In March 2013 Amina Tyler, a young Tunisian woman, posted a topless photo on Facebook. Alluding to the rise of Muslim fundamentalism in Tunisia, she exhibited the following words (in Arabic) on her bare chest: “My body belongs to me and is not the Source of anyone’s Honour”. She was subsequently kidnapped by members of her family, stoned and drugged, among other niceties (Tayler, 2013). This example illustrates how an isolated woman purposefully displayed her naked body to highlight a political message aimed at contesting the social status of women in her society. However, from a (Western) feminist perspective, such a display of nudity could be viewed as a manifestation of sexual objectification, thereby reinforcing the notion that women can be reduced to their bodies. Further, although baring her chest revealed some power inasmuch as Tyler controlled the display of her body, the subsequent response from her family showed that Tyler was still not in complete control; her family exerted significant power over her body through physical violence.

In this chapter, we consider two interrelated phenomena: stereotypes and sexual objectification. These two phenomena, as they have been appraised in the social psychological and also the feminist literatures (Code, 1995), tend to be viewed as ideological tools favouring the oppression of women. We propose that, in addition to functioning as tools of oppression, stereotypes and objectification can be used by the oppressed to question existing power relations. Turning first to stereotyping, we consider how social psychological research may have neglected the role stereotypes can play in challenging social systems. We suggest that stereotypes can play a crucial role in mobilising ingroup members in support of collective projects aimed at transforming social systems. We then examine the parallels between stereotypes and sexual objectification and consider whether self-objectification can also serve this function, as seems to be the case in our opening example. Indeed, feminist scholars have suggested that self-objectification is a means for women to
reestablish some control and power in contexts where they are objectified (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Nevertheless, they argue that the outcomes of this self-objectification are primarily negative. We provide a more nuanced picture, suggesting that stereotypes and sexual objectification may sometimes be used to effectively transform power relations. To embark on this journey, let us turn first to stereotypes.

**Stereotypes and domination**

Stereotypes are traditionally considered as mental representations of the psychological traits possessed by members of social groups. What is the relation between social stereotypes and the social structure? We shall consider two perspectives here: one that portrays stereotypes as consequences of the social structure, and another that envisions how they may contribute to modifying the social structure.

**Stereotypes as ideological tools**

There is a clear relationship between the content of social stereotypes and objective indices of power or status. Among many other examples (see e.g. Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002; Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994), Poppe (2001) showed a correlation between the evolution of the Gross Domestic Product of various Eastern European countries and the ascription of competence to their citizens by neighbouring nations. However, this does not tell us what the psychological relationship between the social structure and the content of shared social stereotypes may be. Three forms of such relationships can be envisioned.

In the first, stereotypes derive from the social structure because they describe actual psychological differences that emerge between groups due to their social position (e.g. Jussim, 2012). For example, in the context of social role theory (Eagly, 1987), the distribution of social roles between men and women leads each gender group to adopt behaviours that are required to perform these roles. Sexist stereotypes incorporate these traits because they partially reflect the gender group’s “real” characteristics. Thus, women may be construed as less assertive than men because their social roles (e.g. as a mother) require them to be so.

In another perspective (e.g. Oakes et al., 1994; Yzerbyt, Rocher & Schadron, 1997), stereotypes serve to explain the social position of groups. For example, Hoffman and Hurst (1990) found that stereotypes could emerge in the absence of actual psychological differences between the groups because they account for existing divisions of labour (a socio-structural difference) between the groups involved (e.g. women are at home because they are more capable of taking care of children).

In a third perspective (e.g. Jost & Banaji, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001), stereotypes not only explain but legitimise the positions of social groups. For example, by describing southern Italians as “lazy”, the lesser prosperity of southern...
Italy is justified as originating in their lack of hard work. This function may play out not only for the members of privileged groups, who find solace in the belief that those who are below them deserve their social position, but also among members of disadvantaged groups. For instance, women may endorse benevolent sexist stereotypes suggesting that they are more relational and warm, but less assertive and autonomous, than men. Such an approach is also present in the Stereotype Content Model (SCM; Fiske et al., 2002). Proponents of this model argue that mixed or ambiguous stereotypes of high status groups (i.e. competent yet cold) and low status groups (i.e. incompetent but warm) justify the social system (Jost & Kay, 2005). By suggesting that all groups’ negative characteristics are offset by positive ones, they indeed convey a perception that no single group is blatantly advantaged or disadvantaged. This idea is at the core of system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), which argues that people have an inherent motive to preserve the social system and view it as fair, even if they are objectively disadvantaged. Stereotypes are a very convenient tool in this respect.

These three perspectives envision stereotypes as consequences of the social structure. The legitimisation approach has an additional twist: it suggests that there may be a positive feedback loop between the social structure and the content of social stereotypes. Indeed, when group members endorse social stereotypes that justify their stigmatisation, they fail to contest the existing hierarchy. Social stereotypes work effectively as a social glue maintaining the inertia of the social system. This is one of the many reasons why they have earned a bad reputation. Given that social systems are generally viewed as inherently unjust by the (often liberal) social scientists who describe them, the mental entities (i.e. stereotypes) assumed to hold these systems together are understandably vilified.

