

**Women in Thai society: The Sexual Objectification of Thai
Women and its Negative Effects on the Thai Emancipation
Process**

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Introduction

Tourist brochures treat Thai women as part of the aesthetic resources of the country. TAT publications such as Thailand Traveller are increasingly conscious of avoiding representations that could encourage sex tourism. [...] Yet publications and posters feature beautiful young women making crafts, dancing, displaying silk and gems, participating in traditional celebrations, and welcoming visitors to hotels ('we recognize the needs of our guests', says a miniskirted beauty advertising Thavorn Hotels in Phuket). Van Esterik 159

The construction of gender is a constantly changing process. Characteristics of what we define as female and male have been reinvented throughout time and are, still today, changing. Personality traits and physical features that were considered attractive two hundred years ago might not be perceived appealing in contemporary society. Throughout the world, societies share ideas about gender traits but also differ in what is deemed gender appropriate. Globalization has made the exchange of information easy on an international level while also enabling individuals as well as societies to meet alien cultures and, therefore, alien beliefs and standards. Concerning gender, especially the perception of male and female beauty characteristics, Western European and U.S. American ideals have spread across the globe, influencing societies in their perception of beauty. This is highly due to an influential movie industry and media advertisement. As a consequence, these societies have reshaped their own perception of beauty, incorporating alien, Western ideals into their own culturally dependent standards. In India, for example, many women aspire fairer skin, a physical trait, which is deemed attractive, and generally a characteristic of Western cultures.

Many scholars have written on the construction of gender. Within this discourse, the presentation of women is especially interesting as it is a diverse and culturally dependent phenomenon. Women, throughout history and still today, are often limited by society's gender roles. This means that women are often assigned to take on certain duties, such as the mother or the wife. These gender roles are so deeply manifested in society that the refusal or failure to meet gender expectations might result in incomprehension and irritation by other members of society. Thus, women suffer from pressure to adhere to these standards. Scholars have investigated these claims by researching several aspects of society and culture. Senta Trömel-Plötz and Luise Pusch concern themselves with the construction of language and the behavior of the sexes within speech. Pusch argues that language is often practiced in a way that has an excluding effect on women (1990), while Trömel-Plötz's research focuses on the characteristics of men and women in speech (1979). Other scholars have investigated the effect the representation of women in media has on women and their gender role within society (Eggermont, Vandenbosch; Nelson, Paek; Oulette; Halliwell, Malson, Tischner). They have found that the practice of illustrating women in a sexual manner has a dehumanizing effect on the same, as it presents women as sexual objects rather than complex human beings. As a consequence, society treats women in an objectifying manner.

While much research has been conducted on the sexual objectification of women in Western societies such as Germany and the United States, few scholars have investigated this phenomenon in Southeast Asian societies. Within this region, Thailand presents an especially interesting case. Thai society unites traditional cultural beliefs and practices with contemporary ideas, often influenced by the spread of Western European and U.S. ideals. The country, known for its sex tourism as well as for its rich, ancient culture paints an ambiguous picture. While the history of prostitution and sex tourism in Thailand and its repercussions on Thai women have been the focus of

much research (Thiemann; Gräning), little to no exploration has been undertaken on the representation of Thai women in visual media. However, it is of importance to address these factors scientifically as they are of significance within the Thai gender discourse; the presentation of women in visual media has repercussions on their self- perception as well as on society's perception of them. Furthermore, it influences the way women are seen by other societies such as people in Western Europe and the US. Thus, the visual perception of women impacts the way Thai women are treated by members of both, Thai and non- Thai societies, turning it into an issue concerning Thai society as a whole.

This paper aims to contribute to the filling of aforementioned research gap. My research will analyze the way Thai women represent themselves on dating websites targeting Western men. By doing so, I will be able to confirm or disconfirm my hypothesis; the sexual objectification of Thai women hinders the emancipation process in Thai society. In order to do this successfully, I ask myself the following questions; does the way Thai women present themselves on dating websites targeting Western men confirm the Objectification Theory as proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts? Does this potential sexual objectification limit women in fully participating in the emancipation process in Thailand and thus hinder the same?

I will use the Objectification Theory as proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts as the theoretical framework of my research. The theory suggests that women self- objectify themselves as a consequence of being exposed to sexual objectification by society. In order to test this theory within Thai society, I conducted research analyzing 89 profile pictures of Thai women registered on dating websites. I will discuss the findings within the framework of the Objectification Theory and finally draw a conclusion on the impact my findings have on the emancipation process in Thai society.

This paper is divided into three main sections. The first section will introduce the theoretical framework in detail and give definitions and explanations of the individual

concepts used within the research. The second section will provide historical background information to the Thai women's movement and emancipation process and discuss the internal and external objectification of Thai women. This will be undertaken by providing examples of influential factors, as the limited size of this paper does not allow for a full analysis of all practices with an objectifying effect on women. The last section will introduce the series of case studies conducted and discuss its findings. Subsequently, the research questions will be answered and the hypothesis confirmed. Finally, the conclusion will provide an overview of the main insights of the paper as well as recommendations for further research.

