

Rumination and Self-Objectification among Female Undergraduates

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Abstract: Objective: This study explored the relationship between rumination and self-objectification among female college students and examined the predictive effect of rumination on self-objectification. **Methods:** A questionnaire survey was conducted among 412 female college students. The Rumination Questionnaire and the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale were used for measurement, and the data were analyzed using Pearson correlation analysis and regression analysis. **Results:** Rumination was significantly positively correlated with self-objectification among female college students ($r=0.383$, $p<0.001$). Regression analysis showed that rumination significantly and positively predicted self-objectification ($\beta=0.383$, $t=8.395$, $p<0.001$). **Conclusion:** The higher the level of rumination, the more likely female college students are to repeatedly focus on their appearance and perceived body defects and to view their bodies according to external evaluative standards. The findings suggest that college mental health education should pay attention to repetitive negative thinking in body image problems and help female college students reduce body surveillance and dependence on appearance-based evaluation.

Keywords: Rumination; Self-Objectification; Body Surveillance; Body Image

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1. Introduction

In recent years, body image has gradually become an important issue in college mental health education and in research on young women's development. Female college students are in early adulthood; they face academic, interpersonal, and career-related pressures while also continuously constructing their self-identity and body image. With the growing influence of social media, short-video platforms, and consumer culture, women's bodies are increasingly placed in contexts of viewing, comparison, and evaluation. The body is no longer merely a physiological existence but is also linked to attractiveness, social recognition, self-worth, and social competitiveness. Recent studies have indicated close associations among visual social media, appearance concerns, and body image distress, and body image problems may further affect emotional experience, eating behaviors, and mental health^[1,2]. Therefore, understanding how female college students think about their bodies and what psychological factors intensify their tendency toward body scrutiny has strong practical significance.

Among the many psychological factors that influence body image, rumination deserves particular attention. Rumination generally refers to a repetitive and passive focus on negative feelings and on the causes and consequences of these feelings when individuals face negative emotions or stressful events, rather than actively seeking solutions. According to response styles theory, rumination prolongs negative emotional experience and keeps individuals immersed in analyzing problems

and blaming themselves^[3]. Treynor et al. (2003) further distinguished rumination into brooding and reflection, with brooding being characterized by more negative and repetitive entanglement^[4]. In recent years, research on rumination has expanded beyond depression and anxiety to topics such as body image, appearance anxiety, and eating problems. For female college students, when appearance and body shape become important sources of evaluation, rumination may lead them to repeatedly recall others' comments, compare their perceived body defects, and think about where they are "not good enough."

Self-objectification is a core concept in objectification theory. It refers to the tendency to regard one's own body as an object to be viewed, evaluated, and compared, and to continuously monitor physical appearance from an internalized observer's perspective. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) proposed that women who are chronically exposed to sociocultural contexts of being gazed at and evaluated tend to internalize the observer's perspective and take physical appearance as an important basis for self-evaluation^[5]. From the perspective of objectified body consciousness, McKinley and Hyde (1996) suggested that body surveillance, body shame, and appearance control beliefs are important dimensions for understanding women's bodily experience^[6]. Recent cross-cultural research has also shown that self-objectification is related not only to sociocultural standards but also to psychological and social factors such as self-esteem, perfectionism, and internalization of media standards^[7]. This suggests that self-objectification is not a temporary response to a single situation but the result of multiple sociocultural and individual psychological factors.

Rumination may be closely related to self-objectification. On the one hand, self-objectification directs attention toward physical appearance, especially toward whether one meets external aesthetic standards. This body surveillance provides material for repetitive thinking: when individuals perceive a gap between their bodies and ideal appearance standards, they may repeatedly think about body shape, skin, facial features, posture, or others' evaluations. On the other hand, rumination may also reinforce self-objectification. Repeatedly thinking about appearance flaws, social feedback, and bodily shortcomings can make physical appearance occupy a larger place in self-cognition and make individuals more frequently view themselves from others' perspectives. Brasil et al. (2024) found that social media appearance preoccupation, self-objectification, and body image concerns were closely associated^[8]. Hewitt and Murray (2024) also suggested that self-objectification affects women's recognition of body image problems and their attitudes toward seeking help^[9]. These findings indicate that in a social environment characterized by strong appearance evaluation, repetitive negative thinking may become an important psychological link in the persistence of body cognition problems.