Marxian approach

It is possible to frame these perspectives in Marxian terminology. To a large extent, social psychological perspectives on the role of stereotyping in the maintenance of social systems, including social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), system justification theory, and social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001), have been influenced by Marx. The position of groups in the social system roughly corresponds to what Marx (1859/1979) called “the base”: the latter term referred precisely to relations of production. In contrast, people’s shared beliefs about social groups emanate from these positions and are part of the “superstructure” (i.e. the “ideology” and social relationships other than those based on production). For example, paternalism, which involves both an ideology and specific forms of relationships, emanates from the division of labour between coloniser and colonised, or between master and slave. In this view, the group who controls productive forces controls ideas as well. Hence, ideology distorts or hides reality, making differences in social status justified or invisible and leading to “false consciousness” (Jost, 1995) when an oppressed group endorses ideas and beliefs, such as social stereotypes, that are in contradiction with its interests.
When stereotypes serve utopias

Although the above description is the widely accepted narrative on stereotypes, it is not the only possible story. Let us take another angle: stereotypes help groups understand the world that surrounds them. However, rather than assuming an inherent motive to maintain the status quo, one can presume that these understandings may also justify social systems that have yet to be. Collective action on the part of low status groups, arguably the most important ingredient in any successful attempt at changing the social system, is predicated on a minimally shared understanding of the positions of groups in this system. In social dominance parlance (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001), stereotypes can be an important ingredient of hierarchy-attenuating ideologies, as well as of hierarchy-enhancing ideologies.

Second, when shared, hierarchy-attenuating stereotypes can be empowering as much as hierarchy-enhancing stereotypes can be disempowering. Coordination between group members, which is the basis of collective action, demands some common ground (Reicher, Hopkins, Levine & Rath, 2005). Thus, knowing that group members share the same view of the outgroup can induce a sense of empowerment and solidarity as well as form a precondition for actual power, given that a group’s power is predicated on its capacity to coordinate its members’ actions (see Reicher, 2008; Reicher & Haslam, this volume).

Appraised in this light, the relation between social stereotypes and social change involves a transition from hierarchy-enhancing to hierarchy-attenuating stereotypes. Mobilising ingroup members—that is, convincing them that this political project is worth fighting for—may often involve disseminating the stereotypes that justify this project. Rather than fulfilling an intrapsychological justification function (by reinforcing the belief that the social order is legitimate), these stereotypes may serve an intragroup or intergroup rhetorical function.

From ideology to utopia

In the Marxian view of ideology, ideology completely encloses the mind (Marx & Engels, 1932/1998). Ideologies are taken for granted and cannot be contested. Thus, in early medieval Europe, people took for granted that God created men and that, through the Catholic Church and its head, the Pope, He ruled their existence in a just way (Bagliano, 2006). Such a set of assumptions may have prevented social change. Given that an ideological belief is necessarily experienced as self-evident, perceiving an ideology as such demands an alternative worldview (e.g. in which God does not exist), or “utopia” (Mannheim, 1954; Ricoeur & Taylor, 1986).

According to Mannheim (1954), such a utopia, like ideology, is divorced from reality, but rather than being oriented toward the past and present (as ideology is viewed in the Marxian perspective), it is oriented toward the future. Nothing in the substance of stereotypes makes them more apt at justifying ideologies than at justifying utopias. The question then naturally arises: why has research on stereotypes focused on their ideological dimension and neglected their utopian function?
Automaticity and bias

Research on stereotyping has focused on the following issue: given that stereotypes are mental representations, how and when do they colour the impression of members of the target group (see e.g., Fiske, Lin & Neuberg, 1999)? When, meeting a (female) secretary, is a (male) executive likely to categorise her as a “woman” and to activate a specific gender stereotype that will inevitably fail to capture her “true”, idiosyncratic, qualities? And if the stereotype is activated, will the executive apply the stereotype to this specific secretary and actually perceive her in line with the stereotype? Ample research (Fiske, 1998) suggests that the activation of stereotypes is largely automatic: it is unconscious, unintentional and/or cannot be monitored. Cultural stereotypes (Devine, 1989) are an inescapable consequence of our socialisation (Bargh, 1999). They remain in the back of our mind, but they may “pop out” each time we are in the presence of a person we categorise in the relevant social group. In this view, stereotypes appear to be the ultimate weapon of false consciousness: not only does their content justify the position of the dominant, but all members of a society may use them unintentionally even when they do not endorse them, and even when they hurt their own interests. Thus, viewing stereotypes as automatically activated and as biased mental representations contributes to emphasising their ideological function in the reproduction of social systems (for a review, see Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000).

When stereotypes serve social change

How have researchers within these perspectives examined the relationship between stereotypes and social change? Social change can be said to occur when the positions of salient social groups within a society change. Thus, women’s acquisition of the right to vote, or their massive entry into the workforce in industrialised countries after World War II, can be considered as forms of social change as they helped reduce gender inequality.