1. Theoretical Framework

The research discussed in this paper was conducted with the use of several theories and concepts. These notions, which form the theoretical framework of the study, will be defined in the following paragraphs. At the core of the research lies the Objectification Theory. This theory forms the base of the theoretical argument. It includes concepts and ideas, which will prove relevant in the conduction of the case study discussed in the subsequent chapters.

Objectification Theory

The Objectification Theory (OT) is the theory that claims the objectification of others, especially women, by society. In this context, objectification refers to the reduction of individuals to superficial attributes such as body shape. Furthermore, the theory explains how women are influenced by a culture that treats the female as an object rather than a multidimensional human being. The work of Fredrickson and Roberts on OT has proven especially influential. Their research shows the negative

effect of sexual objectification by society on the mental and physical health of women.

Although the sexual objectification of women that OT aims to uncover is only one component in the formula that constitutes the gender inequality syndrome and stereotypes related to it, it holds a special position in the gender inequality discourse as it provides an explanation for the interconnectivity of the varying symptoms of aforesaid syndrome. Examples for such symptoms are employment discrimination and sexual assault (Fredrickson, Roberts 174). OT does by no means claim the equal perception of sexual objectification by all women. It does, however, imply the existence of shared experiences in the social sphere. These shared experiences are said to occur due to having a “mature female body” (Fredrickson, Roberts 175), which exposes women to sexual objectification and “a shared set of psychological experiences” (Fredrickson, Roberts 175).

Fredrickson and Roberts gain several findings through their research. They come to the conclusion that the self- perception of women due to the pressure society puts on them to live up to a certain standard results in self- controlling. This constraint of self- controlling may eventually lead to feelings of anxiety and shame. Self- worth, therefore, is only drawn from adhering to societal beauty standards; other potential sources to draw self- esteem from such as professional and personal accomplishments are regarded as irrelevant. Rather than women setting their own standards and striving to reach those, an outside force dictates beauty standards that are hard to adapt to for the majority of the female population.

Objectifying Gaze

Sexualization is not always an obvious, easy to identify process. It expresses itself in different ways. Especially hard to detect is the objectifying gaze. This term acknowledges one of the subtlest forms of the sexualization of women. It refers to the “visual inspection of the body” (Fredrickson, Roberts 175).

In any situation women are potentially exposed to an objectifying gaze. The obviousness of the gaze might vary, what they have in common, however, is the inability of women to gain control over being gazed at and therefore over being objectified. The objectification of women by gazing occurs in three spheres, which have first been defined by Fredrickson and Roberts (176,177). The first sphere is that of interpersonal relations which take place in a social environment. In every day situations, women experience more gazes than men while at the same time executing less gazing than men. Furthermore, men tend to verbally underline their actions, often dehumanizing women farther through their language use.

The second sphere refers to advertisements and other forms of media which illustrate social encounters between men and women. Men are more likely to be pictured looking at women than vice versa. Furthermore, what some scholars refer to as the “anchored drift” (Fredrickson, Roberts 176) becomes apparent. The term refers to the common practice in media to illustrate men looking at women, while they themselves seem to be unaware of the gazes executed on them, often paying their attention to other object.

The third sphere is perhaps the most obvious one. It refers to the conscious portraying of women in media as objects, for example by depicting certain body parts or focusing only on the depiction of the body as an object. This form of media presentation not only allows the viewer to engage in objectified gazing, it rather encourages and invites the viewer to do so; thereby presenting this action as societally acceptable and normal. A notion that goes along with this form of media presentation is “face-ism”. The term refers to the tendency of media to illustrate women without showing their faces or heads, therefore only depicting their bodies or certain body parts. This action clearly allows for the objectification of women as “the visual media portray[s] women as though their bodies were capable of representing them” (Fredrickson, Roberts 177).

Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality is widely used in, and mostly limited to, the feminist discourse. It claims that people perceive certain experiences differently. This is because people belong to different social, ethnical, gender and other categorized groups, thus experiencing society and its repercussions differently. One might, therefore, be discriminated against for different reasons, overlapping in that one person. Sexism, for example, may be executed differently on Black women than on White women, therefore creating two entirely different experiences. In this case, Black women are not only discriminated against for being female but also for the color of their skin. As Fredrickson and Roberts acknowledged; “For women of color, objectifying images are often infused with racial stereotypes” (176) while “Asian American women are portrayed as possessing a more exotic and subservient sexuality” (176).

Self- Objectification

The notion of Self- Objectification occurs, when women internalize the sexual objectification made by others on themselves. Eventually, they will execute objectification on other women as well as on their own person. Internalized self- objectification, therefore, leads to the transference of alien standards by women to other people, mostly fellow females. Whether this process happens consciously or unconsciously might vary from individual to individual. Even if it happens consciously, however, it is a strategy adopted to “help determine how others will treat them” (Fredrickson, Roberts 179) rather than a sinister action. Consequently, the pressure which is executed by society, of potentially being faced with images of their bodies at any time and in any situation presents a threat to the physical and psychological health of women.

2. The case of Thailand

Thailand's political and societal landscape is constantly changing. The country is known for its high number of military coups and its monarchical system. With an insecure political agenda, which seems to reform frequently, developments in society are also occurring. In recent years, the role of women especially, has evolved. Thailand's society is undergoing changes, largely due to a relatively new established women's movement. Nevertheless, Thai society is also struggling with the objectification of its women. The following chapter will discuss the development of aforesaid movement and explore the objectification of Thai women.

