectification Always Problematic?

As the foregoing suggests, self-objectification, which may be induced by objectification, is associated with several negative effects. At this juncture, however, an important question to ask is whether objectification is always problematic. After all, most of us have, at times, perceived partners or relatives as identified with their looks: Is paying another person a compliment on their appearance always an objectifying and, thereby, a morally problematic act?

Nussbaum argues that objectification needs not have devastating consequences for a person's humanity. Rather, Nussbaum believes that it is possible that

some features of objectification ... may in fact in some circumstances ... be even wonderful features of sexual life", and so "the term objectification can also be used ... in a more positive spirit. Seeing this will require ... seeing how the allegedly impossible combination between (a form of) objectification and "equality, respect, and consent" [Sunstein, 1995] might after all be possible.

(Nussbaum, 1995, p. 251)

So, what might determine whether an instance of objectification is of the morally acceptable or the problematic kind, according to Nussbaum? The answer, she notes, is that it is a matter of context:

in the matter of objectification context is everything. ... in many if not all cases, the difference between an objectionable and a benign use of objectification will be made by the overall context of the human relationship”

(Nussbaum, 1995, p. 271)

In summary, Nussbaum views objectification as morally problematic when it takes place in a context where “equality, respect and consent” (Sunstein, 1995) are absent. Conversely, objectification is benign, when it is compatible with “equality, respect and consent.” Nussbaum (1995, p. 265) illustrates her point with the following example:

If I am lying around with my lover on the bed, and use his stomach as a pillow there seems to be nothing at all baneful about this, provided that I do so with his consent (or, if he is asleep, with a reasonable belief that he would not mind), and without causing him pain, provided, as well, that I do so in the context of a relationship in which he is generally treated as more than a pillow. This suggests that what is problematic is not instrumentalization per se, but treating someone primarily or merely as an instrument. The overall context of the relationship thus becomes fundamental.

(Nussbaum 1995, p. 265)

So, again, what is key, according to Nussbaum, is whether the objectifying behaviour takes place within the context of an overall relationship whose members usually treat each other with “mutual respect and concern” (ibid., 275), acknowledging, in this way, each other’s humanity (or dignity, as this is grounded in their subjectivity, agency, and autonomy).³

However, as influential as Nussbaum’s view has become in the literature, it has also been met with resistance: Nussbaum’s view stands in opposition to Catharine MacKinnon’s (1987, 1989), Andrea Dworkin’s (1997, 2000), and Sally Haslanger’s (2012) view on sexual objectification, which holds that sexual objectification is necessarily morally problematic. The disagreement between these two points of view has attracted considerable attention by feminist scholars, with Papadaki (2010) (siding with Dworkin, MacKinnon, and Haslanger) holding that objectification must be defined such that it always be a morally problematic act that specifically denies a person’s humanity—where “a person’s humanity is denied when it is ignored/not properly acknowledged and/or when it is in some way harmed” (Papadaki, 2010, p. 32)—while Kathleen Stock (2015, 2018), and Sheila Lintott and Sherri Irvin (Lintott & Irvin, 2016) appear more receptive to Nussbaum’s perspective.⁴

Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to extensively comment on the matter, I am inclined to follow Papadaki into thinking that objectification should be defined as always problematic. One good reason for this proposal is practical:

Objectification would be a more useful concept if restricted to the negative [...]. This way, we can more efficiently focus our efforts on teaching people why it is wrong, how to spot it, as well as how to avoid it (avoid both causing and being the targets of objectification).

(Papadaki, 2010, p. 30)⁵

Of course, Nussbaum is still correct to point out that (at least some of) the potentially objectifying behaviours in her (and—we may here add—in Langton's) list can be part of a larger situation that may be overall benign; and that, necessarily, when this is so, the potentially objectifying acts will be taking place in the context of a mutually respectful relationship where members acknowledge each other's humanity. Nevertheless, as Papadaki notes, we may not think of such cases as instances of benign objectification; rather these may be more appropriately thought of as cases where objectification is absent:

Since we have rejected Nussbaum's distinction between benign and negative objectification, her instruction can be adapted as follows to fit our conception of objectification (which is always negative): "in many if not all cases, the difference between the occurrence or not of objectification will be made by the overall context of the human relationship."

