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## **The morality of the objectification of women in social media**

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Thesis

Justice and Inequality in a globalized world

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# **The morality of the objectification of women in social media**

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## **Abstract**

Within this thesis, the morality of the objectification of women within social media is explored. First of all, the theoretical perspectives on objectification are examined through a feminist lens. It is found that there is a considerable debate within the scholars. Some are of the opinion that objectification is always morally wrong, and others believe that it is dependent on the context in which it occurs. Next, the criteria necessary for the context are developed and analyzed through some examples. Finally, these criteria are applied to social media, and it is discovered that not all criteria are met. This indicates that a negative form of objectification has occurred which can be harmful. The conclusion is drawn that the objectification of women within social media is morally unacceptable.

## I. Introduction

Throughout history, discrimination and inequality based on gender has been quite common. There are many contributing factors which support this system, including the gender wage gap and unequal opportunities. However, the objectification of women is an important factor as well (Jutten, 2016; Zurbriggen, 2013). Most philosophers and researchers that have looked into the concept of objectification don't bother to define it properly as it is often seen as common knowledge. However, there are some that do try to find a concise definition. Kant defined objectification as "treating a person as an object, in the sense of a mere instrument for someone else's purposes, and consequently *reducing* this individual to the status of a mere instrument" (as cited in Papadaki, 2010). Kant believes in the importance of humanity and treating someone as a mere means is against this concept. This, in turn, causes the concept to have a negative condescension. Kant applies this to the idea of sexuality and is of the opinion that once a person has been objectified by their partner at a certain time, it allows them to continue this status of being a 'thing'. He states that "sexual activity leads to the loss or 'sacrifice' of humanity", he does make the exception for monogamous marriage where sexual activity is allowed according to him. It is important to note that his theory allows men and women to fall victims of objectification, but Kant does recognize the dispersion in occurrences. Similarly, MacKinnon and Dworkin define objectification like Kant. Firstly, MacKinnon states that women are 'dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities... reduced to body parts' when objectification occurs. Dworkin describes objectification as the following: "Objectification occurs when a human being... is *made less than human, turned into a thing* or commodity. When objectification occurs, a person is *depersonalized*... those who can be used as if they are not fully human are no longer fully human..." (as cited in Papadaki, 2010). As can be seen, both agree with Kant that objectification occurs when people are treated only as a means. The primary difference between the authors is that MacKinnon and Dworkin explicitly state in their research that only women can be victims of objectification. They are of the opinion that gender is socially constructed and do think that someone of the female sex can be the objectifier. MacKinnon and Dworkin, however, then see their gender as male and vice versa. Objectification, according to Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin is thus quite problematic and should be a circumstance that occurs rarely. If this is not the case, they believe that we should fight against it.

However, not every researcher agrees with this outlook on the term. Nussbaum, for example, introduced seven concepts which are associated with objectification and if one of those criteria is triggered, she considers the existence of objectification. The notions will be

thoroughly explained later, but Nussbaum takes a broader approach by utilizing these. She does, however, challenge MacKinnon, Dworkin, and Kant, as she does not believe objectification solely has to be negative. She thinks that objectification could be positive as long as it does not undermine the person's basic capabilities and dignity. Papadaki (2010) has analyzed these three perspectives extensively and formulated the following definition: "Objectification is seeing and/or treating a person as an object (seeing and/or treating them in one or more of these seven ways: as an instrument, inert, fungible, violable, owned, denied autonomy, denied subjectivity), in such a way that denies this person's humanity. A person's humanity is denied when it is ignored/not properly acknowledged and/or when it is in some way harmed." The researchers that further study this concept often build on the definitions listed before, and either agree or disagree with them. To continue, the perspectives on whether objectification is necessarily a negative or positive phenomenon are divided. Some believe that it is always negative, others that it is positive, and most are of the opinion that it is somewhere in between. These viewpoints are frequently not connected and studied together except by Papadaki (2021). This research will build on Papadaki's work by taking even more authors into consideration and by analyzing their arguments. Next, my own perspective will be analyzed and formed with help of the theoretical perspectives.

