



Objectification limits authenticity: Exploring the relations between objectification, perceived authenticity, and subjective well-being

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Five studies (total valid $N = 834$) examined whether objectification (i.e., being treated as a tool or an object to achieve others' goals) reduces people's perceived authenticity and subjective well-being. Participants who experienced more objectification (Studies 1a and 1b), imagined being objectified (Study 2), or recalled a past objectification experience (Study 3) felt less authentic and reported lower levels of subjective well-being than their counterparts. Moreover, perceived authenticity mediated the link between objectification and subjective well-being (Studies 1a–3). In addition, offering objectified participants an opportunity to restore authenticity could enhance their well-being (Study 4). Taken together, our findings highlight the crucial role of authenticity in understanding when and why objectification decreases subjective well-being and how to ameliorate this relationship. Our findings also imply the effect of authenticity in understanding various psychological outcomes following objectification.

Authenticity, defined as knowing oneself and acting in alignment with the true or genuine self (Harter, 2002; Maslow, 1971), is a virtue people are strongly motivated to pursue. A large body of literature regards authenticity as a personality trait and suggests that individuals with high authenticity exhibit congruence between their behaviour, internal states, beliefs, and values across contexts and time (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008). More recently, researchers have begun to recognize that authenticity as a psychological state varies in different situations and have found that feeling authentic is associated with positive psychological outcomes, such as greater well-being, life satisfaction, and self-esteem and lower anxiety and depression (Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013; Lenton, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2016; for a review, Sedikides, Slabu, Lenton, & Thomaes, 2017). Given the important role of authenticity in optimal functioning, it is crucial to understand when and why people feel more or less authentic. Previous studies have focused on the effect of intrapersonal factors (e.g., mood, power, nostalgia) on authenticity (Baldwin, Biernat, & Landau, 2015; Cooper, Sherman, Rauthmann, Serfass, & Brown, 2018; Kraus, Chen, & Keltner, 2011). In the current research, we aimed to extend the antecedents to state authenticity to interpersonal factors by examining whether objectification leads people to be less authentic. In addition, we further examined the role

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of feeling inauthentic following an objectification experience on subjective well-being (SWB).

Authenticity

The concept of authenticity has long been a prominent concern in humanism and positive psychology. Maslow put it, authenticity, ‘the reduction of phoniness toward the zero point’ (Maslow, 1973, p. 183), is the key determinant in self-actualization and optimal functioning (Maslow, 1971; Rogers, 1961). Similarly, Harter (2002) argued that a person’s knowledge of and acting in congruence with the true self are fundamental elements of good living. Such approaches have traditionally considered authenticity from a trait perspective, suggesting that people who tend to be authentic more frequently engage in self-congruent behaviour irrespective of the influence of others (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008).

Based on a person-centred approach (Rogers, 1959, Rogers, 1961), Wood et al. (2008) posited an Authentic Personality model that consists of three dimensions. *Self-alienation* refers to the discrepancy between conscious awareness and actual experience. *Authentic living* depicts the degree of consistency between the expression of emotions and behaviours and conscious awareness of physiological states, emotions, beliefs, and cognitions. *Accepting external influence* refers to the degree to which an individual is overly affected by the social environment. In line with the assumptions of humanism and positive psychology, empirical studies have shown that trait authenticity is closely linked to healthy psychological functioning, such as SWB, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and perceived meaning in life (Davis, Hicks, Schlegel, Smith, & Vess, 2015; Kifer et al., 2013; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997; Sheldon et al., 1997; Wood et al., 2008).

Although previous literature has focused on trait authenticity (e.g. Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008), recent studies have also begun to conceptualize authenticity as a state, with the latter defined as ‘the sense or feeling that one is currently in alignment with one’s true or genuine self, that one is being his or her real self’ (for a review, see Sedikides et al., 2017). Using the experience sampling method, Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, and Sedikides (2013) found that people can experience feelings of both authenticity and inauthenticity in their daily life. Moreover, authenticity varies more within persons than between persons (Lenton et al., 2016). Similar to trait authenticity, state authenticity is also related to multiple positive outcomes (e.g., well-being; for reviews, see Sedikides, Lenton, Slabu, & Thomaes, 2019; Sedikides et al., 2017). Therefore, an increasing number of studies have investigated the antecedents of state authenticity, including satisfaction of basic psychological needs, power, nostalgia, and identity integration (Baldwin et al., 2015; Ebrahimi, Kouchaki, & Patrick, 2020; Kraus et al., 2011; Thomaes, Sedikides, van den Bos, Hutteman, & Reijntjes, 2017). In the present research, from the perspective of interpersonal interaction, we investigated whether and how objectification leads people to feel less authenticity.

Objectification

Objectification refers to being treated or manipulated as an object to help others achieve goals (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Poon, Chen, Teng, & Wong, 2020; Wang & Krumhuber, 2017), which is a pervasive phenomenon in daily life. The philosopher Nussbaum (1995) considered objectification to have seven features, including

instrumentality (using the target solely for purposes or desires), lacking agency (the target cannot act, plan, and exert self-control independently), denial of autonomy (the target lacks self-determination), lacking experience (the target cannot feel pleasure, pain, and emotions), fungibility (the target can be replaced by others of the same type), violability (disregarding the target's physical well-being), and ownership (the target is commoditized). Vaes, Loughnan, and Puvia (2014) further generalized these characteristics into two dimensions, namely, instrumentality (i.e., the perception of people as mere tools for achieving goals) and the denial of human mental states (i.e., the perception of people as mindless entities). Based on objectification theory and the feminist perspective, many studies have concentrated on sexual objectification (regarding women as tools to meet men's sexual desires and ignoring women's psychological needs, feelings, and autonomy) and have found that sexual objectification has a series of detrimental influences on women, such as eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, depression, and self-esteem (Calogero & Pina, 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Holmes & Johnson, 2017; Loughnan et al., 2010; Moradi & Huang, 2008).