2.1 Emancipation in Thai society- A Historical Overview

The Kingdom of Thailand is a constitutional, democratic monarchy. It illustrates a special case when looking at the role of women in society. Compared to many of its neighboring countries, Thailand manages to score high in criteria considered important for gender equality by international standards. Statistical profiles of the country, compiled by the United Nations, show that in the year 1990, 51.2 per cent of all children attending primary school in Thailand were male, while the total female percentage lies at 48.5 (see Appendix A). The same data shows that on the Upper secondary level, females constitute the majority with a total of 53.2 per cent. For the year 1991, UN statistics show that a total of 47.1 per cent of all students graduating university with a doctoral degree were female (see Appendix B). Concerning political participation, Thai women gained the right to vote in the country's elections in 1932.

These numbers seem to make any discussion about structural discrimination against women redundant. However, the reality of the status of women in Thai society is far from the idyllic picture, which above shown data paints. Although historically, Thai society used to be a matriarchy, and its modern society is often referred to as bilateral, women face structural and institutional suppression and domination by men. Out of this inequality, a demand for change arose and women began organizing themselves in order to claim equal rights. Scholars defined three periods in recent Thai history that proved significant for the development of women movements (Bhongsvej, Vichitranonda; Pongsapich).

1st Period

The First Women's Movement took place from 1855 until 1935. Before this period, protests by women were hardly heard of and an organized formation of women to fight for their rights was nonexistent. In 1855, however, the Kingdom of Siam that would change its name to the Kingdom of Thailand in 1932, signed the Bowring Treaty with Britain. This treaty enabled Thailand to partake in global trade and is marked by scholars as the beginning of the country's Westernization process (Pongsapich, 64).

One of the many results of Thailand's Westernization was the introduction of school education for upper and middle class children in the country's urban areas. Education allowed women access to written media and, as a consequence, it furthermore enabled them to engage in written media by publishing magazines and newspapers for women only. This might have been the first time in Thai history, known to scholars, that Thai women publicly organized for a common goal targeting specifically women. According to Pongsapich, these publications became possible because “women who were suppressed were motivated by the desire and determination to liberate themselves” (64).

Written media was not the only development in this period, however.

Women's organizations were also founded. Pongsapich defines the most important one the Sapha Unalom Daeng, which would eventually become the Red Cross (65). However, other women's organizations came into existence, too. Their agenda included women labour, women welfare and politico- social changes. It must be noted, at this point, that these magazines and organizations did not always advocate similar beliefs. While the women's magazine Kulasatri “provided information on proper manner for ladies and how to be good wives” (Pongsapich, 65), Ying Thai, a women's newspaper, demanded changes in Thailand's social and political sphere, especially for issues concerning the masses rather than the elite only. The newspaper's annihilation in 1932 shows that the country was not ready for such 'extreme' political changes.

2nd period

The second period lasted from 1935 until 1970. In this period, political figures began involving themselves in the matter. The Prime Minister's Wife, Lady La-aide Bhandhukravi, set up the Women's Cultural Club in 1943. Another change that occurred was in the nature of the organizations that developed after the Second World War, as they were different to the majority of clubs established before. These organizations became more business oriented and often focused on women's educational status and career choice. Examples are the Women's Lawyer Association, the Women's University Organizations and the Home Economics Association (Pongsapich, 68).

As the number of women's organizations grew, women became increasingly part of the political sphere, although usually still not actively participating. In 1950, one woman was elected into the national government (Pongsapich, 69). Often, women were encouraged to participate in the legislation of family law; while this might seem a positive development; it clearly shows how women were still seen to belong to the family and domestic sphere. Altogether, the majority of these

organizations were established in urban areas, in rural parts of Thailand none or hardly any women's organizations were active.

3rd period

The third period started in 1970 and lasts until the present. During this period, for the first time, women's organizations acted as political pressure groups. They organized in universities and other educational institutions. However, the groups' activities triggered violent government interference and many organizations had to disperse. They kept low during a period of political instability; but in the 1980's women's organizations began to re- appear.

Pongsapich identifies two major issues in the organization's political agendas; equal rights and child labour and prostitution. The groups pushed for the legal affirmation of equal rights for both men and women. They succeeded to a certain extent when, in 1974, a clause that ensured equality of the sexes was added to the Constitution. Unfortunately, the instability of the political sphere in Thailand resulted in a military coup and in the abolishment of said Constitution. The equality clause was not included in the new Constitution of 1978.

The other issue that the Thai women's movement concerned itself with, was child labour and prostitution. Prostitution, as Pongsapich observes, is not a new phenomena. However, prostitutes used to tend to a local audience only. The increasingly popular business of human trafficking presented a new danger to women, whether they were in the business voluntarily or forced. As a reaction, more groups formed both in Thailand as well as in the countries women were trafficked to.

Recent developments

In recent years, Thai society opened up its economy to the international community and the forces of globalization influenced the country's economic, societal and political policies. The legal and economic status of women seemingly improved, not seldom due to international pressure. One example presents the accession of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women by Thailand in 1985. While Thailand's willingness to adopt measurements to fight gender inequality is regarded as a positive development, the Asian Development Bank adequately expresses the problem with many of these legal agreements; " [...] even in countries where women's human rights are fully guaranteed in law, the actual implementation and protection of those rights are often compromised by a complex system of practices based on historical, cultural, linguistic, religious, political, and other traditions." (5).