After, this perspective and my conclusions will be applied to the usage of social media within our current world. During the past two decades, globalization has expanded excessively which has also introduced new technological developments and more ways to stay in touch with the world. The development in question is social media. Social media has had an abundance of positive effects and has altered our contemporary world. However, there are negative consequences as well. Davis (2018) found through textual analysis of two Instagram sites that female college students were often objectified. The women were often showcased without their faces, names, or clothing, and were treated as a sexual object. She continues on stating that objectifying women in the media through the male gaze, emphasizes the idea that a woman's value lies within her sexuality. Another problem which occurs within social media is self-objectification. Pan (2021) looks into the objectification theory which discusses that when women are consistently being shown that the female body is seen as an object and as an entertainment, they start self-objectifying. She continues to state that this is especially harmful within social media when celebrities and influencers post unrealistic images and therefore objectifying themselves. She found that women who frequently look at these posts, also often struggle with dissatisfaction with their own bodies. Social media and objectification are thus intertwined, not only as a means but it also reinforces objectification within other parts of life.

In summary, within this thesis feminist perspectives on the objectification of women will be analysed and compared. My own perspective will then be applied in the concept of social media and the objectification of women within this field. This thesis is structured around this research question: “Is objectification morally wrong and if so, how is this displayed within social media?”. This research question will be answered with help of two sub-questions. The first one is the following: “Where do feminist researchers stand in regard to the objectification of women?”. The second question is focused on the feminist lens within social media and is thus: “What effect does social media have on the objectification of women?”.

## **II. A theoretical perspective on objectification**

Within this chapter feminist perspectives on objectification will be analyzed. None of the researchers actually deny the existence of objectification. They, however, vary in the severity of the consequences and their opinions can be seen as a scale which ranges from negative to positive. Most authors that have been examined, however, fall in the middle and try to look at the phenomenon from multiple viewpoints. This part of the thesis will give an answer to the following sub-question: “Where do feminist researchers stand in regard to the objectification of women?”.

### *Objectification is morally wrong*

Immanuel Kant (1785, 1797) has laid down the foundation for feminist perspectives on objectification. The classic Kantian view holds that every person has human dignity and therefore we cannot treat them as a mere means to an end because that would be morally wrong. As has been stated before, by objectifying someone you treat them as an object and thus an instrument for your own purpose. This would go against Kant’s belief and would oppose one’s moral duty. Kant argued that the purpose of sexual activity outside of a monogamous marriage, was only sexual pleasure and would thus cause the one person to treat the other as a mere means to reach that. He therefore believed that this would cause objectification to occur. He also applied this to prostitution and stated that by exchanging money for sexual advances, they allow others to treat them just for their bodies and thus causing them to become an object. Kant is of the opinion that the prostitute herself is the person responsible for the objectification because she decides to sacrifice her humanity by offering up her body for other’s sexual desires. Kant, also, briefly considers the existence of men having multiple sexual female partners. He considers a relationship like this morally wrong as well because there is inequality in it. The women surrender their sex to the man completely, but this is not the case for the man

considering he has multiple partners. This in turn causes the woman to lose her person and is made 'into an object'. Kant believes the only relationship which can be considered morally acceptable in terms of objectification (so there is no chance of being objectified), is monogamous marriage.

From Kant's work the objectification theory was further explored. Two of those researchers are Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. MacKinnon (1989, 1995) and Dworkin (1989, 2000) have focused on sexual objectification and more specifically on pornography. They argue that objectification is a key problem within the subordination of women. The object-like-status of women is then, according to them, a direct result of inequality based on gender. By upholding the myth that women are naturally obedient, one will maintain the status quo and the system won't change. MacKinnon sees gender as socially constructed but does make distinctions between the biological sex. She considers the woman (gender) to always be the victim of objectification even when their biological sex is male. In her opinion, the man (gender) is always the perpetrator of objectification. MacKinnon and Dworkin continue that the system of objectification gets preserved by men's use of pornography in which a woman's role is that of an object for men's sexual pleasure. Pornography then is also one of the reasons for the existence of women's object like status. In addition, Mackinnon and Dworkin hold that "all women's consent to be sexually used by men cannot be true consent under the existing conditions of gender inequality" (as cited in Papadaki, 2021). Dworkin and MacKinnon are often taken together in their ideas because of the similarity of their opinions. The biggest difference between their arguments is that MacKinnon has a bigger focus on a legalistic defense of the theory and argues for a regulation or ban on pornography. Dworkin focuses more on philosophical claims, and more specifically on how it influences people's behavior towards sexuality and gender. Haslanger (2002) has taken a different approach even though she does support MacKinnon and Dworkin. Haslanger looks into a norm that is often used by 'objectifiers' to justify the objectification that occurs, more specifically this norm is called the assumed objectivity. 'Assumed objectivity' has four sub-norms which are the following (as cited in Papadaki, 2021):