However, objectification occurs not only in the sexual domain but also in a wider range of groups and interpersonal contexts. For example, high-power groups have greater instrumental perceptions of others and greater disregard of the mental state of those who are not beneficial to achieving a goal than low-power groups (Gruenfeld et al., 2008). In terms of social contexts, studies have revealed that compared with non-work contexts, people tend to objectify themselves and others in work contexts (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021). Recently, some research has also explored the effects of working objectification on people's psychosocial processes (e.g., job burnout, belief in free will, aggression; Baldissarri, Andrighetto, Gabbiadini, & Volpato, 2017; Baldissarri, Andrighetto, & Volpato, 2014; Poon et al., 2020). In the current research, we focused on the impact of objectification on people's state authenticity and SWB.

Objectification limits authenticity

Objectifying behaviours indicate that the 'objectifier' values some characteristics of the objectified persons while ignoring other important personal characteristics, such as thoughts, feelings, and personhood. In other words, objectified individuals are included in social interaction merely because of their instrumental attributes rather than as full human beings. Previous studies have demonstrated that objectified individuals are perceived as more instrument-like and having less humanity (Andrighetto, Baldissarri, & Volpato, 2017; Loughnan et al., 2010; Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013; Vaes et al., 2014).

More importantly, when people were objectified, they also perceived themselves as less warm, competent, human-like, and more object-like (Loughnan, Baldissarri, Spaccatini, & Elder, 2017). Thus, objectified people experience less human mental states related to autonomy and subjectivity. For example, Baldissarri et al. (2017) found that participants who were engaged in or recalled tasks with objectification characteristics (e.g., repetitive, other-directed, and fragmented) reported lower levels of belief in free will than those who were not involved in these tasks. Moreover, objectified people had a stronger tendency to conform to others' opinions (Baldissarri, Andrighetto, Bernardo, & Annoni, 2020). These findings suggest that in objectifying situations, people usually cannot behave as a full human being, and then they might experience less authenticity at that moment.

Additionally, the instrumental aspects that 'objectifiers' value may not be compatible with the self-concept of objectified people. When objectified people are asked to self-perceive and behave in self-objectifying way, they may feel inauthentic. For example,

perceived societal emphasis on appearance negatively predicted women's authenticity (Huang, Teng, & Yang, 2021). Finally, in the process of objectification, since objectified people are merely manipulated as instruments, they lack a sense of control and autonomy (Poon et al., 2020). In other words, people who suffer from objectification are unable to freely express their needs, thoughts and will or to regulate their actions autonomously. According to self-determination theory (SDT), autonomy is an essential precondition for authenticity (Ryan & Deci, 2004, 2017; Ryan & Ryan, 2019). When people act with spontaneity and interest, they experience authenticity. For example, diary studies have demonstrated that satisfaction of the need for autonomy is positively associated with state authenticity (Heppner et al., 2008; Thomaes et al., 2017). Therefore, we proposed that people would feel less authentic following objectification.

The implications of authenticity for SWB

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2004) and psychological theory (Harter, 2002, 2012) argue that authenticity has significant implications for SWB. A large number of studies support this notion, demonstrating that both trait and state authenticity consistently predict SWB (e.g., Heppner et al., 2008; Kraus et al., 2011; Lenton et al., 2013; Sheldon et al., 1997; Wood et al., 2008). The positive relationship between authenticity and SWB was also replicated in adolescent samples, with perceived authenticity mediating the relationship between needs satisfaction and SWB (Thomaes et al., 2017). In contrast, perceived inauthenticity was positively associated with psychological dysfunction, such as negative emotions, anxiety, and depression (Lenton et al., 2013; Sheldon et al., 1997). Therefore, we propose that objectification lowers people's perceived authenticity and causes them to experience a lower level of SWB.

Since we suggest that perceived authenticity plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between objectification and SWB, restoring objectified people's authenticity can buffer the negative effect of objectification on SWB. Prior work has revealed that authenticity as a psychological resource counteracts many adverse effects of social threats (e.g., social exclusion, interpersonal conflict; Gino, Sezer, & Huang, 2020; Wickham, Williamson, Beard, Kobayashi, & Hirst, 2016). Thus, we propose that authenticity could attenuate the negative effect of objectification on SWB. That is, when the psychological authenticity of objectified people is evoked, they perceive a greater level of SWB.

The present study

The present research examined whether objectification reduces perceived authenticity and SWB and whether authenticity mediates the relationship between objectification and SWB (Studies 1a–3). In addition, we investigated whether restoring authenticity could effectively counteract the effect of objectification on SWB (Study 4). In each of the studies, we measured participants' chronic experiences of objectification (Studies 1a and 1b) or experimentally induced situational feelings of objectification (Studies 2–3) and then assessed perceived authenticity and SWB (Studies 1a–3). In Study 4, we manipulated participants' perceived authenticity to test whether experimentally inducing objectified participants' authenticity could increase their SWB. Two studies were pre-registered (Study 2: <https://aspredicted.org/jw97p.pdf>; Study 3: <https://aspredicted.org/j6pf2.pdf>). All studies provide data and materials on OSF (https://osf.io/ag94k/?view_only=e946a4a018e74e62b64badec3a03cb3a).