When taking a closer look at Thailand's reality concerning women, the country seems to do increasingly well in incorporating its female population. As already mentioned earlier, Thai women constitute at least half of the total number of students at all educational levels. Furthermore, they have access to political participation and are active in the economic sector. This is largely due to an increasing amount of influence of women's networks and organizations. Thus, it becomes clear that the Thai women's movement has scored great achievements and successes. Nevertheless, gender equality advocates face difficulties, which have been largely to do with societal values. These values still limit women to the role of mothers, wives and family related matters in general (Bhongsvej, Vichitranonda; Pongsapich). As a consequence, it becomes rather difficult for women to part take in any sphere other than that of the family, as society and politics, dominated by men, question their capabilities.

Figures provided by Bhongsvej and Vichitranonda support this claim.

According to their research, women have constituted only ten per cent of all political candidates

between 1993 and 2008 (59). In 2001, Senate was elected for the first time with women constituting ten per cent of the total. In 2006, this number increased to almost 20 per cent (60). Although these numbers are still low, it can be argued that, although slowly and still insufficient, a positive development has occurred.

Altogether, Bhongsvej and Vichitranonda identified over 30 organizations that tackle issues concerning women in Thai society. These issues include, but are not limited to, social welfare and political and legal representation. Organizations such as the Women's Constitution Network and the Coalition to Combat Violence Against Women advocate gender equality. The Women's Movement has developed from an urban phenomenon to a national agenda and has since been joined by women from all spheres of society and class backgrounds. Together, they pose a driving force in the Thai emancipation process.

2.1 Sexual objectification of Thai women

The sexual objectification of women is practiced in societies all around the world. Scholars, especially within the field of feminist and women studies, have engaged themselves with the issue intensively. Sexual objectification is multidimensional and not always easy to identify which makes it, at times, rather difficult to study. This is especially true, as the objectification of women has become the normative in many societies, such as the United States and Germany. This normative status presents a great obstacle in the abatement of said issue. Recently, scholars have taken to readjusting their focus, no longer concentrating on Western societies but also integrating other cultures in their research.

Many of the women in these cultures face two different forms of sexual objectification;

internal and external objectification. Internal objectification refers to the objectification by society of which affected women are part of, while external objectification refers to the objectification of these women by Western standards of beauty and physical appearance. A clear separation of these two forms is not always easy for they often appear intertwined. Nevertheless, the following paragraphs will attempt to examine them separately, by firstly defining and analyzing the sexual objectification of Thai women by Thai society, thereby focusing on the depiction of women in Thai ancient as well as contemporary culture. Secondly, by examining how Western beauty standards and stereotypes about Thai women affect the same. This will be undertaken with the use of research conducted by scholars on these topics as well as with the use of visual media that engages with these themes.

Internal sexual objectification of Thai women

Thai people are said to be proud of their rich cultural heritage. When visiting Thailand, one will come across many symbols and artifacts depicting the country's culture. Women are an important part in these depictions and visitors might notice the relative frequency with which females are illustrated in culture-related objects, such as postcards showing Thai women in traditional attire. Penny van Esterik concerns herself with this matter critically. According to her, this supposed visibility presents a threat as it draws a false picture of female reality. Because women are depicted frequently within a cultural context, the claim arises that Thai women are indeed well represented and visible in society. This, however, is a misassumption (Van Esterik 43- 45). Often, women are chosen to be illustrated in a traditional way, not seldom with an entrepreneurial motivation at its core, targeting tourists, exoticizing Thai culture and its women (Van Esterik 36).

The notion of exoticism is a common practice in the visual depiction of

non- White women. Fredrickson and Roberts identified exoticizing to be a harmful contributor to the sexual objectification of women in their publication on OT. It has the power to degrade women to nostalgic ancient standards, which might not match the self- perception of contemporary Thai women. This may not only occur in the visual but also in the literary depiction of the same;

Thailand's classical literary tradition was very much an elite discourse, extolling the virtues of the good, dutiful woman who exemplified grace, beauty, and self control.[...]. An ogress queen, ugly, with long teeth is transformed by a magic bath into a beautiful girl of seventeen- the only fitting wife of a king. Van Esterik, 46

This is only one example of how literature reduces the female to physical appearance. The message perceived is that only women who are considered beautiful will find happiness. Furthermore, male attention seems to be the aspired end goal. As a result, physical attributes are prioritized over mental capacities. It may be argued that these stories and pictures are from the past and merely depicting Thai gender relations the way they used to be; however, the presence of said ancient tradition with its objectifying depiction of women on television, and other forms of media, undoubtedly influences how contemporary Thai society defines and treats women.

Modern culture, too, has generated practices that reduce women to their physical appearance. In this context, one of the most objectifying inventions of modern society is the beauty contest. Although these competitions started out as an international phenomenon, they eventually incorporated themselves into Thai local culture; Van Esterik observes; “Local contests offer an opportunity to see how indigenous approaches to beauty, appearance, and competition are played out in

the absence of international standards, although their standards are increasingly influential” (150). Incentives for women to participate in such contest are, aside from material prizes, potential career opportunities or even mere respect and admiration by the community.