We have suggested that stereotypes could—theoretically—serve a “utopian” function (i.e., justifying ideal social systems), but let us now consider some empirical evidence for this function. In our work (Klein & Licata, 2003), we examined the role of stereotypes in a situation of rapid social change: the decolonisation of the former Belgian colony of Congo, a process that occurred in less than two years (1958–1960). Specifically, we addressed the use of stereotypes in the speeches of the Congolese nationalist leader Patrice Lumumba, who sought to represent the oppressed Congolese people. Importantly, Lumumba nurtured a single political project during the whole period: that of an independent and unitary Congo. Using content analysis, we found that stereotypes were not solely the tools of the dominant insofar as Lumumba relied heavily on stereotypes during this period. However, the content of the stereotypes varied depending on the specific point in time and on the audience of Lumumba’s speeches. Thus, when talking to a Congolese audience (especially at the beginning of the decolonisation process), he tended to rely on classic anticolonialist
rhetoric by depicting the Belgians as ruthless oppressors and the Congolese as innocent victims. During the same period, Lumumba also visited Belgium and addressed Belgian audiences (directly and via the media). In this context, his speeches were much more moderate and emphasised the interdependence between Belgians and Congolese, sometimes depicting Congolese as infants in need of the help of the more experienced Belgians. A surface analysis of such discourse could mistake it for an endorsement of colonial paternalistic stereotypes. In our view, however, these stereotypes were used here to advance a revolutionary agenda. Lumumba knew that his project required collaboration from the Belgians, who controlled most of the colonial state and had the necessary technical skills to make the project work.

In this context, the use of such stereotypes cannot be considered as merely reflecting the automatic activation of cognitive representations. Rather, such stereotypes should be understood as rhetorical tools helping Lumumba achieve his political goals, here the “utopia” of an independent Congo. Specifically, Lumumba used stereotypes to mobilise his audiences into supporting specific forms of actions to serve his political project. When addressing the Congolese people, especially in the beginning of the period considered here, the success of his project depended on his capacity to raise an anticolonial consciousness among the Congolese who, until then, had not manifested much enthusiasm for independence. When addressing Belgians, the success of his project depended on alleviating their fears about his capacity to govern his country in ways that would preserve the interests of the Belgians.³

When considering the stereotypes expressed by Lumumba, whether they are accurate or biased is less important than their function within this particular project. They should be considered in the context of his utopia: thus, his anticolonialist stereotypes (Africans of the past as victims of European oppression) are a prelude to a desired brighter future that will see the liberation of Africans.⁴

**Stereotype expression as identity performance**

In this context, stereotypes are tales of social identity, with social identity conceived in a dynamic way leading to the achievement of the utopia. Thus stereotypes, like social identity itself, appear to be guides for actions (Reicher, 1996).

When group leaders express their view of the group to which they belong in front of an audience, they manifest what they believe the group identity to be. In doing so, they will often develop nuanced views of the traits composing these stereotypes. Some of these traits will be construed as stable and inherent to the ingroup, whereas others will be construed as the result of social pressures from a relevant outgroup. Thus, as in Lumumba’s example, ingroup stereotypes may incorporate a historical dimension: past, present, and future.

However, stereotypical expressions of the outgroup can also be viewed as a way to express the identity of one’s ingroup. When emphasising the moral depravity of the colonialists, Lumumba indirectly affirms the virtues of the Congolese. Here we follow self-categorisation theory’s assumption that stereotypes are inherently
comparative: stereotypes of a target group maximise distinctiveness from relevant comparison groups. Hence, stereotypical expressions of the outgroup can be viewed as a way to express the identity of one’s group, albeit indirectly.

Stereotypes can be expressed strategically without necessarily implying adhesion to the relevant representations. When moving to the laboratory, such a strategic use of stereotypes can be best evidenced when observing how people use stereotypes as a function of the communicative context, and especially the audience they address (Klein, 2004).

To capture the strategic or rhetorical aspect of such behaviour, we (Klein, Spears & Reicher, 2007) have coined the term “social identity performance”. The concept refers to “the purposeful expression (or suppression) of behaviors relevant to those norms conventionally associated with a salient social identity” (Klein et al., 2007, p. 30). The concept of social identity performance is rooted in the proposition that, depending on the social context, different identities can be cognitively salient (a central tenet of self-categorisation theory: Turner et al., 1987). For example, a female executive may define herself as a woman, as an executive, or as working for company X, depending on what is salient in a given context. Once a social identity is salient people are thought to automatically align the self with this social identity and conform to relevant group norms. However, depending on power relations, people may refrain from expressing some of these norms especially when they are punishable, even if they are salient (Reicher, Spears & Postmes, 1995). In early studies of this concept (Reicher & Levine, 1994a, b), group members were less likely to express adhesion to group norms (especially punishable ones) when they were identifiable to a powerful audience. This suggests that, over and above the more purely cognitive process of identity salience, there is also a motivational function providing room to “play” with group norms to accrue benefits for the group. This is the more strategic side to identity expression, or social identity performance (see also Barreto & Ellemers, 2003).

We have proposed that such strategic behaviour can fulfil two main functions: consolidation of one’s identity, and group mobilisation. The first function relates to the fact that people seek to verify their identity in order to attain a secure and stable sense of self. To do so, they need their identities to be verified by others (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003; Chen, Chen & Shaw, 2004). The second function relates to the fact that by expressing their social identities in specific ways, people may seek to induce their audiences to collaborate in the achievement of projects they associate with their social identities. Lumumba’s example can be readily interpreted in these terms: his use of stereotypes of the Congolese during the decolonisation of Congo can be understood to be aimed at influencing his audiences to support his political project (i.e. a unitary and independent Congo).