Study 1a

Study 1a aimed to test the relationship between objectification, perceived authenticity, and SWB in the workplace. We expected that objectification at work would negatively predict authenticity and SWB in the workplace. Moreover, we expected to find a mediation of authenticity in the relationship between objectification and SWB in the workplace.

Method

Participants

A G*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2007) showed that at least 84 participants were needed to detect a medium effect size ($r = .30$) for a correlational study with a power of .80 ($\alpha = .05$). We recruited 131 full-time employees through an online recruiting platform (65 men, 66 women; $M_{age} = 28.62$, $SD = 5.50$). They received CN¥ 4.5 as compensation.

Measures

Objectification. Participants rated seven statements about how much they felt objectified by their leader or colleagues (adapted from Belmi & Schroeder, 2020; $\alpha_{superior} = .80$, $\alpha_{colleagues} = .86$). Example items were ‘My leader (colleagues) value(s) me for what I can do for him/her’ and ‘My leader (colleagues) treat(s) me as though I am an object’ (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*). We computed objectification by summing the standardized scores for two subscales.

Authenticity at work. Authenticity was measured with the Individual Authenticity Measure at Work (IAM Work; Van den Bosch & Taris, 2014). The scale has 12 items ($\alpha = .86$) and three dimensions: self-alienation (e.g., ‘At work, I feel out of touch with the “real me”’), authentic living (e.g., ‘At work, I always stand by what I believe in’), and accepting external influence (e.g., ‘At work, I am strongly influenced by the opinions of others’). Responses ranged from 1 (*does not describe me at all*) to 7 (*describes me very well*).

SWB at work. We chose two scales, overall job satisfaction and workplace well-being, to assess SWB at work. Overall job satisfaction was assessed by 6 items (e.g., ‘I feel fairly well satisfied with my present job’; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; Brayfield & Rothe, 1951; $\alpha = .92$). Workplace well-being was measured by 9 items (e.g., ‘I attach lots of value to my work’; ‘My job provides ample scope for career growth’; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; Pradhan & Hati, 2019; $\alpha = .93$). We computed well-being at work by summing the standardized job satisfaction and workplace well-being scores.

Finally, participants reported demographic information, including age, gender, and subjective socioeconomic status (SSS, Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000).

Results and discussion

As expected, objectification was negatively correlated with authenticity ($r = -.37$, $p < .001$) and SWB at work ($r = -.43$, $p < .001$). Authenticity was positively related to SWB at work ($r = .49$, $p < .001$).

Next, a multiple linear regression analysis found that after controlling for demographic variables, objectification was negatively associated with authenticity ($b = -2.72$, $t = -4.66$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-3.88, -1.57]) and well-being at work ($b = -5.07$, $t = -5.39$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.69, -.32]).

A bootstrapping mediation analysis with 5000 iterations was conducted to test whether the effect of objectification on SWB at work was mediated by authenticity using the PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2013). A significant indirect effect of authenticity was observed because the 95% confidence interval did not include zero ($b_{indirect\ effect} = -.16$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [-.30, -.08]) (see Figure 1). The direct effect was also significant ($b_{direct\ effect} = -.34$, $SE = .09$, 95% CI [-.53, -.16]).

Study 1a provided initial empirical support for the prediction that employees who experienced more objectification in the workplace felt less authenticity, a perception that was related to reporting a lower level of SWB at work. The results are in line with previous findings showing that organizational dehumanization perceptions decreased employees' job satisfaction and affective commitment, and increased emotional exhaustion (Caesens et al., 2018; Stinglhamber et al., 2021). Moreover, this study showed that authenticity mediates the relationship between objectification and SWB at work. This implies that, in part, objectification leads people to perceive lower SWB, which seems to be related to the extent to which people feel that they are in alignment with the true or genuine self. Since objectification is not limited to the workplace, Study 1b examined the relationships of these variables in the academic field.

Study 1b

The purpose of this study was to conceptually replicate Study 1a by examining the relationship between objectification, perceived authenticity, and SWB in the academic setting. We expected that objectification in the academic setting would be negatively related to graduate students' authenticity and academic SWB. Moreover, authenticity could mediate the link between objectification and SWB.

Method

Participants

As in Study 1a, a G*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2007) showed that at least 84 participants were needed to detect a medium effect size ($r = .30$) for a correlational study with a power of .80 ($\alpha = .05$). We sampled 170 graduate students by distributing survey links

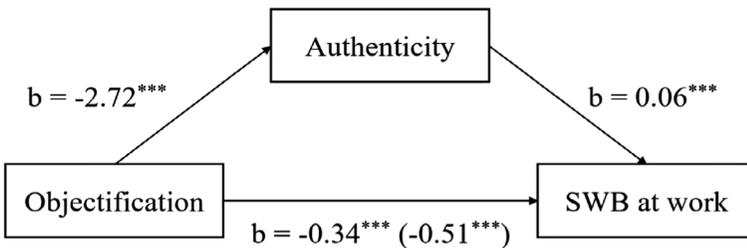


Figure 1. Authenticity mediated the effect of objectification on SWB at work (Study 1a). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

through university online forums or social media like WeChat. Participants received CN¥5 as compensation. Twenty-one participants who did not pass the attention checks (e.g., 'For this question, please choose 2') were excluded from the analysis. The final sample included 149 participants (18 men, 131 women, $M_{age} = 24.73$, $SD = 2.57$).