Van Esterik's observations align with the proposed notion of Self- Objectification by Fredrickson and Roberts; women agree to present themselves as (sex) objects, in order to magnify private as well as professional success. This is a result of society treating women as sexual objects, additional to the fact that greater physical attractiveness promises better treatment by other members of society and creates advantages in different spheres of life. As a consequence, Thai women may (un)consciously absorb this perception and objectify themselves and other women.

Another example of how the sexual objectification of women by contemporary society has influenced how women perceive themselves is media advertisement. Often, visual advertisements objectify women, and, furthermore, show how women are self- objectifying themselves. Laurie Oullette, who conducted research on one particular US American magazine sold internationally including Thailand, finds that the beauty standards that women find themselves confronted with in media, manipulates them into creating their identity through sexuality solely.

Some scholars also claim that the dominance of Buddhism in Thai society has a direct effect on the high amount of sexualization found in Thai advertisement. Nelson and Paek, as one example, believe Buddhism as a religion provides more freedom concerning sexuality than other religions do. Therefore, the level of sexuality in Thai advertisement may be higher than one might expect. This is a notion worth exploring further, however, due to the limitations of this paper concerning its size, the effects of Buddhism on the depiction of sexualized femininity will not be looked into deeper¹.

1 For further information on the effects of Buddhism on the depiction of femininity see Nelson and Paek: 2005; Van Esterik: 2000

External sexual objectification of Thai women

Globalization, especially its repercussions on the interconnectivity of media and information exchange on an international level, have altered the way Thai womanhood is defined. Often, Western standards of beauty and attractiveness are reflected in local Thai media. According to Nelson and Peak, “illustrations or visuals are the most likely place for sexualized elements and the most easily standardized element in global advertisement. Given that advertising often originates in the West and travels abroad, these often standardized images may become “normal” in domestic media” (373). As a consequence, Thai society might regard the sexual objectification of women as normal and even desirable.

This has a direct effect on Thai women, who not seldom turn to products and practices that are supposed to 'correct' their faults and bring them closer to desired beauty standards. Van Esterik claims that the integration of Western beauty standards in Thai culture is, in fact, not a recent phenomenon. According to her, Western cosmetics were already shipped to Thailand at the end of the 19th century;

“‘Scientific’ perfume, hair removers, creams, blemish removers, lipsticks, rouge, eyebrow pencils replaced local and more natural powders, waxes, herbal mixtures [...]and flower- based perfumes for those who could afford the high prices (154).

In the first half of the 20th century, beauty shops appeared in Thailand and correction surgeries for women were offered as another result of Westernization. Nowadays, Thai women can join classes, which not only teach them how to “enhance their appearance” (Van Esterik 154) but also how to behave in accord with Thai conception of manner and politeness (Van Esterik 154).

This politeness and supposed submissiveness that is perceived to be typically Thai by many non- Thais, is also what motivates many Western men to look for a partner in Thailand. According to interviews with British Men married to Thai women conducted by the British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC) on Bride trafficking, after the attractiveness of the woman, it was her ability to be a good wife that convinced the man to marry her. When asked what this ability was, one man replied her willingness to clean and take care of him and their home. The objectification of Thai women along with stereotypes about their personality due to their cultural background is what scholars call intersectionality (see Chapter 1). Fredrickson and Roberts identified intersectionality as a core concept within OT. The following paragraph summarizes the objectifying effect beauty standards have on women;

As beauty is interpreted less as a natural attribute existing within the body and radiating outward, and more as something that can be purchased, placed on the surface, and enhanced, it becomes the responsibility of women to develop their own beauty potential rather than assume responsibility for meritorious acts that will result in inner beauty. Van Esterik 154

3. Women in Thailand- a case study

Fredrickson and Roberts claim sexual objectification to have a direct negative effect on the mental and physical health of women. Their research suggest that the dehumanization of women, which they analyze through the lens of the Objectification Theory, reduces

women to their physical appearance. Furthermore, it might eventually lead women to self-objectify themselves. I argue that sexual objectification has an impact on the self-representation of Thai women and, subsequently, a negative effect on the emancipation process in Thai society. In order to test this claim, I have analyzed 89 profile pictures of Thai women on dating websites targeting Western men.

3.1 Methodology

In order to choose the dating web sites objectively but at the same time making sure they would be useful for my research, I created two criteria. Firstly, the website had to clearly be about finding a partner and not for sexual adventures; secondly, registration with the site was not required for viewing its member profiles. The first 15 websites that met these criteria, located through a google search, were chosen for the research. In order to be able to objectively select the profile pictures, I decided to pick the first six profiles on each web site that met certain criteria. Firstly, only one person could be depicted on the profile picture. Secondly, if several pictures were available only the first one would be analyzed. Thirdly, if one woman were represented on several web sites, she would only be analyzed once and skipped on subsequent sites.

After framing these criteria, I conducted the research on 25 May 2015. One website allowed the viewing of five profiles only, thus a total of 89 profiles were reviewed. The analysis was conducted by utilizing visual research techniques as proposed by Borgerson and Schroeder. This technique is used in order to examine the visual depiction of men and women according to gender standards. It unites concepts from social psychology, feminist theory, and art criticism “to provide an interpretive analysis of visual communication, gender, and sexual roles” (Borgerson, Schroeder 162).