Thus, this approach allows us to contrast a purely cognitive view of stereotypes, depicting them as ideological tools in the service of reproducing the social system with a strategic perspective that views stereotypes as rhetorical tools used to mobilise audiences into supporting any political project, including those aimed at transforming the social system. Next, we shall consider whether sexual objectification can also be used in the same way for transforming social systems.
Sexual objectification and power relations

Philosophers since Kant have used the concept of objectification to refer to a mode of relation involving appraising others as objects (for reviews, see Gervais, Bernard, Klein & Allen, 2013; Papadaki, 2007). The concept has, however, been employed most notoriously in the context of gender studies (MacKinnon, 1987). One of the core goals of the feminist movement has been to confer upon women active roles in society and liberate them from their status as objects of male desire (see de Beauvoir, 1953). Sexual objectification is said to occur when a person’s body parts or functions are separated from the person, reduced to the status of instruments, or regarded as capable of representing them (Bartky, 1990). Although, like stereotyping, the concept of objectification defined in this way could potentially target many social groups (e.g. manual workers, physically handicapped persons, ethnic minorities), most research on this topic has focused on women, and we shall therefore limit ourselves to this category.

Although they are clearly distinct, stereotypes and objectification bear many similarities. Researchers have focused on the processes as well as the content of both stereotyping and objectification. For example, some researchers have primarily focused on the process of stereotyping (Devine, 1989; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Lepore & Brown, 1997; see Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000 for a review), such as attention to defining features, categorisation into a social category, stereotype activation, and stereotype application. Thus, in this perspective, stereotyping (and related self-stereotyping) is a cognitive process that involves appraising others by relying on mental representations of social groups. Likewise, much objectification research has focused on the cognitive processes involved in objectification (Gervais et al., 2013; see also Bernard, Gervais, Allen, Campomizzi & Klein, 2012; Gervais, Vescio, Maass, Förster & Suitner, 2012), such as how a local appraisal of a person contributes to attention (e.g. the objectifying gaze) and recognition of women’s bodies (e.g. reduction of women’s bodies to their sexual body parts) as well as trait activation and application (or lack thereof). Hence, objectification (and related self-objectification) may be considered as a cognitive process as well, but not necessarily involving specific content. For example, if, as suggested by objectification theory, self-objectification involves adopting an observer’s perspective on the self, this perspective may entail different traits or characteristics depending on which observer one has in mind. Considered in this way, the concept of objectification does not refer to the characteristics of the self that is being objectified, but only to the process per se.

Nevertheless, research on stereotyping process models has also been complemented by models of stereotype content (Devine & Elliott, 1995; Fiske et al., 2002; Katz & Braly, 1933). These content-based models focus more on the specific substance of stereotypes rather than the processes underlying stereotyping. Likewise, objectification could also be considered as referring to a specific content: objects have different features than human beings (Haslam, 2006; Nussbaum, 1995). There may also be overlap between the content of stereotypes and the...
content of objectification. For example, objectification can also involve ascribing the characteristics of an object to another person, such as depriving another of agency or of personhood. One of the most essential aspects of stereotypes of women concerns passivity (Glick & Fiske, 1996): women are often viewed as passive and dependent relative to men. Self-objectification can be considered one psychological manifestation of this stereotype. The ultimate form of passivity involves considering one’s own self as an object. Similarly, objectification is associated with stereotypes of hyper-sexualised women (e.g. the blonde stereotype, Rudman & Borgida, 1995).

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) precisely argues that in the male dominated Western culture, the female body is continuously evaluated and women learn to adopt an observer’s perspective on their own bodies. This leads to self-objectification with women coming to view themselves as men view them (i.e. as objects for the consumption of others). Fredrickson and Roberts theorised the negative consequences that such a self-view can produce: body shame, anxiety, and mental health disorders (see Moradi & Huang, 2008 for a review). Self-objectification can be beneficial to women to the extent that it helps them to navigate male-dominated environments in which physical appearance is a key to success (Wolf, 2002). However, such success comes at a dear price: it perpetuates a social system in which women are evaluated for their looks and may therefore contribute to disempowering them. Self-objectification leads women to focus on their own bodies rather than on factors that may advance the interests of their group as a whole, such as performing demanding intellectual tasks, or considering the plight of their group as a whole, thereby discouraging collective action.

Hence, it is probably safe to assert that self-objectification contributes to a form of false consciousness on the part of women. In support of this hypothesis, Calogero (2013) observed that women who self-objectified, either chronically or via an experimental manipulation, were less likely to engage in social activism on behalf of other women.

Whereas self-objectification has been at the forefront of social psychological research on gender for more than a decade now, its antecedent, objectification per se, has attracted interest only recently. Theorists have struggled to define exactly what it means to objectify another person. Indeed, this concept, which literally means treating a human like an object (Nussbaum, 1995), can be either considered a metaphor without clear psychological equivalents, or an actual psychological process, like stereotyping.

The philosopher Nussbaum (1995) described seven ways of treating someone like an objects: instrumentalisation, denial of autonomy, passivity, interchangeability, violability, possession, and denial of subjectivity. Inspired in part by this list, a variety of indicators of objectification have been proposed: using the person as an instrument to achieve one’s goals (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee & Galinsky, 2008), focusing on the person’s appearance rather than personality (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009) and on their sexual body parts rather than their faces (Gervais, Holland & Dodd, 2013), viewing a woman as a sum of parts rather than a whole human being.
associating women with dehumanizing traits (Vaes, Paladino & Puvia, 2011), or viewing a person as interchangeable with other people with similar body parts, regardless of their faces (Gervais, Vescio & Allen, 2012). Regardless of the criteria being used, this research has generally shown that women tend to be objectified more frequently and with greater intensity than men (see Bernard, 2013; Gervais et al., 2013 for reviews). Thus, this suggests that objectification is not merely a metaphor but, like stereotyping, can be evidenced through empirically observable cognitive processes.