For female college students, the relationship between rumination and self-objectification is especially important. During college, women are more likely to encounter appearance evaluation in interpersonal interactions, romantic relationships, campus communities, and online platforms, and they may also understand their self-worth through appearance-related feedback. When individuals have a high tendency toward rumination, they may not only notice appearance-related evaluations but also repeatedly recall, interpret, and amplify their meaning. For example, a comment about weight, body shape, or the effect of a photograph may repeatedly appear in the mind of a high-rumination individual and further trigger body surveillance and self-doubt. Over time, this cognitive style may make individuals increasingly accustomed to inspecting their bodies from an external perspective while neglecting bodily function, authentic feelings, and subjective experience.

In addition, the combination of rumination and self-objectification may help explain why some female college students show different psychological responses when facing similar appearance pressures. External evaluation and aesthetic standards provide contextual sources of body distress, but whether individuals repeatedly recall these evaluations and continually connect them with self-worth determines whether the pressure becomes further internalized and fixed. Body image research suggests that body distress does not come only from external stimuli themselves but is also related to how individuals interpret body-related information, attentional bias, and emotion regulation ability^[1,9]. Therefore, examining rumination shifts attention from "how the outside world evaluates women's bodies" to "how women repeatedly process these evaluations psychologically."

Based on this background, this study focused on rumination and self-objectification and examined whether rumination among female college students was significantly related to self-objectification and whether rumination could predict self-objectification. This approach may help clarify the cognitive maintenance mechanism involved in body image problems

among female college students and provide a reference for body image interventions in college mental health education.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Participants

This study adopted a questionnaire survey method, and the participants were female college students. Questionnaires were distributed in university classrooms and posted online through social networking platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo. After participants understood the purpose of the study and voluntarily agreed to respond, the survey was completed anonymously. A total of 433 questionnaires were distributed. After excluding invalid questionnaires with excessively short response times, missing responses, repeated answers, failure to pass reverse-item checks, or obvious logical inconsistencies, 412 valid questionnaires were obtained, with an effective response rate of 95.150%. All participants were female. Among them, 40 were junior college students, accounting for 9.709%, and 372 were undergraduate students, accounting for 90.291%. In terms of grade distribution, 19 were first-year students, accounting for 4.612%; 116 were second-year students, accounting for 40.291%; 141 were third-year students, accounting for 34.223%; and 136 were fourth-year students, accounting for 33.010%. The sample covered female college students from different grades relatively well.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Rumination Questionnaire

Rumination was measured using the Rumination Questionnaire, based on the conceptualization of rumination in response styles theory^[3,4]. The questionnaire contains 10 items and is scored from 1 (almost never) to 4 (almost always). It assesses the tendency to repeatedly focus on one's own feelings, the causes of problems, and negative consequences in situations involving negative emotions or stress. Higher scores indicate a greater tendency to fall into repetitive, passive, and negative thinking. In this study, the Cronbach's α coefficient of the scale was 0.895, indicating good internal consistency.

2.2.2 Objectified Body Consciousness Scale

Self-objectification was measured using the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale, originally developed by McKinley and Hyde (1996) and later revised for Chinese college students by Chen and Jiang (2007)^[6,10]. The scale contains 8 items and is mainly used to assess individuals' attention to physical appearance, body surveillance, and objectification tendency. Higher scores indicate a stronger tendency to view one's body from an external observer's perspective and to pay greater attention to whether the body and appearance meet external evaluative standards. In this study, the Cronbach's α coefficient of the scale was 0.935, showing high internal consistency and applicability.

2.3 Data Processing

SPSS 27.0 was used for data processing. First, the questionnaire data were screened and organized. Second, reliability analyses were conducted to verify the internal consistency of the measurement tools. Finally, Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between rumination and self-objectification, and regression analysis was further used to examine the predictive effect of rumination on self-objectification among female college students.