Visual analysis was designed in order to analyze visual advertisement. Because, however, the self-presentation on dating website is, in fact, self-advertising on a smaller

scale, I deemed the technique appropriate for the conduct of my research. Borgerson and Schroder have conceptualized a set of tools, not all of which are useful for the type of images. Therefore, some criteria was discarded. One criterion required alteration, and Sexualization was added to the criterion Objectification. Table I shows the altered set of tools as used in this research².

Advantages of this method are the pre- defined criteria, which allow for relatively high objectivity and minimize selectivity. Furthermore, profile pictures are static; as a single photograph they present a selected image chosen by the women themselves to represent their self-perceived identity. A disadvantage of profile pictures is the one- dimensionality, which doesn't allow for a more complete, multidimensional understanding of the person represented. Furthermore, although the criteria are pre- defined by Borgerson and Schroder, it consists of concepts which in themselves are not always fully determinable. Therefore, the analysis faces the potential danger of subjectivity. Nevertheless, visual analysis, as it combines approaches of several disciplines, proves to be a useful tool for the analysis of gender constructions and representation in visual media.

3.2 Application of visual analysis method

The setup of all web sites is similar for the most part. A commercial picture depicting one or more attractive, ethnically Asian women usually greets the visitor. The viewer is invited to register, usually for free, with the website with the promise of finding love. In order to start communicating with the members, registration is necessary. However, as already mentioned above, the

Table I

Research tools

2 For the complete set of tools see Borgerson, Schroder 167

Tool	Issue	Examples
Social Psychological Factors	Face-ism Head and body cant Eye contact Bodily dominance Male gaze Objectification/Sexualization	Prominence of head and face Signifies submission Signifies dominance Size, height, space Acknowledges sexual dualism Male pleasure

Adapted from Borgerson, Schroder 167

websites included in this research did not require registration for the viewing of the profiles. Upon registering, the visitor may fill out a criteria form, in which he or she (as both man and women may sign up) can specify requirements for a potential partner such as sex, age, body height and, if the website is not only aiming at connecting Thai girls with Western men but Asian girls in general, the nationality (see Appendix D for an example of a homepage of one of the dating websites included in this research).

Applying the criteria presented in table I to each profile individually started the analysis. All criteria, except criterion Head and Body Cant, could either score high, medium or low, depending on the intensity of its occurrence. Head and Body Cant scored either yes or no. Table II presents an example of an individual profile picture analysis. The profile picture was taken from the website lavaplace.com (see Appendix C for according profile picture).

The first criterion applied was Face-ism. In chapter 1, Face-ism was discussed according to the definition of Fredrickson and Roberts as the illustration of women without their heads, only showing their bodies. Within this analysis, however, Borgerson and Schroder define the term as the prominence of the head and face in a picture. 42 of the total number of pictures did not illustrate face-ism. A total of 27 profiles, however, consisted of a close-up photography of the

woman's head and face.

Secondly, head and body cant was analyzed. According to Borgerson and Schroder, a tilted head or body position shows a submissive behavior by the depicted woman, and consequently creates a power relationship in which the viewer holds the dominant position. The majority of women, 55 in total, had adapted such a submissive position. Only 34 profiles depicted women, 55 in total, had adapted such a submissive position. Only 34 profiles depicted women with their heads held up.

Table II

Individual Profile Analysis

Tool		Examples	Applicable
Social	Face-ism	Prominence of head and face	Highly
Psychological	Head and body cant	Signifies submission	Yes
Factors	Eye contact	Signifies dominance	Highly
	Bodily dominance	Size, height, space	Not
	Male gaze	Acknowledges sexual dualism	Highly
	Objectification	Male pleasure	Not

Eye contact, which was defined in this analysis as the women looking into the camera and directly at the viewer, signals strength and dominance of the depicted. Again, the majority of the women, 84 in total, full filled this criterion. Two profile pictures showed the women wearing sunglasses, therefore they were archived as full filling the criterion median. Only three women did not look into the camera.

The criterion bodily dominance, according to Borgerson and Schroder, refers to the amount of space the body claims in the picture, as well as its size and height in relation to

the space available. This criterion did not result in explicit numbers as the criteria before. While 32 women showed a high amount of bodily dominance, 40 women scored medial and 17 women scored low on this criterion.

Feminist Studies scholars define male gaze as the depiction of women through the lens of a heterosexual man. This implies a desire of the depicted women to appear attractive to the viewer; in the case of this research the goal is to physically appear to Western men, as the woman is the image and the man the bearer of the look (Mulvey 9). The research showed a high tendency for the pictures analyzed to comply with the male gaze. 78 of all women full filled this criterion, with only 11 women not seemingly presenting themselves in order to appeal to a male viewers taste.

The last criterion that was applied to the profiles analyzed was self-objectification/ self- sexualization. The pictures were categorized according to the level the illustrated women self- objectified or self- sexualized themselves. In this category, only six women were found to show a high tendency to self- objectify. Examples include posing in lingerie and suggestive body poses. One woman was depicted with a blurred face, encouraging the viewer to focus on her body only. The majority of women, a total of 73, were found to not engage in the practice of self- objectification and self- sexualization.