Whereas the automaticity of objectification has yet to be tested, it likely contains both automatic as well as controlled aspects. For example, Bernard et al. (2012) found that people tend to perceive bodies of women similarly to objects by capitalising on a well-known cognitive phenomenon. The latter, the inversion effect, involves two stages: in the first stage a stimulus is presented either in an upright or inverted (top down, rotated 180 degrees across the x-axis) position. In the second stage, the same stimulus and a distractor (e.g. a mirror image of the original stimulus) are presented. The participant’s task is to identify the previously presented pictures. Earlier work on the inversion effect (Reed, Stone, Bozova & Tanaka, 2003) has shown that when the target is a human being or body, people recognise upright better than top down pictures. When the target is a physical object, people tend to perform equally well regardless of the stimulus orientation. Presenting a stimulus upside down disrupts the relation between the parts of the stimulus. If people attend to these relations rather than to the parts themselves, this presentation is likely to impair performance. Hence, these data suggest that human bodies or faces are perceived configurally, as “gestalts”, whereas objects tend to be perceived in terms of their constituent parts (analytically). However, previous research had not examined the impact of the targets’ gender on this effect. Bernard et al. (2012) did this using images of sexualised men vs. women and found an inversion effect for male but not female targets, suggesting an analogy between perceptions of sexualised women and objects. Note that this effect was found for both male and female participants. In a similar vein, Gervais et al. (2012, Experiment 1) showed male and female participants pictures of male and female bodies and, after each trial, asked participants to discriminate between two stimuli: a target and a foil. These two stimuli were either whole bodies or parts of the previously shown bodies (the foil was a slightly altered version of the original). Gervais et al. (2012) computed correct recognition scores and found that participants were better able to recognise parts of female bodies than whole female (but not male) bodies. Contrary to more overt measures of objectification (such as judging a female candidate for a job on her looks rather than on her skills), the present measures relied on perceptual measures that are unlikely to be under the participants’ voluntary control. Objectification may plausibly occur automatically much like categorisation and stereotype activation (Devine, 1989). However, the influences of variables such as power (Gruenfeld et al., 2008), global and local processing objectives (Gervais et al., 2012, Experiment 2), or system justification motives (Calogero & Jost, 2011), suggests that more controlled processes may modulate
Angry naked ladies

objectification (see Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000 for a similar consideration of stereotyping). Thus, the presence of such biases bears interesting parallels with stereotyping. In this perspective, an “authentic” perception of a woman would involve appraising her as a full-fledged person. Like stereotyping, objectification can be viewed as a curse that plagues us regardless of how we attempt to combat it, reinforcing a biased (and system justifying) view of women.

In addition, despite feminist scholarship suggesting that men are the sole perpetrators of objectification (Bartky, 1990), women are as likely to objectify women as are men (Bernard et al., 2012). Thus, women rely on a mode of appraisal of other women that seems to contradict their interests. In this view, self-objectification discourages women from engaging in collective action. These elements suggest that objectification, like stereotyping, can be seen as a cognitive device that serves to maintain a form of false consciousness in women: it places women in a passive role, as the victims of the male gaze.

Having said that, we should consider an apparent cultural shift noted by a feminist writer (Gill, 2008), but largely overlooked in the social psychological literature, from passive to active sexuality. We shall now turn to this evolution and consider its implications for the role of objectification in the maintenance of gender inequalities.

Cultural shifts in sexualisation: women as sexual agents

In the past decade, the advertising media has tended to emphasise a view of women as powerful and in control of their sexuality (Gill, 2008). Purchasing specific products has been construed as an avenue for female consumers to assert independence from men.

One of the most significant shifts in advertising in the last decade or more has been the construction of a new figure: a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always ‘up for it’.

(Gill, 2008, p. 41)

Showing one’s bare midriff or tattoos in suggestive parts of the body, is the most emblematic manifestation of women as agents of their sexuality, hence the term “midriff” to describe these women. These women “play” with male desire as the model in a Triumph advertisement stating “New hair, new look, new bra. And if he doesn’t like it, new boyfriend” (p. 42). Thus, these women seem to reclaim a sense of power. The term “girl power” is used to describe this movement.

(Jackson, Vares & Gill, 2012)

These women are not only virtual images in advertisements. Many Western teenage girls claim these identities (Jackson et al., 2012). Girls and women may
actually purposefully conform to these images and engage in behaviours that align with objectifying views of women. Self-sexualisation refers to any action taken by a woman that highlights her sexualised features (Allen & Gervais, 2012), and can be considered as a performance of sexualisation. Such a strategy is tempting because it carries the hope of greater power and more positive social relationships. For instance, a recent qualitative study showed that a full 33 percent of heterosexual women reported that they had kissed or made out with another woman at a party (Yost & McCarthy, 2012). The primary motive for such behaviour was to garner male attention. In a society that values agency, the midriff or hooking up with other women seems like an attractive ideal, much preferable to the mere sexual object.

The characterisation of this shift from objectification to self-sexualisation bears interesting parallels with the distinction between the cognitive and the strategic aspects of stereotyping. Engaging in self-sexualisation (which comprises a largely intentional and often strategic component) does not necessarily involve cognitive self-objectification. However, self-sexualisation does involve intentionally playing with behavioural and appearance-related norms that are traditionally associated with objectification without necessarily endorsing them. Indeed, the (maybe illusory) promise of “girl power” is precisely that women may become active agents in their own sexuality.

