

People See Sexy Pictures of Women as Objects, Not People

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Perfume ads, beer billboards, movie posters: everywhere you look, women's sexualized bodies are on display. A new study published in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), finds that both men and women see images of sexy women's bodies as objects, while they see sexy-looking men as people.

Sexual objectification has been well studied, but most of the research is about looking at the effects of this objectification. "What's unclear is, we don't actually know whether people at a basic level recognize sexualized females or sexualized males as objects," says Philippe Bernard of Université libre de Bruxelles in Belgium. Bernard cowrote the new paper with Sarah Gervais, Jill Allen, Sophie Campomizzi, and Olivier Klein.

Psychological research has worked out that our brains see people and objects in different ways. For example, while we're good at recognizing a whole face, just part of a face is a bit baffling. On the other hand, recognizing part of a chair is just as easy as recognizing a whole chair.

One way that psychologists have found to test whether something is seen as an object is by turning it upside down. Pictures of people present a recognition problem when they're turned upside down, but pictures of objects don't have that problem. So Bernard and his colleagues used a test where they presented pictures of men and women in sexualized poses, wearing underwear. Each participant watched the pictures appear one by one on a computer screen. Some of the pictures were right side up and some were upside down. After each picture, there was a second of black screen, then the participant was shown two images. They were supposed to choose the one that matched the one they had just seen.

People recognized right-side-up men better than upside-down men, suggesting that they were seeing the sexualized men as people. But the women in underwear weren't any harder to recognize when they were upside down—which is consistent with the idea that people see sexy women as objects. There was no difference between male and female participants.

We see sexualized women every day on billboards, buildings, and the sides of buses and this study suggests that we think of these images as if they were objects, not people. "What is motivating this study is to understand to what extent people are perceiving these as human or not," Bernard says. The next step, he says, is to study how seeing all these images influences how people treat real women.