3. Results

3.1 Correlation Analysis between Rumination and Self-Objectification

The Pearson correlation analysis showed a significant positive correlation between rumination and self-objectification among female college students, with a correlation coefficient of $r=0.383$, reaching significance at the 0.001 level. This indicates that higher levels of rumination were associated with higher levels of self-objectification. In other words, individuals who are more likely to repeatedly think about negative experiences, the causes of problems, and negative consequences are also more likely to continuously focus on their physical appearance and evaluate their bodies from an external observer's perspective.

3.2 Predictive Effect of Rumination on Self-Objectification

To further examine the predictive effect of rumination on self-objectification among female college students, rumination was used as the predictor variable and self-objectification as the outcome variable in a linear regression analysis. The results showed that rumination significantly and positively predicted self-objectification, with a standardized regression coefficient of $\beta=0.383$, $t=8.395$, $p<0.001$, and a model explanatory rate of $R^2=0.147$. This indicates that rumination explained approximately

14.7% of the variance in self-objectification among female college students. Overall, rumination was not only significantly correlated with self-objectification but also had a significant predictive effect on the level of self-objectification (see table1).

Table1: Regression results of rumination predicting self-objectification

Predictor variable	Outcome variable	β	t	R^2
Rumination	Self-objectification	0.383	8.395***	0.147

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

4.1 Relationship between Rumination and Self-Objectification

The results of this study showed that rumination was significantly positively correlated with self-objectification among female college students. That is, the higher the level of rumination, the more likely female college students were to pay attention to their bodies and appearance from an internalized external observer's perspective. This result can be explained by the cognitive characteristics of rumination. Rumination emphasizes repetitive attention to negative experiences. When this thinking style is directed toward appearance and the body, individuals may repeatedly recall their perceived body defects, others' evaluations, and the gap between themselves and ideal images. As this thinking repeatedly occurs, the importance of physical appearance in self-evaluation is continuously amplified, and the level of self-objectification increases accordingly.

This finding is consistent with objectification theory. Objectification theory argues that women are often viewed and evaluated as appearance-based objects in sociocultural environments; over time, they may internalize this observer's perspective and continuously monitor their bodies^[5]. Rumination may be an important psychological factor that maintains this body surveillance. For individuals with low rumination, appearance evaluation or body dissatisfaction may be only a temporary experience. However, for individuals with high rumination, these experiences may be repeatedly processed and interpreted, ultimately becoming a stable tendency toward body scrutiny.

In this study, rumination significantly and positively predicted self-objectification. This indicates that rumination is not only synchronously associated with self-objectification but may also play a cognitive maintenance role in body cognition problems among female college students. In campus life and online environments, female college students are frequently exposed to appearance comparison and aesthetic evaluation. If they have a higher tendency toward rumination, they may be more likely to remain trapped in questions such as "What is wrong with me?", "How will others see me?", and "Do I meet the standard?" Over time, the body may gradually be understood as an object that needs constant inspection and correction rather than as the subject of feelings, actions, and life experience.

4.2 Rumination May Amplify Body Surveillance and Appearance Evaluation

One important manifestation of self-objectification is body surveillance, that is, frequently attending to one's appearance, posture, body shape, and others' possible evaluations. Rumination may transform momentary attention to the body into sustained psychological activity. When female college students repeatedly think about perceived appearance flaws, the body is more likely to become the center of self-evaluation. For example, after taking photographs, looking in the mirror, dressing, or participating in social activities, individuals may repeatedly think about whether they looked appropriate, whether they appeared overweight, whether they looked attractive, or may repeatedly dwell on one comment made by others. This cycle makes it more difficult for individuals to disengage from appearance evaluation.

Rumination may also intensify negative emotional experience. Individuals high in rumination often attend not only to the problem itself but also to its negative consequences. In relation to body image, this means that individuals may not only think that they are "not attractive enough," but may also further infer that "others will not like me," "I am not attractive enough," or "I am inferior to others." This interpretive style links appearance problems with self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and social value, thereby increasing the psychological burden of self-objectification. Recent research on body image mental health literacy also suggests that individuals' recognition, understanding, and help-seeking attitudes regarding body problems affect the persistence of body image distress^[9]. Therefore, rumination not only affects how individuals view their bodies but may also influence their ability to cope with body distress.