Nevertheless, this strategy is not without its costs. Women featured in “midriff” advertisements are beautiful, sexy, sexually knowledgeable, and perceived as always willing to engage in sexual activity. Thus, the control accrued to women through such images often amounts to presenting themselves in ways that conform to traditional (sexually objectifying) male ideals. Similarly, of the women that publicly “hooked up” with other women, many reported feeling powerful from arousing sexual desire in men and engaging in sexual experimentation, but only 16 percent of women reported these powerful feelings in the absence of explicit pressure from others (usually men). Despite the fact that some feelings of agency were experienced during the public same-sex sexual encounters, many women (64 percent) reported that they also felt sexually objectified and degraded during these experiences and were contributing to the sexual objectification of other women (Yost & McCarthy, 2012).

Also, such images focus on the body rather than other aspects of the women as an entire person. Conforming to such ideals involves acknowledging that sex should play an important part in many social relationships (e.g. professional) in which its place is far from obvious. Besides, such messages are meant to induce the consumption of products allowing female consumers to achieve these ends. Hence, one can wonder whether women who actively advertise their sexuality, while experiencing a sense of agency, are not actually victims of this consumerism. Work reviewed by Allen and Gervais (2012) further suggests that actively conforming to these images may be detrimental to women’s wellbeing. It may make them more vulnerable to sexual harassment and sexual violence. It may also make them more likely to be judged in terms of their sex-related characteristics.
Self-sexualisation and neoliberalism

Self-sexualisation can be viewed as a strategy of the weak, an individual response to lack of control, and reflects the old strategy of good looks that women have used to compensate for their lack of power. In support of this assumption, Allen and Gervais (2012) suggest that using self-sexualisation may be most effective for women in low status positions. In doing so, they would act consistently with their role prescriptions.

In such instances, women engage in individual forms of self-presentation aimed at garnering individual rewards (Jones & Pittman, 1982), a form of “personal identity” performance. To the extent that such behaviours correspond to objectifying ideals, however, they can be considered as perpetuating power relations (Klein & Snyder, 2003). Furthermore, they do so in a particularly pernicious way by conferring an illusory sense of agency. Note also that the examples of self-sexualisation we have reviewed so far are guided by purely individual goals (e.g. eliciting sexual attraction or attention from men). Indeed, implicit in “girl power” advertisements is the message that one needs to be more attractive or more sexually adventurous than other women. Such an emphasis on sexual attraction places heterosexual women in a competition with one another for access to men. The sense of agency conferred by the desired product may make women feel that they have an advantage in interpersonal and intragroup competition. It may thereby discourage women from pursuing group-based actions and undermine ingroup solidarity.

Such an observation resonates with research conducted by the French scholar Jean-Léon Beauvois (2004) showing that people are most likely to be influenced by a message to the extent that they feel free. This is what he calls “freely undergone submission” (see also reactance theory, Brehm, 1966; self-determination theory, Ryan & Deci, 2000). In research on cognitive dissonance (e.g. Guéguen et al., 2013), asserting one’s freedom before performing an unwanted behaviour (e.g. eating worms) makes people more likely to shift their attitudes to make them consistent with their behaviour (e.g. finding worms palatable: Comer & Laird, 1975). Since they were free, they feel bound and committed to the act: endorsing beliefs or attitudes that are consistent with the behaviour reduces dissonance. According to this logic, women who view their engagement in self-sexualisation as deliberate may be aware that this conforms to male ideals. However, because they have freely chosen to adopt these behaviours, they may come to endorse these ideals more than those of the past who conformed to male ideals out of (conscious) resignation. Beauvois sees this effect as an illustration of the neoliberal values governing Western societies. The widespread ideology that everyone is free actually makes people easier targets for manipulation. The empowerment that being an autonomous individual confers makes us more likely to blindly conform to cultural norms (Beauvois, 2004; see also Klein, 2009).

In Western market societies, there is a clear association between such neoliberal values and objectification. Thus, to a large extent freedom is thought to manifest
itself in the capacity to purchase any product one aspires to (provided that the means are available). Living in a consumer market may affect social relationships in such a way that others are perceived only in terms of their instrumental value (Fiske, 1992). Obviously, the sexualisation of women plays a major role in this process as it serves to sell products that assuage male desires.

To summarise this section, we have gathered evidence that sexual objectification, in its passive form or in its more agentic version via self-sexualisation, seems to fulfil an ideological function. Leading women to conform to male ideals and/or to compete for access to men, by emphasising their physical appearance and sexuality to the detriment of less visible skills and psychological traits, discourages collective action, and legitimises the subordinate position of women. We came to a very similar conclusion when inspecting the existing literature on stereotypes, but we found that, viewed through the lens of social identity performance, social stereotypes could be used to transform social systems. Can a similar argument be proposed regarding sexual objectification? We now turn to examine this question.

Can sexualisation be used to transform social systems?

Although objectification research is recent, feminist movements have sought to address the phenomenon for many decades. In line with the view of objectification as an instrument of male domination, many feminists have resorted to forms of identity performance that contrasted with objectified body ideals. For example, some feminists have sometimes deliberately neglected their appearance, whereas others appropriated male dress in an effort to break the glass ceiling (for examples, see Scott, 2006).