Measures

Objectification. Participants rated how much they felt objectified by their supervisor or students in the same lab (adapted from Belmi & Schroeder, 2020; $\alpha_{tutor} = .93$, $\alpha_{students} = .87$). Example items were 'My supervisor (fellow students in the lab) value(s) me for what I can do for him/her' and 'My supervisor (fellow students in the lab) treat(s) me as though I am an object' (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*). We computed objectification by summing the standardized scores for two subscales.

Authenticity. We adapted IAM work (Van den Bosch & Taris, 2014) to measure authenticity in the academic context. The scale has 12 items ($\alpha = .78$) and three dimensions: self-alienation (e.g., 'In the academic context, I feel out of touch with the "real me"'), authentic living (e.g., 'In the academic context, I always stand by what I believe in'), and accepting external influence (e.g., 'In the academic context, I am strongly influenced by the opinions of others') (1 = *does not describe me at all* to 7 = *describes me very well*).

Academic SWB. We adapted two widely used and acknowledged questionnaires to assess SWB in the academic context. First, the five-item Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) was contextualized in the academic setting and used to assess current satisfaction in academic life (e.g., 'I am satisfied with my academic life'; 1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; $\alpha = .87$). Second, the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) was used to assess the frequency of the experienced affect in academic life (1 = *very slightly or not at all*; 5 = *extremely*; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The PA scale includes 10 items, such as 'interested' and 'excited' ($\alpha = .86$), and the NA scale includes 10 items, such as 'distressed' and 'upset' ($\alpha = .88$). We computed SWB by summing the standardized adapted SWLS and PA scores and then subtracting the standardized NA score (Sheldon et al., 1997).

Finally, participants reported some demographic information as in Study 1a.

Results and discussion

As expected, objectification was negatively correlated with authenticity ($r = -.48$, $p < .001$) and academic SWB ($r = -.48$, $p < .001$). Authenticity was positively related with academic SWB ($r = .75$, $p < .001$).

Next, a multiple linear regression analysis found that after controlling for demographic variables, objectification was negatively associated with authenticity ($b = -2.37$, $t = -6.35$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-3.10, -1.63]) and academic SWB ($b = -.60$, $t = -6.31$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.79, -.42]).

A bootstrapping mediation analysis revealed that a significant indirect effect of authenticity was observed because the 95% confidence interval did not include zero

($b_{indirect\ effect} = -.38$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI $[-.52, -.26]$) (see Figure 2). The direct effect was also significant ($b_{direct\ effect} = -.22$, $SE = .08$, 95% CI $[-.39, -.06]$).

Study 1b replicated Study 1a, again showing that graduate students who experience more objectification in the academic context perceive less authenticity and lower levels of academic SWB and that authenticity mediates the relationship between objectification and academic SWB. Through Studies 1a and 1b, we identified the relationships among objectification, authenticity, and SWB across different groups and contexts. To determine the causal role that objectification plays in perceived authenticity and SWB, we decided to implement an experimental design.

Study 2

In Study 2, we experimentally addressed the influence of objectification on the perceived authenticity and state SWB of the participants. Specifically, we expected that participants in the objectification condition would report lower levels of authenticity and SWB than participants in the non-objectification condition. Additionally, we tested the mediational effect of perceived authenticity on the relationship between objectification and SWB.

Method

Participants

To determine the required sample size, we conducted a power analysis using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007). The effect size (η_p^2) in previous research on objectification and aggression was .07 (Poon et al., 2019, Experiment 2). Thus, we need 107 participants to achieve 80% power ($1 - \beta$) at a .05 alpha level ($\alpha = .05$). We recruited 130 undergraduate students who participated in the experiment online through a recruiting platform (57 men, 73 women; $M_{age} = 20.83$, $SD = 1.75$). They received CN¥ 4.5 as compensation. Sixty-eight participants were assigned to the objectification condition, whereas 62 participants were assigned to the non-objectification condition.

Procedure and materials

All participants completed the experiment online via the Qualtrics survey system. They were told that the aim of this survey was to investigate people's imagination.

After providing informed consent, participants completed the objectification manipulation (Poon et al., 2020, Experiment 2). They imagined that they were junior

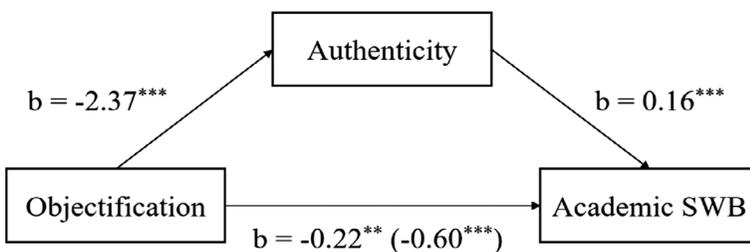


Figure 2. Authenticity mediated the effect of objectification on Academic SWB (Study 1b) * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

undergraduate students working as interns at a company. In the objectification condition, the participants imagined that their classmates only treated them as a tool to complete the course assignment and acquire good grades. At the same time, their superiors at the internship company asked them to do repetitive work to reduce workload and did not care about their thoughts and feelings. In the non-objectification condition, the participants imagined that they and their classmates listened to each other's ideas and opinions and worked together to complete the course assignments. In addition, their supervisor at the company often provided useful advice at work and listened to their thoughts and wishes. Then, participants completed three manipulation check items: 'I feel objectified', 'I feel like I am being treated as an object', and 'People treat me as a tool' (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .88$).