- a) *Epistemic neutrality*: one must take a genuine regularity in the behaviour of something to be a consequence of its nature.
- b) *Practical neutrality*: one must constrain one's decision making to accommodate things' natures.
- c) *Absolute asperspectivity*: one must count observed regularities as "genuine" when:
  - (i) observations occur under normal circumstances, (ii) observations are not

conditioned by the observer's social position, (iii) the observer has not influenced the behaviour of items under observation.

- d) *Assumed asperspectivity*: one must believe that any regularity one observes is a "genuine" regularity, and so reveals the nature of the things under observation

Let us examine these sub-norms a bit more closely with an example of jaywalking. Category a) looks into the regularity of the occurrence, which this one person has seen often in his life and it is seen as a common action. Category b) would look into his decision-making, say the person does not want to jaywalk, however everyone in his life has been doing it and it is almost normal so to stay within the crowd, he does so as well. Criterion c) would look into whether it is only a certain type of person who jaywalks, if everyone from every social class, under normal circumstances (there is not a roadblock somewhere, for example) and out of their own free will does it, then category c is fulfilled. Lastly, point d) which examines the regularity a bit more closely and whether it is genuine. This can be seen as the person experiencing the occurrence of jaywalking in many different cities, streets and it occurs regularly. Thus, by using the norm, an objectifier might 'cloak' his influence in the society by referring to the sub norms of asperspectivity. Specifically, one might state that the inequality that exists with men and women, is due to the consequences of nature and not due to their own behavior. If this assumption is correct, it produces an unmotivated atmosphere and efforts to change the role of 'submissive' women will be pointless. This is due to the nature of the norm, the norm suggests that nothing is to be done and we cannot fight nature and the regularity of occurrences.

Haslanger, therefore, disagrees and completely rejects the norm of assumed objectivity. She is of the opinion that by assuming the norm, it will cause there to be negative ramifications for women. This is due to the unchanging role the object-like-status of women can take when the norm is accepted throughout society. In addition, it also leads an increasing amount of people to believe that the role of women is or should actually be submissive and object-like. Langton (2000) continued on Haslanger's research and agreed with her rejection of the norm of 'assumed objectivity'. However, she adds another reason for the rejection, which is the following: "it yields true but unjustified beliefs". The beliefs that are raised due to this norm (women are naturally submissive), are true but unjustified. She explains that the views within the world are altered to fit men's views instead of the other way around. Therefore, we have a world in which gender inequality is quite common and by accepting the norm, it promotes this way of thinking. This is in line with her ideas on objectification. She believes that objectification is the process where the world conforms to the mind/our beliefs. According to

her, men see women as objects for their own desire and when men have power (which is the case within our world), women are obliged to fit to that stereotype.

*Objectification can be morally acceptable*

However, as has been stated before; not all feminist researchers believe that objectification is completely problematic. One of those philosophers is Alan Soble (2002a, 2002b). Soble did research into pornography and the alleged objectification that occurs there. He is of the opinion that humans are simply animals, and that desires are part of that. He continues to state that humans have no inherent value, and therefore does not see any problem with objectification. With this statement, he thus directly challenges the classic Kantian view where all humans have value and dignity. He thinks everyone is vulnerable to objectification and can be treated as an object. However, because no one has a higher status than anyone else (because everyone is vulnerable to the same level), no one can be objectified in the classic sense and is made to be subordinate. He, thus, does agree that objectification occurs, just does not believe in the harmfulness of the phenomenon, and thinks that it is morally acceptable. Furthermore, there are some researchers who hold themselves in the middle of the debate. First of all, there is Green (2000), who argues that objectification is a necessity of life. She does admit that you should not view someone as 'just' an object but does believe that you should in some circumstances. For example, the friends in your life use your company for their own pleasure. Some researchers would suggest that this is problematic because they use other people as instruments for their own purpose. Green, thus, argues that we should use each other, either our skills, company or even bodies for sexual pleasures. Next there is Nussbaum who broadened the definition through the following 7 criteria in which a person is able to be objectified (1995). First of all, there is the concept of instrumentality which entails treating someone as a tool for your own purpose. The second category is called denial of autonomy, meaning that someone is treated as if they act on someone else's motive, often considered the one of the 'objectifier'. The next criterium is called inertness and looks at the treatment of someone as lacking in agency or in other words, when it is believed that a person cannot make decisions for themselves. Moreover, there is the category of fungibility which is when someone is treated as if they are interchangeable with an object. The fifth point is violability which concerns itself with respecting other's boundaries, or more specifically not respecting them. The sixth concept is that of ownership, which is quite self-evident: namely, when someone is treated as if they are owned by someone else. Lastly, there is the category of denial of subjectivity which examines whether the person's experiences and feelings are taken into account. Nussbaum