(Papadaki, 2010, p. 36)

To accommodate this point (that context may not determine the moral value of objectification—which is always negative—but rather the presence or absence of objectification altogether), in what follows, I suggest introducing the following distinction: Instead of using the term "objectification" to refer to contextually benign occurrences of potentially (but not actually) objectifying behaviours—a necessary condition of the benignity of such behaviours being their occurrence in a context of mutual respect and concern—we may refer to them as "respectful objectual treatment" or "respectful objectual appreciation." In this way, while I may hesitate to follow Nussbaum's suggestion that objectification can itself be benign—insisting, instead, (by following Papadaki's view) that objectification is always negative (i.e. morally problematic)—we can agree with Nussbaum's larger point that potentially objectifying behaviours may be benign within certain contexts, and that a necessary component of all such instances is the presence of a mutually respectful relationship between the parties involved.

With that said, we may now proceed to the main question of the chapter, which, given the above, becomes: Does the design of social media and dating apps inadvertently facilitate the occurrence of potentially objectifying behaviours and, if it does, does it support a context of mutually respectful interactions, wherein the occurrence of the potentially objectifying behaviours will be morally permissible (i.e. without them amounting to instances of objectification, but to instances, instead, of "respectful objectual treatment" or "respectful objectual appreciation")?

Digital Affordances

To answer the above question in as much an informed way as possible, I would here like to take a short detour into contemporary philosophy of mind; specifically, I want to focus on the idea that cognition is both embodied and embedded.

Briefly, according to the hypothesis of embodied cognition (which can be traced back to the work of such figures as Heidegger, Piaget, Vygotsky, Merleau-Ponty), our bodies constitutively affect—via the skilful interaction they support with the surrounding environment—our cognitive processes, perceptual processes, mental states and concepts.⁶ Likewise, according to the hypothesis of embedded cognition, “cognitive processes depend very heavily, in hitherto unexpected ways, on external props and devices and on the structure of the external environment in which cognition takes place” (Rupert, 2004, p. 393).

For our purposes, a particularly illuminating way of spelling out how cognition is both embodied and embedded involves the concept of affordances. The notion of affordances was first introduced in the literature by ecological psychologist James Gibson, whose work has significantly impacted the development of the theory of embodied cognition. According to Gibson (1979):

The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. [...] I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.

(p. 127).

While the precise nature of affordances is the subject of ongoing debate (see, for example, ch. 7 in Chemero, 2011), the main idea is this: An agent, through their body, can interact with their environment in specific ways. These opportunities for certain actions and interactions—what the world offers to our embodied agency determine how we perceive and think about the world. For example, human beings perceive certain objects as straw hats because, given the kind of bodies we have, these objects afford “wearing-on-the-head” to us. However, beings with different bodies will perceive the same objects in substantially different ways. What we perceive as a “straw hat,” to a horse, it might afford eating, and to a butterfly, it might afford landing.

Now, given the hypotheses of embodied and embedded cognition, as well as the associated concept of affordances, we can draw two useful morals:

Methodological moral: to understand cognition, one should always factor in the environment in which it takes place and what it affords to the agent.

Design moral: one can significantly impact on cognition by appropriately structuring the surrounding environment, with the aim of engineering what it affords to the agent.

What is more, and relevant to our discussion, the concept of affordances has become a significant concept in several disciplines outside psychology and philosophy of mind, including the discipline of human–computer interaction (HCI). Of course, as with the original concept of affordances, discussion on how best to understand the nature of digital affordances is ongoing (see, for example, Hartson, 2003; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2012). Nevertheless, for illustrative purposes, it will be here sufficient to mention two specific types of digital affordances, as outlined by Paula Borowska (2015), freelance Web designer, on Squarespace’s website.⁷

Explicit affordances: “hints given off by language or physical appearance of the object. A raised button that says ‘Click me’ is a great example of both language and physical cues. The button’s raised appearance indicates the possibility of clicking and so does the ‘Click me’ text.”

Pattern affordances: “a pattern affordance is affordance set out by conventions. [...] Text that is different color, sometimes maybe underlined or italic, among unchanged body text like a paragraph, is assumed to be a link. Email is often represented with an envelope, while settings are represented with a gear.”