The participants subsequently completed an 8-item state authenticity scale adapted from Authentic Personality Questionnaire (Dormanen, Sanders, Maffly-Kipp, Smith, & Vess, 2020). Example items include 'Right now, I feel alienated from myself' and 'Right now, I am being true to myself' (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very*). The scores were averaged to form a composite of state authenticity ($\alpha = .93$).

Next, we assessed state SWB with two scales measuring positive and negative affect and life satisfaction. Positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA) were assessed using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they experienced these feelings right now. Alphas for PA and NA were .88 and .93, respectively. Life satisfaction was measured with the five-item Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985; $\alpha = .87$). We computed state SWB by summing the standardized SWLS and PA scores and then subtracting the standardized NA score (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Finally, participants reported demographic information.

Results and discussion

Manipulation check

An independent-samples *t* test revealed that participants in the objectification condition ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.32$) reported feeling more objectified than participants in the non-objectification condition ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.09$), $t(128) = 10.30$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.81$.

State authenticity

Using an ANCOVA (control variables: age, gender, and SSS), we found that participants in the objectification condition ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.18$) felt less authentic than in the non-objectification condition ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.17$), $F(1, 125) = 18.60$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$.

State SWB

Participants in the objectification condition ($M = -1.07$, $SD = 2.08$) reported lower levels of state SWB than those in the non-objectification condition ($M = 1.18$, $SD = 2.18$), $F(1, 125) = 39.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .24$.

Mediation

An analysis with the PROCESS macro (model 4) for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) was conducted to test the mediating role of state authenticity. The result showed that the indirect effect was significant ($b_{indirect\ effect} = -1.03$, $SE = .28$, 95% CI [-1.64, -.53]), and the direct effect was significant ($b_{direct\ effect} = -1.25$, $SE = .30$, 95% CI [-1.84, -.67]) (see Figure 3). These findings indicated that state authenticity mediates the relationship between objectification and state SWB.

Study 2 provided additional experimental evidence supporting the prediction that participants who imagine an objectification experience feel less authenticity and SWB compared with those who imagine a non-objectification experience. Moreover, reduced authenticity could account for the effect of objectification on state SWB. To further enhance the robustness of the findings of Study 2, we adopted a new method for objectification manipulation.

Study 3

Study 3 aimed to conceptually replicate Study 2 with a non-hypothetical manipulation of objectification in which participants were asked to recall an objectification experience. Consistent with the hypotheses of Study 2, we predicted that participants in the objectification condition would report lower levels of authenticity and SWB than participants in the non-objectification condition. Additionally, authenticity would mediate the link between objectification and SWB.

Method

Participants

Based on the effect size of previous studies ($\eta_p^2 = .05$; Poon et al., 2020, Experiment 4), the power analysis revealed that 152 participants were required to detect achieve 80% power ($1 - \beta$) at a .05 alpha level. We recruited 180 full-time employees who participated in the experiment online through a recruiting platform (80 men, 100 women; $M_{age} = 28.58$, $SD = 5.44$). They received CN¥ 4.5 as compensation. Eighty-one participants were assigned to the objectification condition, whereas 99 participants were assigned to the non-objectification condition.

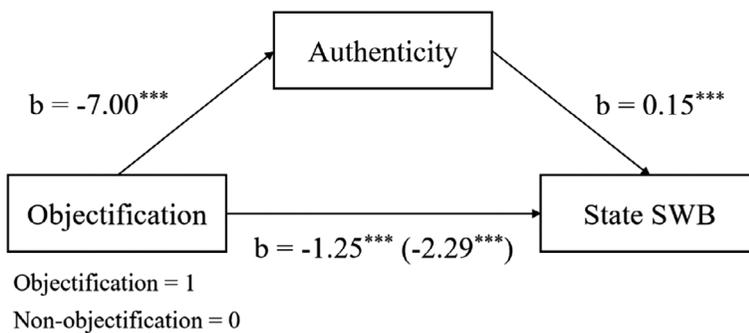


Figure 3. Authenticity mediated the effect of objectification on state SWB (Study 2). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Procedure and materials

All participants completed the experiment online via the Qualtrics survey system. They were told that the aim of the study was to explore how people remember and reflect on events from their past.

After providing informed consent, participants completed the objectification manipulation (Poon et al., 2020, Experiment 4). Participants in the objectification condition were asked to recall a particular incident of objectification. In contrast, participants in the non-objectification condition recalled their last visit to a supermarket or grocery store. Subsequently, participants responded to the same manipulation check items as in Study 2 ($\alpha = .94$). Participants then completed the state authenticity scale as in Study 2 ($\alpha = .87$) and the same state SWB measure as in Study 2 ($\alpha_{PA} = .86$; $\alpha_{NA} = .90$; $\alpha_{SWLS} = .86$). Finally, the participants reported demographic information.

Results and discussion

Manipulation check

An independent-samples *t* test revealed that participants in the objectification condition ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 1.08$) reported feeling more objectified than participants in the non-objectification condition ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.07$), $t(178) = 21.35$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 3.20$.

State authenticity

Using an ANCOVA (control variables: age, gender, and SSC), we found that participants in the objectification condition ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.24$) felt less authentic than those in the non-objectification condition ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 1.00$), $F(1, 175) = 27.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$.

State SWB

Participants in the objectification condition ($M = -1.11$, $SD = 1.81$) reported lower levels of state SWB than those in the non-objectification condition ($M = .91$, $SD = 1.90$), $F(1, 175) = 47.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$.