Thus, they have resisted these stereotypes and the false consciousness they entailed in a way that may seem resonant of how Lumumba rejected paternalistic stereotypes endorsed by the Belgian colonisers when addressing Congolese audiences. Undermining a depiction of women that justified gender inequality allowed them to advance their political agenda.

In this context, it is interesting to consider the case of two recent movements which sought to advance feminist agendas while engaging in forms of identity performance that to a large extent outwardly conform to norms associated with sexually objectified women.

The first example of such a movement involves the Slutwalks, dozens of marches that started in Canada in 2011 to protest the declaration by a Toronto police officer that “women should avoid dressing like sluts”, thereby seeming to legitimise sexual aggression against inappropriately dressed women. The (young) women participating in this movement marched dressed like “sluts”, effectively engaging in the forms of dress associated with sexual objectification. In doing so, they asserted their right to dress as they wish without incurring the risk of sexual violence.

Another example, into which we shall delve more extensively, is the Femen movement that originated in Ukraine in 2008. It was initially composed of mostly
female students. The goal of the movement was to advance the rights of women such as the legalisation of abortion and the prohibition of prostitution. The movement is particularly opposed to religious institutions (Islam and Christianity especially) limiting women’s rights. To do so, members of this movement engaged in spectacular actions against symbols of male domination. For example, one of its members started stripping after a sermon by the Pope while waving a banner claiming “Freedom for women”. In another action, Femen activists engaged in a topless demonstration at the London Olympic Games in 2012 against what they described as “bloody Islamist regimes” which were allegedly supported by the International Olympic Committee (The Daily Telegraph, 2012). They have performed dozens of such actions. The trademark of their action involves acting naked from the waist up and revealing feminist slogans tattooed on their skin, as noted in our introductory example.

These women seem to self-sexualise to advance political agendas. Like the midriffs, they intentionally display sexual parts of their bodies. However, this form of identity performance is quite distinct from self-objectification as described by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). Rather than being victims of the standards conveyed by the media, they actually instrumentalise the media’s thirst for exposed female bodies, and they do so intentionally in the service of a collective political project aimed at the betterment of the conditions of women. In a paradoxical move, both movements use self-sexualisation to restore the agency of women. Deliberately exposing one’s body to male eyes (or dressing like a “slut”), possibly conforming to their standards but doing so freely, appears as the supreme expression of women’s agency. Thus, by instrumentalising one of the main channels of their objectification (the mass media), these movements demonstrate that they are not objects but agents.

In this respect, such a movement differs from the denunciation of system-justifying stereotypes by Lumumba and other leaders of oppressed groups. Indeed, these women do not, through their behaviour, attempt to contest sexually objectifying images of women. Rather, these images are a vehicle for attracting interest to their agendas.

Is such a strategy doomed?

We have shown that by conferring an illusory sense of power, self-sexualisation, like mixed self-stereotypes, may contribute to a form of false consciousness. Should we therefore consider self-sexualisation and power assertions of the Femen movement as manifestation of another illusion? Are the Femen another example of these revolutionaries who, in seeking to combat a social system, actually maintain it? There are grounds for drawing such criticisms.

The Femen are all young and slender. Thus, by exhibiting their body, they may actually contribute to perpetuating cultural standards for women’s bodies. Their actions may seem to exclude women whose bodies do not correspond to these standards. Feminist writings (e.g. Wolf, 2002) have extensively emphasised that
such standards exert formidable pressures on women and contribute to undermining their opportunities of upward social mobility. Although there do not seem to be formal barriers to membership in terms of age or body shape (Huon, 2013), their “commando” actions involve considerable physical activity. Hence a form of (self-) selection as a function of physical fitness seems to be present.

Second, like the midriffs, the Femens clearly claim a sense of agency related to their body. Especially, they claim a right to use their body as they choose. Superficially, this may seem to bear a resemblance to the advertising discourse on female sexual agency.

However, we believe that a clear distinction should be made between the form of agency claimed by the Femen movement and that of the midriffs. Social identity theory (SIT: Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that when people are faced with a negative social identity, they can engage in one of two types of strategies. Individual strategies generally involve trying to upgrade one’s individual status by changing one’s individual position in the social hierarchy (e.g. by moving to a more prestigious group). Although changing gender is rarely a plausible option for women, they may symbolically relinquish their femininity by emphasising aspects of their self that are not typically associated with gender (Pronin, Steele & Ross, 2004). The theory also suggests that people may shift their definition of themselves: in some cases they may define themselves in terms of their personal identity, whereas in other contexts their social or collective identity is more salient. Specifically, when faced with a negative social identity, distinguishing oneself from other members of one’s own group to achieve a more satisfactory personal identity is a plausible option. Self-sexualisation, and conformity to the midriff ideal, can be appraised in this way. As we mentioned previously, self-sexualisation involves being sexier and more attractive to men than other, competing heterosexual, women, a strategy that undermines the cohesiveness of women as a group. It may also involve fitting in with other women while at the same time distinguishing oneself from other women because sexiness is a stereotypically feminine trait, but not all women are (or can be) sexy (Allen & Gervais, 2012).

In contrast, the Femen movement clearly pursues a collective strategy. In the SIT sense, a collective strategy aims at upgrading the position of the ingroup in the social structure. It can be implemented through social competition (i.e. directly challenging the group on crucial dimensions of comparison) or social creativity (i.e. collectively redefining the identity of the group in more favourable ways). By directly contesting male domination in different areas (e.g. religion, sports, politics, and so on), the Femens seem to have used the social competition route, which contrary to social creativity challenges the status quo. Their goal is to achieve not individual power, but collective power. Besides, their goal in exhibiting their body is clearly not to attract men individually, but to advertise that they are free to use their body as they wish, even if, paradoxically, this elicits the objectifying gaze.