With the above in mind, it easy to see how digital affordances can invite certain perceptions, thoughts, and behaviours as well as perceptual, conceptual, and behavioural patterns. These, in turn, can lead to specific frames of mind, moods, and ways of acting, interacting, and socialising online. For example, comment boxes directing you to “type your comment” (explicit affordances) will invite users to comment. Depending on where the comment box is placed, it will predispose users to comment on specific content. Slightly magnifying images as the cursor hovers above them will invite users to scrutinise the image closely (pattern affordance). Placing signs such as thumbs up or hearts or smiley faces (pattern affordances) on specific content will invite users to first judge in corresponding terms and then provide “audience feedback.” Given that all this can be very easily shaped and modified, digital affordances potentially constitute a powerful tool for steering cognition across epistemic, moral, affective, and other dimensions.

Digital Objectification

With the above in mind, we can now take advantage of the methodological moral to examine whether the design of popular online platforms may inadvertently afford their users with digital environments that dispose them to engage in potentially objectifying behaviours, and whether such environments can render the potentially objectifying behaviours innocuous.⁸

Consider Instagram first: As soon as one logs on to it, it becomes obvious that this is largely an image-based social medium. When scrolling through their “feed”, users are mainly presented with image-based content (e.g., other users’ profile photos, photos of their day, videos, and so on), which is accompanied by pattern affordances and explicit affordances inviting users to offer “audience

feedback” by way of writing comments or hitting the “like” button. Additionally, several design features prominently afford users with the opportunity to post image-based content (e.g., profile photos, photos of their day, videos). Users can also post text under their image-based content but if this text is more than a couple of lines long, the rest can only become visible to others if they click on the explicit affordance “more”. Also, it is worth noting, users can see some information about others if they choose to click on their profile, but this personal information is rather limited (e.g., a short 150 characters bio, information about their gender and information about their pronouns).

Now given these design features, it is unsurprising that existing research seems to indicate that the design of Instagram may be inadvertently conducive (through “audience feedback” and “image-posting” features) to the occurrence of potentially objectifying behaviour and, thereby, potentially, to self-objectification (it is here assumed that “liking” another’s image can be—depending on the content of the image—a potentially objectifying behaviour). As Bell et al. (2018, p. 87) report:

Around a third of the young women’s Instagram posts featured objectified self-images, with sexually suggestive poses being the most frequent form of self-objectification. Second, the study examined whether the frequency of posting objectified self-images can be predicted by self-objectification, [and] positive audience reaction (as indicated by likes achieved on objectified self-images relative to non-objectified selfimages) [...]. As predicted, the frequency of posting self-objectifying images was associated with their trait levels of self-objectification (H1) and whether their self-objectifying images typically received more positive audience feedback in comparison to other self-images (H2).

(Bell et al. 2018, p. 87)

Moreover, as Bell et al. (2018, p. 87) note, which may act as possible explanation for their second finding (H2):⁹

receiving more positive feedback on objectified self-images relative to non-objectified self-images indicates that such self-presentations will please the audience, thus providing motivation for presenting the self in similar ways in the future. This novel finding is consistent with existing qualitative research suggesting that the desire for receiving more likes is a motivator of posting objectified self-images among young women (Chua & Chang, 2016; Mascheroni et al., 2015).

(Bell et al. 2018, p. 87)

Now, to move on, similar points can be raised with regards to the popular dating app, Tinder, which also provides rather specific affordances to its users: Mainly, when setting up their profiles, users can upload images of themselves, and provide, alongside some information about themselves (e.g., short lists of

interests and lifestyle choices, job title, education information, languages they speak, gender, sexual orientation), a short selfdescription (with an upper limit of 500 characters). However, compared to the central role of images, this personal information seems to play only a peripheral role while searching for partners, as most of it appears only if a user's name is clicked on, or at the bottom of users' photos, if more than one image is explored when presented with their profile). In effect, it seems reasonable to assume that, when using the app, users primarily tend to choose people they like based on their images, and mainly by taking advantage of the binary pattern affordance of either swiping their image to the right ("like") or to the left ("nope"), with their limited personal information only playing a secondary role in the process. Once two users have liked each other (a "match"), then they can start texting each other