3.3 Discussion of findings

Table III presents a summary of all findings gained through the conduction of the research. These findings confirm the implications of the Objectification Theory as proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts. Accordingly, the sexual objectification of Thai women by Thai society and Western Men results in the internalization of said objectification by the women affected. Fredrickson

and Roberts refer to this process as self- objectification (see chapter 1). In order to find private success, many women feel the need to adhere to society's beauty standards. The data collected within this research confirms this assumption. Among others, it showed a tendency for women to present themselves in a submissive manner. Furthermore, the high amount of body presentation (a total of 72 women showed a high or medium amount of body presence in their profile picture) confirms the belief that physical attractiveness and willingness to show body parts is linked with male attention.

Connected to this belief is the notion of the male gaze. Women present themselves in a way that they believe to be appealing to the heterosexual, male viewer. Consequently, they are not only reduced to their physical appearance by the viewer, but also reduce themselves to their looks. Mental capacities of the women are ignored in this process. Furthermore, once the picture is uploaded, the women lose control over not only who views it but also what viewers might do with their photograph. This notion of control loss is also identified by Fredrickson and Roberts to which they refer to as the objectifying gaze.

While the tendencies to self- objectify and self- sexualize were comparably low in the profile pictures, it is unsettling that six of these photographs showed a clear sexualization of the woman depicted. Considering that these pictures were likely chosen by the women themselves, this seemingly small number gives a clear insight into the repercussions of society's sexual objectification of women. After all, profile pictures found to have a high grade of self- objectification or self- sexualization constitute 11.2 per cent of the total number.

The objectifying practices of Thai society on its women have a negative effect on the emancipation movement in Thailand. A society that marginalizes half of its members by sexualizing and objectifying its women cannot achieve gender equality. Fredrickson and Roberts have shown that the dehumanization of the female has a negative impact on the mental and physical health of women.

Thus, women's capabilities to demand equal treatment on the social, cultural, economic and political sphere are reduced through the internalization of said dehumanization in the women themselves as well as through institutionalized gender inequality; Bhongsvej and Vichitrandonda observe that “discriminatory practices against women are still prevalent” (55).

Table III

Summary of data collected

	Applicable/ High amount	Medium Applicable/ Medium amount	Not Applicable/ Low amount	Total in numbers	Applicable in Per cent	Medium Applicable in Per cent	Not Applicable in Per cent	Total Per cent
Face-ism	27	20	42	89	30.3	22.5	47.2	100.0
Head and body cant	55		34	89	61.7		38.3	100.0
Eye contact	84	2	3	89	94.3	2.3	3.4	100.0
Bodily dominance	32	40	17	89	35.9	44.9	19.2	100.0
Male gaze	78		11	89	87.6		12.4	100.0
Self- Objectificat ion/Self- Sexualizati on	6	10	73	89	6.7	11.2	82.1	100.0

Thus, advances in societal norms are required, in order to change the representation of women. The normative nature of sexual objectification seems to be instilled in society to an extent where women not only accept their objectified role but also are willing to act accordingly to it. As Pongsapich claims; “[...] sexual inequality and exploitation of women remain the fact and social reform is certainly required if one were to move toward a sexually democratic society” (96).

Conclusion

This paper aimed at illustrating the negative effects the sexual objectification of Thai women by society has on the women's movement in Thailand and the emancipation process in Thai society. Within a geographical context, Thai women are rather privileged. They have access to education to the same extent than the male members of society. Furthermore, women have the legal possibility of being politically active, they can, in theory, be voted into political parties and into official political positions. On an economic level, they are also well represented. Women in Thailand constitute half of the country's work force. Nevertheless, Thai women face discrimination and obstacles in actively shaping the country's political and economic landscape;

One common thread that ties all [...] women together is the constraints on their participation in politics. Socio- cultural and historical antecedents which demarcated the public sphere for men and the private sphere for women is one major hindrance. The values and mindset of the Thai people have kept women from venturing into the political domain. Vichit-
Vadakaan 163

Because Thailand's society used to be organized as a matriarchal system, some claim contemporary Thai society to be bilateral, referring to a balance between patriarchy and matriarchy. Scholars such as Van Esterik and Vichit- Vadakaan disagree, however. According to them, men dominate Thai society and women are structurally disadvantaged on a political, economical and societal sphere.

The Thai women's movement has been fighting this structural suppression of women. The formation of the first movement in the 19th century set the momentum for future developments. By the 1970's, women have mobilized themselves into organizations and groups, which actively executed pressure on Thailand's political landscape in order to achieve change. Today, over 30 organizations advocate gender equality and the abolishment of obstacles that hinder women to participate in the country's development to the same extent as Thai men do.

A threat to the advances of said movement is the sexual objectification of Thai women. As Fredrickson and Roberts have shown, the repercussions of this practice are of profound nature, impacting both, the physical as well as the mental health of women. Objectification can occur within one society but also applied to women from other societies and individuals. They also claim that women will eventually internalize the objectification they experience and apply it onto themselves as well as onto other women, the process of which Fredrickson and Roberts call self-objectification.