continues on to evaluate the consequences of objectification, which she does not believe to be severely negative. She argues for positive, and negative objectification, which depends on the compatibility with equality, respect, and consent. If there is mutual consent, respect and the relationship remains on an equal footing, she considers the context in which it occurs to be positive and does not see any moral issues with it. She illustrates positive objectification with an example of two lovers in bed: say that there are two partners in bed together, they will treat each other as “tools for sexual pleasure”. However, the partners consider each other as way more than that and don’t only use each other for that purpose. Their relationship is often more than that, and they have given their mutual consent and most importantly remain equal. Thus, she would argue that this is a form of positive objectification. Nussbaum and Green make similar points, considering they both believe that there are not always severe consequences to objectification. However, Green does not mention any form of consent that needs to be taken into consideration which Nussbaum believes is essential. For instance, if we consider two people, who are feeling bad and will use each other for their own pleasures (to make themselves feel better). Nussbaum argues that this is a form of objectification because criteria one is met. Green does not disagree with the fact that this is objectification but would promote this form of objectification as the two people use each other for their own purposes. Nussbaum would state that if they both had each other’s consent, it would be a form of positive objectification but otherwise it could be harmful.

Not every author believes in the existence of positive objectification, amongst those are Kant, MacKinnon, Dworkin, and Langton. Langton (2009) has, however, further worked on Nussbaum’s definition and added 3 more categories. The first category is the reduction to body which entails that the person is “treated as identified with their body”. The second one is ‘reduction to appearance’ which concerns itself with the habit of judging someone based on their looks. Finally, the third criterium is ‘silencing’ which would be regarding someone as if they were mute or lacking in speech. Finally, there is one more author worth discussing which is Patricia Marino (2008). Marino looks into the commonly acceptance of the morally wrongness of sexual objectification. She argues against this perspective. She emphasizes the importance of consent and the respect for each other’s autonomy. She does recognize that sexual relationships can increase the problem of objectification or the existence of it. However, she believes that if there is consent and autonomy, objectification will not be a problem. She also includes the belief of MacKinnon and Dworkin on how consent can never be true because it is given in a society where there are unequal institutions for women and men. She argues that it does depend on context, but that there is a definite form of consent that women can give. She

concludes by stating that there is nothing wrong with sexual objectification as long as the consent is given within the right conditions.

To summarize, the authors that have been discussed here all agree that objectification does occur within our society, but they disagree on the severity of it. Soble believes that objectification is not problematic at all, Nussbaum argues for positive and negative objectification, and Green believes that one can objectify someone else as long as you don't treat them as merely an object. Marino further works out Nussbaum's theory by stating that the context in which consent for the objectification, is everything. Then MacKinnon, Dworkin, Kant, Haslanger and Langton all disagree with objectification and believe that it is always harmful to women.

### **III. My personal perspective on objectification**

As is shown within the theory part of this paper, there is a collection of philosophers and feminist researchers that have studied the concept of objectification. Each of them build on or contradict each other to form their own opinion and evaluate which theory has the moral high ground. Within this chapter, the studies will be evaluated, but most importantly my own moral stance will be formed and examined.