To a large extent, then, like Instagram, Tinder seems to be an imagebased app. It mainly affords users with the means to present themselves primarily through their images and choose potential partners based, predominantly, on their appearance. This suggests that its design may be inadvertently conducive to the occurrence of potentially objectifying and potentially self-objectifying behaviours in ways that are similar to the ways that the design of Instagram may be inadvertently conducive to the occurrence of such behaviours. Receiving approval from potential partners is plausibly at least as good a motivator as receiving "likes" and positive comments from one's Instagram "followers." So, it may be assumed, if posting potentially self-objectifying images increases the chances to "match" with intended partners, then such "matches" may likely function as positive "audience feedback" (similar to "likes"), possibly motivating users to potentially self-objectify. However—it is important to note—the problem here is not the potentially self-objectifying behaviour or its employment for ameliorating one's prospects of social approval; neither of these behaviours are (nor should they be construed as) problems. The question and the only problem that should here be of concern is whether the design of such dating apps increases the chances that users will then be exposed to actual objectification (as opposed to merely potential objectification that amounts to "objectual treatment and appreciation"), which may prime to actual self-objectification and the correlated harmful effects.

Unfortunately, empirical studies seem to suggest that the answer to the above question could be positive. In a cross-sectional study (where drawing inferences about the temporal ordering of the observed associations is limited, since data are collected at a single point in time), Jessica Strubel and Trent Petrie (2017) attempted to (provisionally) explore the possible effects of Tinder use. As the researchers note:

regardless of gender, tinder users and non-users differed significantly [...]. Tinder users reported less satisfaction with their faces and bodies, more shame about their bodies, greater likelihood of monitoring their appearance and viewing themselves from an external perspective, stronger internalization of societal appearance ideals, and more frequent comparisons about appearance than nonusers.

(Strubel & Petrie, 2017, p. 37).

Relatedely, in a systematic literature review of the problematic use of online dating in general, Bonilla-Zorita et al., (2020) note:

There is a body of research that points to the objectifying environment that emerges in online dating (e.g. through using market-like vocabulary and filtering through numerous profiles). It is of concern that objectification of other users may increase self-objectification (Koval et al., 2019), whose mental health consequences have been noted in previous literature including clinical symptoms of depression and eating disorders. (Jones & Griffiths, 2014; Register et al., 2015).

Bonilla-Zorita et al., (2020)

Overall, then, looking at the characteristics of the above image-based online platforms, as well as their possible effects on users, it seems we can draw some useful conclusions. At the most general level, the design of online platforms affects how users will interact with it and with one another. If a platform prominently affords uploading of photos, then many (if not most) users will end up posting photos because they understand (perhaps implicitly) that this is what the platform is for and, plausibly, for the sake of conformity as well. Similarly, a platform that is riddled with digital affordances inviting users to offer “audience feedback” by way of “likes” or comments on each other’s posts will set the tone of users’ online interactions. Further, if such “audience feedback” features are often paired with posted images of oneself, then users will be primed to offer “audience feedback” (“likes”) or comment on each other’s images (of themselves), possibly leading to an increased number of potentially objectifying “audience feedback” and comments. Moreover, positive “audience feedback” on potentially self-objectifying images arguably acts as motivator for many users to post increasingly more such images, which the audience is then more likely to potentially objectify. On the whole, it seems reasonable to assume that such platform designs may inadvertently sustain and propagate the occurrence of potentially objectifying and potentially self-objectifying behaviours online.¹⁰

Now, a further important question to ask is whether the related potentially objectifying behaviours are benign. In other words, going back to Nussbaum’s point about context: Do social media and dating apps, such as the ones mentioned above, provide a context where users can develop and sustain relationships of mutual respect and concern, thus acknowledging each other’s dignity, humanity, and subjectivity? If not, the occurrence of potentially objectifying behaviour on such platforms would be problematic.¹¹