Mediation

A bootstrapping mediation analysis with 5000 iterations was conducted to test whether the effect of objectification on state SWB was mediated by authenticity using the PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2013). A significant indirect effect of authenticity was observed because the 95% confidence interval did not include zero ($b_{indirect\ effect} = -.68$, $SE = .17$, 95% CI $[-1.06, -.40]$) (see Figure 4). The direct effect was significant ($b_{direct\ effect} = -1.17$, $SE = .25$, 95% CI $[-1.67, -.67]$).

Study 3 confirmed that objectification leads people to feel less authentic, which subsequently decreases their level of state SWB. Since prior studies provided convergent evidence that perceived authenticity plays a crucial role in the effect of objectification on SWB, it was desirable to test whether restoring objectified people's authenticity could effectively increase their SWB.

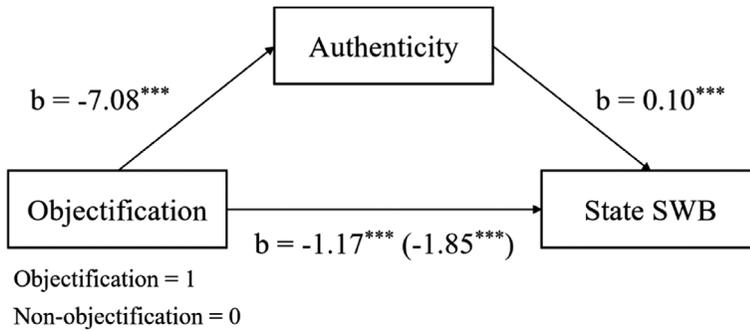


Figure 4. Authenticity mediated the effect of objectification on state SWB (Study 3). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Study 4

If there is a lower level of SWB in the objectification condition than in the non-objectification condition because objectification limits perceived authenticity, as we propose, then allowing objectified people to restore authenticity should also enhance SWB. Study 4 tested this proposition by adopting an experimental moderation approach (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016; Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005).

Method

Participants

The power analysis revealed that 199 participants were required to detect a small to medium effect ($f = .20$) with 80% power. We recruited 279 participants to do complete this experiment in exchange for CN¥ 6. Participants were randomly assigned to one condition in a 2 (objectification vs. non-objectification) by 2 (authenticity vs. control) between-subject design. Thirty-five participants failed to recall the required experience and were therefore removed from all analyses¹. The final sample consisted of 244 participants (117 men, 127 women; $M_{age} = 28.42$; $SD = 4.69$). One hundred and eleven participants were assigned to the objectification condition ($N_{authenticity} = 47$, $N_{control} = 64$), whereas 133 participants were assigned to the non-objectification condition ($N_{authenticity} = 61$, $N_{control} = 72$).

Procedures and materials

All participants completed the experiment online via the Qualtrics survey system. Participants in the authenticity condition were told that the study consisted of two unrelated parts: one part investigated their imagination, and the other part investigated their memory. Participants in the authenticity-control condition were told that the aim of the study was to investigate people's imagination.

After providing informed consent, participants completed the objectification manipulation similar to Study 2 (Poon et al., 2020, Experiment 5). They imagined themselves as a

¹ Two researchers independently checked whether the participants' writing content followed the instruction. When the two researchers' judgements differed (3 statements), they made a decision after a joint discussion.

new employee at a company. In the objectification condition, participants imagined that they were objectified by their supervisor and colleagues in the company. In the non-objectification condition, participants imagined that they were generally respected in the company. Then, the participants completed three manipulation check items as in Study 2.

The participants were then exposed to the authenticity manipulation adopted in previous research (Gan, Heller, & Chen, 2018; Gino et al., 2020; Kifer et al., 2013). Participants in the authenticity condition were asked to recall and describe a particular incident in which they felt authentic. They were asked to write for at least 100 s. Participants in the authenticity-control condition were given no additional information or tasks. Participants in both conditions responded to three manipulation check statements: ‘Right now, I feel like I’m being myself’, ‘Right now, I feel like I am being true to myself’, and ‘Right now, I feel like authentic aspects of myself are shining through’ (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .90$).

Next, participants completed the same state SWB measures as in Study 2 ($\alpha_{PA} = .88$; $\alpha_{NA} = .89$; $\alpha_{SWLS} = .88$). Finally, the participants reported demographic information.

Results and discussion

Manipulation check

Participants in the objectification condition ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.65$) experienced more objectification than participants in the non-objectification condition ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.05$), $t(1, 242) = 11.14$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.43$. In addition, participants in the authenticity condition ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.19$) felt significantly more authentic than those in the authenticity-control condition ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(1, 242) = 3.80$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = .49$.

State SWB

A two-way ANCOVA (control variables: age, gender, SSS) was conducted to test whether evoking authenticity could weaken the effect of objectification on state SWB. The results showed a statistically significant main effect of objectification, such that, participants in the objectification condition ($M = -.31$, $SD = 2.10$) reported lower levels of state SWB than participants in the non-objectification condition ($M = .35$, $SD = 2.06$), $F(1, 237) = 8.02$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. The main effect of the authenticity manipulation was also statistically significant, such that, participants in the authenticity condition ($M = .39$, $SD = 2.28$) reported greater state SWB than participants in the authenticity-control condition ($M = -.35$, $SD = 1.88$), $F(1, 237) = 5.41$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. More importantly, the expected interaction effect emerged, $F(1, 174) = 4.88$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$.