Kant, MacKinnon, Dworkin, Haslanger and Langton all believe that the objectification of women is morally wrong. They give arguments through examples and also consider the consequences and context. Nussbaum and Marino discuss consent very extensively and argue that when consent is given one might objectify the other. Even though, this would then still be objectification, Nussbaum then calls it positive objectification. Marino states that the context in which it is given says everything. MacKinnon and Dworkin, in fact, also state that the context in which consent is given is quite important. However, MacKinnon and Dworkin look at the bigger picture and consider the institutions that play a role within this problem. They believe that consent can never truly be given, as women (and men) have been conditioned their entire lives. Expectations are set upon them and the institutions that are in place, will impact the ability to freely consent to anything. This can, for example, be seen within the sex culture: if a man pays for dinner, a woman is expected to have sex with him. If the woman then continues to go home with him, can we truly consider her consent freely given? According to Dworkin and MacKinnon, we cannot. She has been told her entire life that she should have sexual relations with him and therefore has been influenced in giving 'consent'. So, Dworkin and MacKinnon believe consent is never free, in any context. Nussbaum and Marino also share the concern for free consent but examine the context in which it is given instead. They specifically

examine what has happened in those times. So, if we bring it back to the example from before, Nussbaum and Marino would state that she agreed to go home with him and have sexual relations with him, therefore giving her consent. Even though, she might be objectified in a sexual way with her partner, she has given consent to this, and it can thus be regarded as positive objectification. In addition, he has also given consent to being objectified in this way and they ‘use’ each other as instruments, which according to Nussbaum is not an issue.

I, however, don’t completely agree with either of the stances. In my opinion, the institutions that are in place within our patriarchal society are of importance as MacKinnon and Dworkin suggest. However, I don’t believe that consent can never fully be given. According to Nussbaum and Marino, it is dependent on the context in which it is given. They pay attention to criteria such as coercion and age. However, there are more prerequisites that are of importance in my opinion. The following criteria need to be met for consent to be truly free:

- A) No coercion
- B) Appropriate age
- C) No power difference
- D) Cognitive awareness
- E) Informed Consent
- F) No commitment

Firstly, there is one which is widely accepted within our world. Consent can only be true when there is no coercion taking place. Coercion is the act of persuading or forcing someone to do something by threatening them. This can be applied to a lot of different contexts, such as sex. Within a sexual context, it can be defined as “tactics used following a partner’s refusal to sexual advances” (as cited in Pugh & Becker, 2018). To further explore this, when coercion has been used, someone’s consent is never truly free. If, for example, their lives are threatened, they might act or do something which is against their own will. The second prerequisite, namely ‘appropriate age’, stems from the age of the person giving consent. Depending on the context, the age of consent usually ranges from 16-18. For example, the age of consent for medical treatments in the United States of America is 18, but this might be different within other countries. However, what is universal is that the age of consent was issued to establish a rule for ensure that children are of an appropriate age to make the choices they want within a specific context. For instance, the age of consent for sex was issued to “protect children from abuse or consequences of early sexual activity, such as early pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases” (as cited in European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2018). When putting this into perspective in regard to the objectification of women or girls,

this should also be the case. If the girl in question is not mature enough to realize the consequences or is too young to understand them, their consent cannot be sincere. The third criteria is the presence, or rather absence, of power differences. An imbalance of power can occur in numerous ways, such as a difference in levels of ability, position in society or maybe function at work. A difference in levels of ability can be seen as many things, such as a caregiver and their patient where one might rely on the other for care. Position in society can be a factor through wealth, education or even citizenship (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2019). Finally, a function at work can cause an imbalance between a boss and their employee. Each of these instances, can cause someone to feel as if they are not able to say no, or feel that if they do there will be negative consequences. Within the last few years, #MeToo movement has grown and has broadened the reach for the stories of women who have been sexually assaulted. After the Weinstein scandal, it has focused a fair amount on the power structures that are in place, and what kind of behavior can be tolerated (Leung & Williams, 2019). Women tell and report the stories of the sexual misconduct they have experienced at their work and with it shining a light on the importance of the absence of power imbalance within the concept of consent. There is a good chance that consent is then given under certain circumstances or with possible negative implications in mind. So, when there is a power imbalance which is so prevalent that it might impact your life, consent is difficult to obtain freely. The fourth criteria is called cognitive awareness. It has two subcategories, the first one being intoxication and the second one mental ability. Intoxication refers to drugs and/or alcohol use. If a person agrees to something while their cognitive functions are impaired by alcohol or drugs of any kind, it cannot be taken seriously and thus consent cannot truly be given. In regard to the second subcategory, mental ability, it is important that someone is mentally able to give consent. If this person is disabled intellectually, or for some other reason mentally impaired to properly understand what it means to give that consent, it cannot be true. Therefore, it is important that the person who issues the consent is cognitively present and aware of what they are consenting to. Next, there is the criteria of 'informed consent'. Informed consent is important in many different areas of life and ensures that the person knows all the relevant information including the risks, benefits, alternatives, and possible consequences. Within some contexts, such as medical procedures, this is even a legal obligation. The patient must then make a voluntary decision about the procedure, and thus give their consent. When the patient has been given all of the information, it can then be considered informed consent (Shah et al., 2023). This is not only important within the medical field, but also when examining the objectification of women. When women consent to being objectified, but do not know the risks it might pose or cause,