Unfortunately, contemplating on the way such online platforms are many times used seems to indicate that users may often fail to be participants to meaningful and mutually respectful relationships, and they may often be unlikely to establish—as they are engaging with the platform and being simultaneously exposed to potentially objectifying behaviours and effects, such relationships between them through the platform alone.¹² Instagram users may

have dozens or even thousands of “followers” they may know very little or nothing about. Similarly, on Tinder, users attempt to “match” with strangers mainly based on their images, some limited information about each other, and a short self-description. Thus, often enough, users’ interactions on such platforms seem likely to be superficial and primarily image-based. What is more, platform-initiated and platform-sustained interactions may often have little prospects of developing into wholesome connections that could render potentially objectifying behaviours unproblematic: The above platforms have a texting feature which may be used even between strangers, with varying degrees of frequency and mutual engagement. Texting, however, (if it is at all employed) affords limited communication, and it is normally not as rich as the communication channels provided by phone calls, video-calls, or, better, face-to-face online communication.¹³ Texting through such platforms may likely (though of course not necessarily) centre around small talk. Moreover, the ability to chat through texts on Tinder is only available between “matches”; and, crucially, it is unavailable during the potentially objectifying process of assessing and being assessed by unfamiliar others (mainly) on the basis of images. Of course, this is not to say that through texting (when it is employed), such platforms are impossible to lead to meaningful, respectful interactions between users.¹⁴ But, overall, wholesome interactions that begin and exclusively unfold on such platforms through the texting feature, and which can offset potentially objectifying behaviours and effects, while users are being exposed to them, are, presumably, (relatively) rare. If that is correct, then the speculated rarity, or minority status, of such meaningful interactions is worrisome. Whether the design of such platforms falls short of providing an overall context in which potentially objectifying behaviour will be unproblematic is also a question about its general effect on significant proportions of the population of users. If, for many users, much of the communication and interaction occurring on such platforms often leads—due to the inadvertent effect of the platforms’ design—to potentially objectifying behaviours that are often not accompanied by a context of a respectful and meaningful relationship, then the design of such platforms is wanting.¹⁵ Of course, given the associations observed in some of the aforementioned empirical studies from objectification theory, it is not surprising to here speculate that the design of such online platforms might be problematic. If that’s correct, however, what’s important is that we now have a systematic, even if tentative, explanation of what might be (at least in part) wrong with it.

Is It Avoidable?

So far, it has been speculated that the design of certain popular online platforms may inadvertently facilitate the occurrence of potentially objectifying and potentially self-objectifying behaviours. Moreover, it’s been also speculated that the potentially objectifying behaviours that their design may unintentionally propagate are many times unlikely to be benign, because, presumably, users on these platforms often fail to establish a context of

meaningful and mutually respectful user interactions, whereby they will clearly acknowledge each other beyond their image. Thus, if the above is correct, it appears that the design of these (and relevantly similar) popular online platforms may inadvertently sustain and propagate the occurrence of online objectification and self-objectification. Nevertheless, by taking advantage of the design moral (according to which, one can significantly impact on cognition by appropriately structuring the surrounding environment, with the aim of engineering what it affords the agent), it is possible to suggest design solutions to alleviate the above speculated problem of digitally mediated objectification and self-objectification.

Of course, sharing image-based content of oneself is popular and understandably so: Despite the associated possible negative consequences, imagebased content can convey a lot of information that may not be communicable in any other format. Therefore, rather than targeting image-posting, we should insist that users should feel free and safe to post image-based content of themselves, including potentially self-objectifying content; and that, specifically, they should be able to do so without worrying that this is then likely to expose them to objectification, which may prime self-objectification and the associated negative psychological states and behaviours. As noted above, the problem is not the potentially self-objectifying behaviour or its employment for ameliorating one's prospects of social approval (neither behaviour is problematic). Rather, the problem is to then have any related content and oneself be objectified on the platform—in the absence of which self-objectification and the correlated negative effects would likely not follow. Accordingly, any design solutions should primarily aim at ensuring— through the manipulation of digital affordances and other elements of the platform— either that images will not be accompanied by features (such as “audience feedback”) that may afford potentially objectifying behaviour or, if they do, that such behaviour will at least take place in the context of mutually respectful and meaningful interactions, in which the agents' dignity and humanity will be clearly acknowledged and respected (i.e. that such behaviour will only amount to “respectful objectual treatment and appreciation”, falling short of actual objectification).¹⁶

For example, social media, such as Instagram, could entirely remove all positive “audience feedback” features, including both “likes” and comments, tied to features of posting image-including content;¹⁷ a bold measure that could nevertheless stop users from potentially objectifying each other as well as from thinking that they are being valued only for their physical appearance.¹⁸ Similarly, dating apps, such as Tinder, could promote longer and more meaningful descriptions of oneself. More drastically, they could also be designed such that users can see each other's photos only after they have “matched” based on their self-descriptions and personal information, and perhaps also after being mutually satisfied from an online “blind” date (or something along these lines).