It should be noted that the relationship between rumination and self-objectification may not be unidirectional. Female college students with higher levels of self-objectification are more likely to frequently monitor their bodies, and this surveillance may provide content for rumination. In turn, rumination may deepen body scrutiny and appearance anxiety. The two may form a cycle: the more individuals focus on appearance, the more likely they are to ruminate; the more they ruminate, the harder it becomes to escape appearance-centered self-evaluation. Although the cross-sectional data in this study cannot strictly test this cyclical relationship, the results suggest a connection that deserves further attention.

4.3 Special Significance in Female College Students' Developmental Stage

The college years are an important period during which self-identity, interpersonal relationships, and social roles gradually stabilize. Female college students at this stage hope to gain peer acceptance and are more attentive to their image and attractiveness within groups. When rumination is strong, appearance-related events may be given excessive meaning, and individuals may interpret a photo comment, a change in weight, or a piece of social feedback as evidence of their self-worth. This tendency may weaken individuals' ability to understand themselves from multiple perspectives, allowing academic ability, personality traits, emotional experience, and bodily function to be overshadowed by appearance evaluation. Therefore, the relationship between rumination and self-objectification is not only a body image problem but is also related to the overall development of female college students' self-concept.

4.4 Educational Implications

First, college mental health education should incorporate rumination into body image interventions. Traditional body image education often emphasizes identifying unreasonable aesthetic standards, reducing appearance comparison, and improving self-acceptance, but it pays insufficient attention to how individuals repeatedly think about appearance problems. Teachers and psychological counselors can guide students to identify thinking patterns such as "repeatedly thinking," "being unable to stop," and "feeling worse the more one thinks," helping them distinguish problem solving from negative rumination and reduce excessive attention to body defects.

Second, cognitive reappraisal and mindfulness training can be used to reduce body-related rumination. For individuals high in rumination, simply telling them "not to care about appearance" is often ineffective because they may have already formed automatic repetitive thinking habits. A more effective approach is to help them notice when body evaluations arise, learn to view appearance issues from more flexible perspectives, and shift attention toward bodily function, emotional needs, and realistic action. Mindfulness training, group counseling, and cognitive-behavioral techniques can all be used to reduce body surveillance and appearance-related rumination.

Third, colleges should encourage female students to understand the body from the perspective of subjective experience. The body is not only an object to be viewed and evaluated but also the basis for learning, movement, experiencing life, and building relationships. Through mental health courses, physical activity, and body positivity activities, colleges can guide students to pay attention to bodily function, health status, and authentic experience, thereby reducing the tendency to measure self-worth according to a single appearance standard. When individuals can understand themselves more through "what the body can do" and "what experiences the body brings," self-objectification may be alleviated.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

This study was based on questionnaire data and can demonstrate a correlation and predictive relationship between rumination and self-objectification among female college students, but it still has several limitations. First, this study used a cross-sectional design and therefore cannot strictly infer causality. Although the results showed that rumination predicted self-objectification, it is also possible that individuals with higher self-objectification are more likely to develop body-related rumination. Future studies can use longitudinal or experimental designs to further examine the direction of the relationship between the two variables.

Second, this study mainly used self-report questionnaires to collect data, which may be affected by social desirability, subjective understanding, and common method bias. Future research can combine experimental tasks, interviews, diary methods, or ecological momentary assessment to further understand when female college students experience body surveillance and appearance-related rumination in daily life and how these experiences change across contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between rumination and self-objectification among female college students. The results showed that rumination was significantly positively correlated with self-objectification and significantly and positively predicted self-objectification. In other words, the higher the level of rumination, the more likely female college students were to repeatedly focus on their bodies and appearance and to evaluate their bodies from an internalized external observer's perspective.

Rumination may make it more difficult for female college students to disengage from body surveillance by amplifying perceived body defects, prolonging negative emotional experience, and strengthening dependence on appearance-based evaluation. To reduce the risk of self-objectification, college mental health education should pay attention to repetitive negative thinking in body image problems and help female college students reduce appearance-related rumination, improve media literacy, enhance body acceptance, and develop subjective bodily experience.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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