they cannot have given it completely voluntarily. The final prerequisite is concerned with the commitment you might have to your consent. What this entails is the following: if you have given your consent at one point in time, there should be no obligation for this to remain the same and one might thus always retract their consent. This can best be illustrated with an example: if someone gives consent for sexual intercourse, but after a couple of minutes decides that it is not something they want after all, one must be allowed and able to stop and there should be no obligation to continue. It is important to note that this criterion is not relevant in every context of consent. For example, if you have already gone through a medical procedure where you have previously given your consent for, it is hardly possible to renounce your consent after it has taken place.

To summarize, after reading all the literature I find myself in the middle of the debate between Nussbaum & Marino, and Dworkin and MacKinnon. I do believe that the institutions we grew up with, have an impact on our lives and the consent we give to being objectified. However, I do still believe that there is a thing as consent that can be given voluntarily, and that objectification can thus sometimes be ‘positive’. I have identified six criteria that need to be met in order for the consent to be freely given. It is important to note that the impact institutions have, might lead to an involuntary consent. To resolve this problem, it is especially important to have prerequisites E and F. By allowing the person to have all the information and to back out any time, the institutions have a less meaningful impact, and their consent can be freely given or retracted. After consent has been given within this specific context, one might objectify the other without having to worry about negative consequences.

#### **IV. Can objectification within social media ever be positive?**

Social media has a multitude of effects on our reality and our society. These consequences are sadly not always positive. As has been stated before, objectification is quite visible within social media and does not only cause people to objectify themselves, but also others. In addition, during the past two decades social media has grown immensely, and studies have found that the usage of social media has a negative impact on girls’ self-esteem (Steinsbekk et al., 2021). As social media has progressed, the research into the effects has as well. There is a lot of research into the effects of social media and the dangers it might pose for our society. However, this research has not been linked to moral ethics and has not been related back to the responsibilities we have and what we owe to one another in regard to social media usage. Within this chapter of the thesis, the studies and negative effects of social media will first be examined. After, an evaluation into objectification theory applied to social media will be given

and the criteria of consent introduced within the last chapter will be applied. This section will then answer the second sub-question, which is “What effect does social media have on the objectification of women?”.

Barratt (2018) did a content analysis within the context of Trinidad and Tobago and found that social media can support and encourage gender-based violence. Furthermore, she states that online platforms reinforce the traditional submissive role of women and will directly influence our surroundings. She concludes that “the online environment is a force that breaches offline boundaries across the globe, thus its effect must be accounted for as we attempt to build the resilience of feminist consciousness and gender justice”. Barratt is not the only author to examine the effects social media have on women and girls. The European Parliament (2023) have also tasked researchers to look into this problem. They found that women and girls are more likely to experience negative body issues, gender-based abuse, sexual abuse online than men and boys. Furthermore, they caution for the normalization of misogyny and traditional roles, and the effects this might have on women all across the globe. Social media does not only have physical effects, but it also contributes to the mental wellbeing of women and men. As Pan (2021) has stated, women are often accustomed to being treated as an object and their lives being reduced to their appearances and bodies. This leads to them not only objectifying other women, but also themselves. Other researchers have found similar outcomes, for example Bell et al. (2018) looked into the self-objectification that occurs within Instagram. They analyzed eight six women’s social media use and found that within approximately twenty nine percent of their Instagram images they were self-objectifying. They also discovered that women receive more likes, or positive feedback, for pictures which fall under that category than for non-objectified images. This, in turn, promotes the concept of posting self-objectifying images which will ensure that the system remains in place. Similarly, Chen et al. (2022) executed four studies to examine the relationship between trait self-objectification and self-presentation on online platforms. Each of the four studies confirmed what the other said which is that there is a positive link between the two variables. To put into other words, women that score high for self-objectification, are often more likely to edit their pictures and present themselves in a favorable way on social media. They found that this inclination for editing/altering images for strategic self-representation is due to a need for approval. This can then be linked to the research done by Bell et al. (2018), because you will get more positive feedback if you post more objectifying images. This vicious circle in which women find themselves on social media, will most likely continue until a superior organization puts a stop to it. Therefore, a lot of authors and researchers suggest governments to regulate social media