Simple effects analyses were conducted to clarify the expected interaction effect (see Figure 5). Among participants in the control condition, participants in the objectification condition ($M = -.99$, $SD = 1.95$) reported lower levels of state SWB than participants in the non-objectification condition ($M = .30$, $SD = 1.81$), $p < .001$. Among participants in the authenticity condition, participants in the objectification condition ($M = .38$, $SD = 2.26$) and participants in the non-objectification condition ($M = .39$, $SD = 2.30$) held similar levels of state SWB, $p = .57$. Moreover, among participants in the objectification condition, participants in the authenticity condition reported higher levels of state SWB than participants in the control condition, $p = .002$. In contrast, among

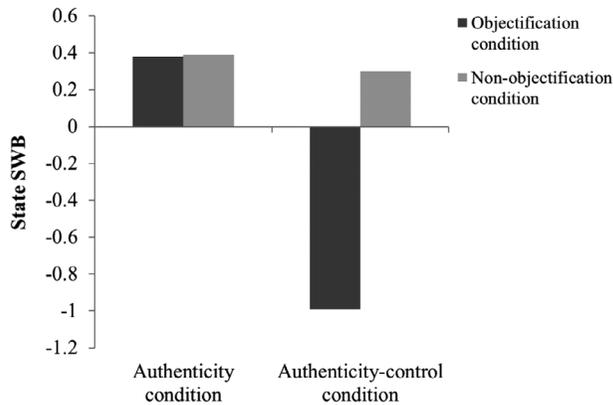


Figure 5. State SWB as a function of objectification condition and authenticity condition (Study 4).

participants in the non-objectification condition, the authenticity manipulation did not significantly affect participants' state SWB, $p = .95$.

Study 4 provided direct evidence for the prediction that the authenticity manipulation would interact with the objectification manipulation in influencing state SWB. The results of this study were consistent with previous studies in that when objectified people were not given the opportunity to evoke authenticity, they reported a lower level of state SWB. In contrast, when objectified people's authenticity was restored, they reported a similar level of state SWB as nonobjectified people.

General Discussion

In this study, we found that objectification has a negative impact on feelings of authenticity and SWB. When people are objectified, they are degraded from a person to an object, and their value depends on their function to achieve goals for others (Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Nussbaum, 1995). Objectified people generally self-perceive and behave in self-objectifying way rather than their intrinsic values and interests (Baldissarri et al., 2020; Loughnan et al., 2017). Thus, we proposed that the objectification experience limits perceived authenticity. Since authenticity is key to healthy psychological functioning (Sedikides et al., 2017), we suggested that feeling less authentic following objectification further leads people to experience a lower level of SWB. In addition, we believed that experiencing authenticity can provide a protective benefit for objectified people. Specifically, boosting authenticity can ameliorate the negative role of objectification on SWB.

We conducted five studies with different methodological designs to examine these hypotheses. Studies 1a and 1b provided correlational evidence that objectification (at work and university) is negatively related to perceived authenticity and SWB. Moreover, authenticity mediated the relation between objectification and SWB. Extending these findings by adopting experimental designs, Studies 2 and 3 revealed that compared with participants in the non-objectification conditions, participants in the objectification condition felt less authentic and had lower levels of SWB. Moreover, authenticity could account for the effect of objectification on SWB. Therefore, we further proposed that restoring authenticity can enhance objectified people's SWB. In line with our prediction, Study 4, adopting an experimental moderation approach, demonstrated that offering

objectified people an opportunity to restore authenticity effectively eliminates the negative effect of objectification on SWB.

Implications

The finding that objectification, as an inconspicuous interpersonal maltreatment, reduces perceived authenticity enriches the authenticity literature. Since authenticity facilitates mental health and well-being (Rivera et al., 2019; Sedikides et al., 2017), examining when and why people feel more or less authentic is theoretically and practically important. Previous research has been more concerned with how intrapersonal factors (e.g., power, nostalgia) lower feelings of authenticity (Baldwin et al., 2015; Kifer et al., 2013). Our research found that objectification – an experience of social interaction – can limit one’s sense of authenticity, thereby leading to lower levels of SWB.

Our results revealed a novel psychological factor to explain why objectification undermines employees’ mental health and performance. Previous studies found working objectification heightened workers’ exhaustion and cynicism, and decreased working engagement (Baldissarri & Andrighetto, 2021; Baldissarri et al., 2014). This study provides a possible explanation for the detrimental consequences of working objectification: individuals feel less authentic following objectification. The decreased authenticity further reduces work engagement, vitality, and job satisfaction, and increases stress and burnout (e.g., Van den Bosch & Taris, 2014; Van den Bosch, Taris, Schaufeli, Peeters, & Reijseger, 2019).

The current research demonstrated the power of authenticity intervention in countering the negative impacts of objectification. Research has revealed that authenticity, as a psychosocial resource, aids people in coping with deleterious outcomes following stressful events in daily life. For example, Gino and Kouchaki (2020) found that when people suffering from social exclusion experience authenticity, they feel less threat and rejection. Our finding that authenticity benefits post-objectification well-being is compatible with prior findings. Thus, we identify an effective preventive strategy to buffer against objectification: simply being true to oneself. Specifically, when encountering objectification, individuals can boost authenticity through reflection about personal identity (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013) or mindfulness practice (Allan, Bott, & Suh, 2015), so as to restore SWB.