But a crucial question concerns whether design modifications such as entirely removing positive “audience feedback” tied to features of posting

image-including content would be well-received and whether tech companies would be likely to implement them. One possible reason (perhaps among several other reasons) why social media, in general, may hesitate removing features of “audience feedback” as well as associated engagement metrics (such as displays of the number of “likes” a post has received) is that these features seem both popular among users and effective at keeping them engaged.¹⁹ If that’s correct, then we should expect that companies are not likely to eliminate them. But if companies (for whatever reason) do not entirely remove “audience feedback” from features of posting image-including content (a design modification that could arguably help alleviate some of the speculated problems we are here concerned with), then users must act for themselves. So how could we go about it in this instance?

It seems that the most important suggestion would be for society at large to stay aware of objectifying behaviours and the associated harmful effects. Remaining alert in this way could provide us with the drive necessary to act in our capacity as users, designers, and educators (whatever the case might be). For example, objectification theorists could—in addition to their very important task of critically assessing existing platforms—(be invited to) actively contribute to the re-design and even creation of social media and dating apps that can reliably support contexts of mutual care and respect between users. Likewise, educators could inform students of the possible negative effects that may be associated with objectifying behaviours on social media and dating apps (see also Bell et al. 2018, p. 88); teach them how to develop respectful relationships online and make concentrated efforts to educate students about how to avoid objectifying behaviours online. The combined result could be more wholesome online environments, where users will be more likely to engage in mutually respectful and caring online relationships—relationships, in which instances of “respectful objectual treatment and appreciation” (as opposed to actual objectification) may take place without significant cause for concern.

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Notes

- 1 As Nussbaum (1995, p. 258) notes, “On the whole, it seems to me that ‘objectification’ is a relatively loose cluster term, for whose application we sometimes treat any one of

these features as sufficient, though more often a plurality of features is present when the term is applied.”

- 2 For a recent overview of the literature on the link between reduced cognitive performance and state self-objectification, see Winn and Cornelius (2020).
- 3 For more details on the relation between the concepts of humanity, dignity, subjectivity, autonomy, and agency in relation to the topic of objectification and against the background of Kantian ethics, see (Nussbaum, 1995), (Langton, 2009) and (Papadaki, 2010).
- 4 Lintott and Irvin (2016, p. 312) note, for example, that sexualised attention “is problematic when it comes in the form of an objectifying gaze, treating the individual as though their only value for us is in the sexual use we might make of them. But directing sexualised attention toward someone seen as a full, embodied person rather than a mere body, with an aim of respectfulness, is not, in general, a particularly problematic form of interpersonal engagement.”
- 5 It should be noted that Papadaki (2010) does not think that the only reasons for thinking that objectification should always be thought of as morally problematic are practical. Following her practical rationale, she goes on to convincingly argue that her view on objectification is also preferable from a theoretical perspective.
- 6 For overviews of “embodied cognition,” see (Shapiro & Spaulding, 2021) and “Embodied Cognition” by Monica Cowart, The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ISSN 2161-0002, <https://iep.utm.edu/> (accessed 25/01/22).
- 7 Squarespace is a leading website building company.
- 8 Following the discussion of the section entitled “Is Objectification Always Problematic?,” for the rest of this chapter, I will be using the term “potentially objectifying behaviours” to refer to behaviour that may potentially constitute objectification; however, whether such behaviour actually amounts to objectification (which is necessarily morally wrong) or to morally acceptable instances of “respectful objectual treatment” or “respectful objectual appreciation” is to be, each time, decided by whether the relevant behaviour occurs in a context of mutual respect between the parties involved.
- 9 This may only be a possible explanation because, as Bell et al. (2018, 87–88) note, all data were collected at a single point in time. Therefore, their study cannot establish causality, or clearly capture the directionality, between audience feedback and objectifying self-presentations. As the authors suggest, more research is required in this direction.
- 10 The above points are not meant to suggest that everyone uses these platforms to potentially objectify or potentially self-objectify—obviously, many users don’t. Rather, the above is intended to convey the point that the design of these platforms may unintentionally prime users to act in these ways, which may (at least partly) explain why many users may tend to engage in potentially objectifying and potentially self-objectifying behaviours.
- 11 Another way to put the same point is to ask whether the design of such platforms unintentionally motivates users to go beyond what Stock (2018, p. 304) refers to as ‘seeing-a-person-as-a-body’—an instance of objectification that “simultaneously involves (a) attention towards bodily and other physical characteristics and (b) attention away from ‘minded features.’”
- 12 As the following indicates, I am here referring to interactions that begin and unfold solely on the online platforms. I am not referring to connections that begin online, but then strive in the offline world, or to established meaningful relationships, that then go on to be sustained online. Instagram, for example, is often helpful for keeping in touch with old friends, with whom we wouldn’t normally have the chance to stay in touch in the offline world. This kind of already existing meaningful relationship that then