usage, especially in young women considering that they are often the victims of this entire concept.

So, how can we apply this development and implication to the philosophical theory of objectification? First of all, let us examine MacKinnon and Dworkin's theory of consent. To restate, MacKinnon and Dworkin are of the opinion that true consent for objectification can never be fully given as it is given under the circumstances that is the patriarchal society that we live in. There are institutions which hold up inequality between men and women, and everyone has grown up with them and adjusted to those norms. Therefore, even though you might believe the consent is true and pure, it can never not be influenced by the values that are known within our society. When women post a picture on Instagram or any other online platform, one might say that she gives consent for people to objectify her within that picture. She decides herself to post the picture and for people to see it. However, this consent was also given within our society with gender unequal values and therefore the permission to objectify cannot be truly consensual. In addition, there has been evidence that suggests that women with low feminist beliefs will most likely post more of these "objectifiable" pictures (Feltman, 2018). She did research into the relationship between feminist beliefs and posting self-objectifying pictures on Instagram amongst 524 young adults. Her finding suggests "that feminist beliefs play a buffering or protective role whereas low feminist beliefs play an intensifying role". Kant can also be included within this line of argument, he states that if you have been objectified at a certain point in time, it can happen across all contexts and any time. When you take all of these studies together, you can see a vicious cycle forming within our gender unequal society. Women get objectified at a certain time within their lives because men deem it permissible. This continues throughout their lives and also has an impact on their social media usage. They start posting more pictures that are susceptible for this kind of usage. They start receiving more positive feedback, which causes them to post even more of this type of content. Due to them sharing pictures and images like that, the objectification by others and by themselves increases and makes it even more permissible. This will most likely continue to progress. If we now again, look back at MacKinnon and Dworkin who have examined pornography. They see an identical process happening within that field and suggest putting a ban or at least a form of regulation on this type of material. One might consider this to be necessary for social media as well.

So, how can we apply the 6 criteria of consent to the usage of social media? I will discuss this per criteria and examine whether they have been met to cause the consent to be voluntary within this context, making the objectification of women positive. First of all, there

is 'no coercion'. Even though, this prerequisite might be situation-dependent, for example if someone would force you to post something online, I would argue that it is generally not the case. Women who post something online do it with their own free will and decide by themselves to click on the 'post' button. There is usually no form of coercion. Secondly, there is the issue of age appropriateness. Most social media websites have a certain age which a child has to be, to be able to be online. For Instagram and TikTok this would be 13 years old. As we can see from the research mentioned before, social media has a negative affect on teens. One might thus wonder whether this age limit is too low. In addition, due to the nature of social media it is quite difficult to maintain this age of consent and enforce it. Next, there is the condition of power differences. This one is quite difficult to apply to social media, as once your picture has been posted it is open for the world to see. This includes people as your boss, teacher, family, which makes it quite difficult for there to be a direct power imbalance within this context. The fourth criteria is cognitive awareness, which is, again, quite difficult to enforce. If one happens to be intoxicated and decides to post something, there is no way for social media to regulate this. This makes criterion F even more important, but this will be discussed later. In addition, if someone is mentally challenged and posts something, there is no way for the social media companies to know about this and/or make regulations that are not discriminatory. Moreover, is it fair to regulate someone's social media usage based on their cognitive abilities? In my opinion, it is not. However, one might ask family members and/or caretakers to aid them in their usage and the type of content that they post. Next, the category which concerns itself with the information that is given, "informed consent". One must know all the facts and relevant consequences before being able to voluntarily give consent. If we apply this to social media, we might think about the terms and conditions we need to accept before using the application. Within the terms and conditions, all of the rights and prohibitions are displayed. It is important to realize that within the terms and conditions, the possible effects are not illustrated. In addition, as has been mentioned before research has found that women with "low feminist beliefs" are more likely to post certain pictures which have a detrimental consequence on their lives (Feltman, 2018). Research such as this, is not included within the terms and conditions used by social media companies and often women don't know of the existence of these relations. This will lead to an even worse effect, and the vicious cycle will continue. In addition, most people just accept the terms and conditions without ever reading them. So, one might wonder if it is even useful to have these terms and conditions in the first place, outside of legal reasons. Finally, there is the last criterion, namely 'no commitment'. On all social media platforms, it is possible to delete posts or your account. This causes there to be no necessary