Previous research found that compared with advantaged groups, disadvantaged groups (e.g., low-socioeconomic status groups) have lower levels of subjective well-being (e.g., Anderson, Kraus, Galinsky, & Keltner, 2012; Curhan et al., 2014). There are many factors that may contribute to the lower well-being of disadvantaged groups, such as poor material conditions (Tay & Diener, 2011) and a strong sense of relative deprivation (Boyce, Brown, & Moore, 2010). Our findings provide a potential explanation for this phenomenon. Specifically, since disadvantaged groups are more likely to be objectified (e.g., Jones, 2011; Loughnan, Haslam, Sutton, & Spencer, 2014) and have less opportunities to express their true selves (Depaulo & Friedman, 1998; Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008), they might have a lower level of well-being. This assumption is indirectly supported by previous research suggesting that since power allows people to express their true self, it enhances SWB (Kifer et al., 2013).

Limitations and future directions

Participants did not experience real objectification in all experiments. Recent studies have found that task features (repetitiveness, fragmentation, and other-direction of activities) are significant in shaping working objectification (Andrighetto et al., 2017; Baldissarri et al., 2017). Thus, future research could manipulate objectification by asking participants to do some real activities. Furthermore, since Studies 2 and 4 did not include a baseline condition, we did not clarify whether objectification experience decreases authenticity or non-objectification situation increases it.

Although this study examined the direct effect of objectification on authenticity, we cannot rule out that objectification may cause other psychological outcomes that affect authenticity. For example, objectifying experiences may make people feel discontent or angry, thereby affecting authenticity. In addition, this study cannot exclude the possibility that objectification manipulation evoked other variables that contributed to our findings. For example, in the objectification condition, participants might feel more exploited by 'objectifiers', such as devoting more time and energy to work, and then they have lower levels of well-being. Thus, future work needs to control other possible confounding variables.

This study did not examine the long-term impacts of objectification on authenticity and SWB. It remains unclear whether chronic objectification would have a greater influence on authenticity and SWB. Additionally, in Study 4, we manipulated authenticity immediately after participants imagined themselves being objectified. We do not know whether the buffering effect of being authentic lasts for a long time or only for a short time. Future research should adopt a longitudinal study design to examine these questions, which can allow a deeper understanding of the effect of objectification on authenticity and SWB.

In the current research, we adopted a simple dichotomy (objectification vs. non-objectification) to manipulate objectification. However, objectification, as a complex social phenomenon, can take many forms in which people are objectified to different degrees. For example, in sexual objectification, associated behaviours can range from subtle forms (e.g., the target's breasts are gazed at; being the target of sexual comments and jokes) to blatant and violent sexual assaults (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gardner, 1980; Klonoff & Landrine, 1995; Quinn, Kallen, & Cathey, 2006). Following this approach, working objectification can be manifested as failing to fully consider the target's thoughts and feelings or as completely regarding the target as a tool to manipulate. Our research did not consider whether different degrees or forms of objectification have similar impacts on psychological outcomes. Thus, future research can examine how different forms of objectification affect objectified people's authenticity and SWB.

Researchers can explore the consequences of depriving objectified people's authenticity beyond SWB. Feeling inauthentic is a negative, uncomfortable state that leads to negative effects on work engagement, the meaning of work and job performance (Metin, Taris, Peeters, van Beek, & Van den Bosch, 2016; Reis et al., 2016; Van den Bosch & Taris, 2014). A recent study has found that being instrumentally (vs. non-instrumentally) treated decreased people's task engagement and performance (Baldissarri & Andrighetto, 2021). Similarly, in Studies 1a and 1b², we also found that objectification was negatively associated with employees' work engagement and graduate students' academic engagement, in which authenticity played mediating roles. In addition to well-being and

² See the additional analyses of Studies 1a and 1b in the supplementary materials.

performance, feeling inauthentic can also lead to greater unethical behaviour (Ebrahimi et al., 2020; Kim, Christy, Rivera, Schlegel, & Hicks, 2017). Thus, future research can explore whether reduced authenticity following objectification increases undesirable social behaviours.

Future research can examine other possible explanations beyond authenticity for the link between objectification and SWB. For example, objectification thwarts people's sense of control (Poon et al., 2020), thereby decreasing SWB (e.g., Lang & Heckhausen, 2001; Quadros-Wander, McGillivray, & Broadbent, 2014). In addition, the current research did not examine whether certain dispositional characteristics play a moderate role in the relation between objectification and authenticity. Past studies found that since highly interdependent people prioritize social harmony over their own concern, they experience a higher level of authenticity when suppressing their negative emotions during a sacrifice for romantic partner (Le & Impett, 2013). Therefore, when objectification is beneficial for social harmony, the negative effect of objectification on authenticity may be weakened for people high in interdependence. Future studies can investigate which types of people are more (or less) likely to experience authenticity following objectification.

Conclusion

We conducted five studies to examine the potential impact of objectification on authenticity and SWB. The findings showed that objectification decreases SWB, which is mediated by perceived authenticity. In addition, restoring objectified people's authenticity can effectively eliminate the effect of objectification on SWB. These findings carry both practical and theoretical implications in highlighting the critical role of authenticity in understanding why objectification reduces SWB and how to weaken such an effect.

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Conflict of interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Xueli Zhu (Validation; Writing – review & editing) Fang Wang (Conceptualization; Funding acquisition; Supervision; Writing – review & editing) Mingyang Hao (Data curation; Methodology) Lei Cheng (Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Writing – original draft) Zifei Li (Data curation; Formal analysis; Methodology; Validation; Visualization).

Data availability statement

All study datasets are available at https://osf.io/ag94k/?view_only=e946a4a018e74e62b64badec3a03cb3a

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Supporting Information

The following supporting information may be found in the online edition of the article:

Appendix S1. All the manipulations, measures and the additional analyses can be found in the supplementary materials.

Data S1. All study datasets are available in the files.