survives online is (I assume) capable of preventing the occurrence of any negative effects that could otherwise be associated with potentially objectifying behaviours taking place in its course.

- 13 This is not to claim that these other forms of communication are always preferable over texting. For a user- and context-relative assessment of online communications, see Osler and Zahavi (2022).
- 14 Again, I here have in mind online interactions that take place solely through the texting feature of these apps—not online interactions that then go on to develop into meaningful and respectful relationships in the o\$ine world.
- 15 “Instagram also has calling and video calling features and Tinder offers the possibility for “matches” to video call (if both users activate the feature). Such features may fair better than texting in relation to developing meaningful connections. However, I here assume, users who do not know each other in the o\$ine world will seldom employ these features (considerably less frequently than they may utilize the texting feature). If that is correct, such features are too rarely used between strangers, so their availability cannot help neutralise the overall effect that, for many users, presumably arises from the frequent occurrence of potentially objectifying behaviours (such as receiving likes on potentially self-objectifying images) by people they do not know in the o\$ine world. Finally, I am also assuming that neither the aggregate of meaningful interactions that may be established through either texts, calls or video calls can counterbalance the overall effect of such potentially objectifying behaviours. If that is also correct, then, often enough, many users will be exposed to a significant amount of potentially objectifying behaviours that are not accompanied by a context of meaningful and respectful relationship. Nevertheless, these are all speculative claims that need to be empirically confirmed.”
- 16 I am here assuming that potentially objectifying behaviours that take place in the context of respectful relationships—in other words ‘respectful objectual treatment’ and ‘respectful objectual appreciation’—cannot prime self- objectification and the associated negative consequences. However, this is an empirical claim that remains to be confirmed. If this claim is not correct, then all potentially objectifying behaviour should be minimised.
- 17 For a sustained philosophical analysis and critique of the ‘like’ function primarily in relation to (though not solely directed to) text-based (rather than image-based) content, see (McDonald, 2021).
- 18 In fact, at the time of writing this Instagram allows users to hide from others the likes that their posts receive and turn off commenting on their posts, if they so choose (users can also choose to hide the likes that other users’ posts receive (Al-Heeti 2021)). Hiding the likes one’s and others’ posts receive, however, is not the same as altogether removing the ability to offer them and receive them, which seems to be what is required to avoid potential objectification and potential self-objectification. Having the option to disable comments on one’s post might seem better in this regard, but ultimately it is going to be ineffective. First, disabling comments without also precluding others from “liking” one’s post is most probably insufficient for preventing potential objectification.
Secondly, and rather crucially, making it the users’ choice to turn off preexisting features of audience feedback may significantly reduce the chances that users will do so: Bearing in mind the ‘default effect’ (e.g., Jachimowicz et al. 2019), the fact that the availability, rather than unavailability, of such features is the default design may dispose users to retain them and make it improbable for them to choose to remove them from their posts. Thus, overall, and as noted in the main text, preventing potential objectification would seem to require that all features of audience feedback, tied to features of posting image-including content, be entirely eliminated.

- 19 See, for example, Martineau's (2019) article on the Wired: <https://www.wired.com/story/internet-healthier-without-like-counts/>

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