commitment and one can always retract their previously given consent for that certain post to be online. However, it is important to note that once something has been posted online, people might have already taken a screenshot or have distributed it, which will then exist for a longer period of time. I would argue that this is not the responsibility of the social media company, but one of the possible consequences that can happen when posting something online.

To summarize, regarding the six criteria of consent: two have fully been met (A and C), three have been half met and can be seen either way (B, D and F), but in my opinion E has not been met at all. Category E concerns itself with informed consent, and according to research done by Rocha (2019), parents and teenagers seem to lack knowledge on digital media usage and the dangers it might pose. In addition, within schools and other institutions, people are often not extensively thought about feminism and its beliefs. There seems to be a lot of misinformation on this subject, causing women to have a low feminist belief, leading to them posting more revealing pictures which in turn causes them to be objectified. Therefore, I am of the opinion that social media has worsened the objectification of women and that women do not give free consent to this, even when they might believe so. Social media therefore has a harmful effect on the subject and deteriorates the progress women make within the feminist field. Social media increases the self-objectification and the objectification by others, of women, which in turn have a lot of negative consequences. This would include anxiety, a bad body image, depression and more (Pan, 2021; Steinsbekk et al., 2021).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Within this research, the feminist philosophical perspectives on the objectification of women have been examined. All the researchers that have been examined agree that objectification is definitely something that occurs within our current society. However, the severity of the consequences and the morality of the concept is up for discussion. Some mention a form of positive objectification for which consent is given, and others believe that objectification is always morally wrong. After examining all the standpoints, I conclude that I fall somewhere in the middle of the debate. I believe that the institutions which surround us, do have an impact on our lives and will change our reactions. However, I also think that consent can still be given voluntarily and freely, but only under certain circumstances. If we apply the criteria for free consent to social media, we find that social media does not fully meet all of them. We can conclude that consent within social media has not been given freely and can thus say that the objectification that occurs is not a positive one, but instead is quite harmful. So, the objectification of women in social media can, in my opinion, be seen as morally wrong.

## V. Discussion

So, within this research the conclusion has been drawn that objectification in social media is morally wrong. However, it still occurs and there is no reason why it would change any time soon. Therefore, multiple authors and philosophers suggest that there should be regulations and/or laws to administer the usage of online platforms. It is, however, difficult to properly execute this because it is a form of freedom. However, one could do research into this subject. We could compare teenagers who have had a regulation on their social media use by their parents, and those who have not. This could, for example, be a certain amount of minutes of screen time during the forming years.

However, the question that can be raised is the following: whose responsibility is it to regulate this use, and who can eventually be held responsible for it? One might argue that it is the social media companies themselves, but as previously mentioned, it is quite difficult to enforce the rules that are already in place. If these rules are expanded and/or modified, it can increase this difficulty. Can it be the responsibility of the government and/or international organizations? These institutes already have a responsibility towards its citizens/members, can social media be included within this responsibility? Someone else might state that it is the responsibility of the women who have posted that type of content. As has been stated before, these women post these pictures without actively consenting to the objectification that occurs, but should they not be aware that this happens and negative consequences it might have on our society?

Building on this last question, Feltman (2018) found that women who have 'low feminist' beliefs, often post more pictures that are susceptible to objectification. This, in turn, creates the vicious circle that has been explained before. However, this just illustrates the importance of feminist literature more and the way we should encourage everyone to learn about this topic. This is often ignored within most school curriculums, or only briefly touched upon. This creates a knowledge vacuum which is often filled with misinformation which promotes this vicious circle to keep going.

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