The concept of social identity performance helps us appraise these differences. Whereas the Femen women use their naked body to present their collective identity as women to fulfil the goals of their movement, the midriffs sexualise their
body to advertise their personal identity as attractive women. Although on the surface the behaviours may appear similar, the motivations are very different; the former behaviour is directed at social change while the latter is clearly not.

Even if the strategy of the Femen movement is opposed to that of the midriffs, there is no evidence that this strategy is successful. Indeed, whereas the strategies of the Femen movement have helped them garner attention to their cause, it remains unclear whether media attention has helped them convey their message efficiently. In October 2012 a German movement announced that all its members would demonstrate naked to support refugees (Kalbe, 2012). This announcement attracted much media attention, but when the media arrived to cover the demonstration, the women were clothed. They wished to demonstrate that the media’s interest lies in the shock value of showing naked women rather than in conveying their message.

Second, it is doubtful that viewers are actually attentive to the message conveyed by the demonstrators. Nudity may divert attention from the message (Bushman & Bonacci, 2002). As an example, Glick, Chrislock, Petersik, Vijay and Turek (2008) showed that women advertising their sexuality by showing cleavage were perceived as less persuasive, at least when selling a “strong” product.6 Feminists (e.g. Murphy, 2013) have actually criticised the Femen movement for falsely believing that the media were interested in anything other than their nudity.

However, for the Femens’ slogans to have any effect, the demonstrations need to be available in the media in the first place. Competition for media space is particularly severe, and that places the Femens in a paradoxical situation. The belief that sex sells, which is commonly (albeit often erroneously: Glick et al., 2008) held, made it possible for the Femen movement to access the global media. These actions have made it possible to highlight feminist issues in ways that more traditional actions may have failed to achieve.

Conclusion

We have sought to consider two phenomena that have generally been considered as ideological tools serving to preserve existing power relations: stereotyping and objectification. In relation to stereotyping, we have shown that stereotypes can serve an ideological function, and that this function is reinforced via three of their main features highlighted in the social psychological literature: they are thought to be automatically activated (sometimes even when the perceiver does not endorse them), they are considered to be biased, and they ascribe a group’s current social position to stable dispositions thereby depriving groups of their history. We have suggested that this reflects a partial view of stereotypes. They can also be used by group leaders to define the ingroup’s identities in ways consonant with projects of social transformation and in order to recruit audiences into supporting these projects. The counterpart to the automatic activation of cognitive representations lies in the strategic expression of stereotypes, a form of social identity performance. Stereotypes can serve utopias and not only ideologies. It is difficult to gauge the
extent to which these tactics actually succeed in transforming power relations. It is obviously one of the chief tools political leaders can use to mobilise their constituencies against the status quo as it serves to define the identity of the ingroup. Work conducted in other contexts confirms that “self-category construction” indeed plays an important role in political mobilisation (see Reicher & Hopkins, 1996, 2001; Reicher, Hopkins & Condor, 1997). In Lumumba’s case, this strategy seemed to have paid off, in terms of achieving independence from Belgium at least (although his political career was short-lived after independence).

We then turned to sexual objectification and found that, in many ways, a similar analysis could be performed. Self-objectification seems to justify the existing social order and to discourage collective action. We also considered a recent variant of self-objectification, self-sexualisation, which seems to restore a sense of agency to women. We suggested, however, that to the extent that it undermines solidarity and group cohesiveness, serves personal goals, and conforms to sexualised male ideals, such self-sexualisation reinforces the gender hierarchy. We contrasted such behaviour with the forms of collective self-sexualisation endorsed by the Slutwalks and the Femen movements, which we consider as a form of social identity performance. It is still uncertain how efficacious such movements can be. By using sexualisation to capture the attention of the media, they offer their feminist message a chance to be heard. However, if audiences fail to grasp the irony of these naked women harbouring a right to use their bodies as they wish, the result may, as is often the case for feminist endeavours, be backlash.

In sum, both stereotypes and objectification connect power and identity. On the one hand, they seem to reflect the texture of power relations as they emanate from these relations. In doing so, they describe or point to the identity of their target (for example, a social group or an individual woman) within the existing social structure. On the other hand, through rhetoric and social identity performance stereotypes and objectification can be used to transform these power relations by articulating views of the self or the ingroup with a utopia. The success of such endeavours may depend as much on the creativity and rhetorical skills of minority group leaders as on the “objective” factors traditionally studied by social scientists.

Notes
1 We are very grateful to Manuela Barreto and Denis Sindic for their extensive, and constructive, feedback on earlier versions of this chapter.
2 Now the Democratic Republic of Congo.
3 Lumumba was sometimes portrayed as pro-Soviet or as promoting violence.
4 As clearly enunciated in the poem written in 1959 (Van Lierde, 1963) in which the history of “the Black man” is described as a “human livestock for millennia” who will now assert his pride and freedom.
5 “Soumission librement consentie” in French.
6 The product was a painkiller, which, based on charts shown to the participants, was efficient (70 percent more relief than a placebo). When the product was “weak” (9 percent more relief) the cleavage had no effect.
References


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Angry naked ladies