The research conducted and discussed in this paper has shown that Thai women do, indeed, objectify themselves. It confirms the assumption that these women connect the chances of success in private life with the attractiveness level of their physical appearance. Almost 90 per cent of profile pictures (see table C: male gaze) analyzed in the case studies showed women seemingly presenting themselves in a way that is generally deemed attractive to heterosexual men.

Examples include playing with hair and adopting certain postures. This internalized supposed inferiority to men manipulates women into limiting their own mental and physical capabilities. As a consequence, they are less likely to demand equal treatment on a greater level. Thus, the emancipation process in Thailand is hindered by the sexual objectification of the country's women.

The analysis conducted is aiming to fill a research gap concerning the repercussions of visual presentation of Thai women. While the research was executed according to scientific methods, it encountered some unavoidable weaknesses. Firstly, although the visual analysis method provides guidelines in the measurement of the individual criteria, the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of these criteria remains subjective to the viewer to some extent. Therefore, misinterpretations might occur. Secondly, in order to create a clearer picture of how the women themselves perceive their identity, it would be advisable to incorporate the descriptive parts of the profile into future analysis. Due to the limitation of this paper concerning its size, this was not possible. Thirdly, although the pictures analyzed were strictly taken from websites created for dating purposes, it is not possible to guarantee all of the women registered are indeed looking for a partner, rather than sexual adventures which would change the context of the message the picture carries.

Future research is required in order to gain a deeper insight into the visual representation of women in Thailand. Nevertheless, the findings of the case studies have helped draw a clearer picture of the situation of women in Thailand. While women's movements have impacted the emancipation process greatly, Thai women are still facing suppression and hold a disadvantaged role in society. Conscious changes in the way society portrays women need to occur in order to help realize gender equality.

Appendix

A

Numerical and percentage distribution of enrollments of primary and secondary schools by sex: 1990

Level of education	Both sexes		Male		Female	
	Number	Per Cent	Number	Per Cent	Number	Per Cent
Primary	6,954,282	100.0	3,578,941	51.5	3,375,341	48.5
Lower secondary	1,415,998	100.0	741,457	52.4	674,541	47.6
Upper secondary	478,043	100.0	223,820	46.8	254,223	53.2

Source: United Nations. *Women in Thailand a Country Profile*. New York: United Nations Publication, 1999. Print.

B

Numerical and percentage distribution of graduates from public and private universities by type of degree and sex: 1991

Type of degree	Both sexes		Male		Female	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
All degrees	77,363	100.0	35,420	45.8	41,943	54.2
Certificate	3,485	100.0	2,566	73.6	919	26.4
Diploma/associate degree	1,231	100.0	795	64.6	436	35.4
Bachelor's degree	66,487	100.0	28,893	43.5	37,594	56.5
Graduate diploma	928	100.0	533	57.4	395	42.6
Master's degree	5,164	100.0	2,597	50.3	2,567	49.7
Doctoral degree	68	100.0	36	52.9	32	47.1

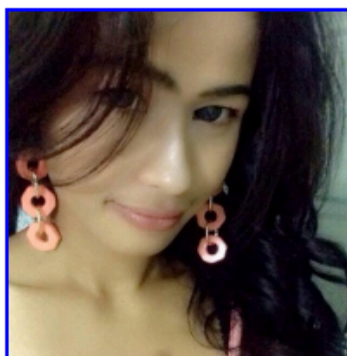
Source: United Nations. *Women in Thailand a Country Profile*. New York: United Nations Publication, 1999. Print.

C

Example Profile Picture

☆ [Member5429199](#)

I am a: 28-year-old woman
zodiac sign: Capricorn ♄
located in: [Bangkok, Thailand](#)
looking for: 40 - 60-year-old man
relationship:
race:
marital status:
children: None
eye color:
hair color:
body type:
height:
religion:
drinking:
smoking:
food:
occupation:
education:
languages:
interests:



Select a rating to vote for this profile

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

-
-
-
-
-

(Online 5 days ago)

views this month: 4
adds to favorites: 0

Source: <https://www.lavaplace.com/Member5429199/>

D

Example Home Page


[Home](#)
[Register](#)
[Log In](#)
[Search](#)
[Browse](#)
[Top 100](#)
[Now Online](#)
[Places](#)
[Help](#)

Personals site search

I am a

Seeking

between and



Member sign in

Email:

Password:











[Forgot your password?](#)

Not a member? [Sign up](#) for free.

International Dating Service

Dating by city

- [Amsterdam](#)
- [Rotterdam](#)
- [Eindhoven](#)
- [The Hague](#)
- [Utrecht](#)
- [Groningen](#)
- [Almere](#)
- [Alkmaar](#)
- [Arnhem](#)
- [Maastricht](#)
- [Leiden](#)
- [Apeldoorn](#)
- [Delft](#)
- [Haarlem](#)
- [Amstelveen](#)
- [Nijmegen](#)
- [Breda](#)
- [Amersfoort](#)
- [all cities »](#)

[next »](#)

Dating by country

- [United States](#)
- [Canada](#)
- [United Kingdom](#)
- [Ireland](#)
- [Australia](#)
- [New Zealand](#)
- [Norway](#)
- [Sweden](#)
- [Finland](#)
- [Denmark](#)
- [Cyprus](#)
- [Malta](#)
- [Germany](#)
- [Austria](#)
- [Netherlands](#)
- [all countries »](#)

Source: www.lavaplace.com

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