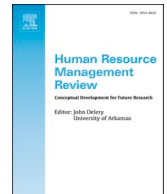




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Workplace objectification: A review, synthesis, and research agenda

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ABSTRACT

Objectification – treating human beings as instrumental tools deprived of agency and experience – is inherent in many organizational practices, as employers hope that it may further their interest in profit-making. However, workplace objectification undermines target employees' interests and well-being. This systematic review seeks to address this conflict by discussing relevant theories and empirical studies on workplace objectification. Based on an analysis of 78 studies, this review summarizes and integrates what is known about antecedents and consequences of workplace objectification from three different perspectives: Objectifying others, self-objectification, and experiencing objectification. This review shows that people objectify others to achieve performance and extrinsic goals or to reduce subjectivity uncertainty, while thwarting the objectified targets' fundamental control, belonging, and self-esteem needs. We provide a comprehensive framework that integrates the extant literature on workplace objectification and offer theoretical and methodological recommendations. We conclude by discussing how juxtaposing conflicting elements in workplace objectification can help create a more virtuous cycle.

1. Introduction

With the term “human resource” that promotes the alignment of employees' interests with organizational interests (Inkson, 2008), employees might feel objectified and get the impression that “the company has forgotten [about] the people, emphasizing business over employees” (Väyrynen & Laari-Salmela, 2018, p. 107); employees could feel that their sole purpose is to hit the performance targets in exchange for money (Laaser & Bolton, 2017). *Objectification* – the treatment of human beings as instrumental objects without any needs or feelings (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021; Gray et al., 2011; Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Nussbaum, 1995) – takes place in a work context. From a humanistic management perspective (Pirson, 2019), workplace objectification poses a fundamental threat to human dignity. Employees who feel objectified report lower job satisfaction, lower sense of belonging, more burnout, more aggression, and higher turnover intention (e.g., Baldissarri et al., 2014; Belmi & Schroeder, 2021; Poon et al., 2020). The negative impact of workplace objectification spills over into interpersonal relationships outside of work as well (i.e., with family and friends; Hur et al., 2021), and can be long-lasting given that it damages a person's perceptions of the self (Baldissarri et al., 2019; Baldissarri, Andrighetto, et al., 2017).

Yet, despite the negative effects on employees, employers who aspire to transform human labor into economic value may feel

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tempted to objectify their employees. Indeed, because employers' primary agenda is to maximize profits via labor utilization, workplace objectification is deeply rooted in management theory and practice (Värynen & Laari-Salmela, 2018), such as human capital theory and pay-for-performance practice. An economic-based logic prevails so much that the "human" aspect is often neglected (Wright, 2021). Workplace objectification is also rooted in labor economics, as evidenced by the assumption that capital and labor are perfect substitutes in the creation of output whenever the rate of exchange between capital and labor is constant (Borjas, 2019). Likewise, workers of similar skills are perfect substitutes for one another. As Shields and Grant (2010) put it, workplace objectification is "the most proximal, intimate and (potentially) insidious facet of labor utilization" (p. 62). This conceptualization of labor leads people to take a more calculative utilitarian approach in relating to others and to objectify others more in work contexts than non-work contexts (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021). The questions of what triggers workplace objectification, what are the consequences of workplace objectification, and what are integral features of workplace objectification need to be addressed systematically.

While previous studies have explored various aspects of workplace objectification, a unified theoretical framework is absent. Research has typically concentrated on either the objectifier or the objectified and on either antecedents or consequences of workplace objectification, without integrating these insights. This fragmentation hinders a comprehensive understanding of workplace objectification and obscures its full implications. The growing body of literature on workplace objectification, alongside its increasing relevance in the modern workplace (highlighted by trends such as the rise of gig work and zero-hour contracts; Bieber & Moggia, 2021), underscores the need for and timeliness of a systematic review. Such a review would evaluate the theoretical foundations of workplace objectification, identify methodological concerns and shortcomings, and explore the dynamics and harmful consequences of workplace objectification. Our goal is to illuminate the tension between the driving forces and detrimental outcomes associated with workplace objectification and propose strategies for addressing these issues.

We integrate the diverse theoretical perspectives on workplace objectification and synthesize the extant empirical evidence drawn from 78 studies on predictors and effects of workplace objectification. We focus on workplace objectification or objectification taking place in a work context. In due course, we will outline how the theories of market-pricing (Fiske, 1992) and subjectivity uncertainty (Landau et al., 2012) illuminate what triggers workplace objectification, and how psychological needs perspectives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) explain how workplace objectification influences individuals. We take three different perspectives into account: Objectifying others, self-objectification, and experiencing objectification. By using this integrative framework, we aim to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how, when, and why workplace objectification takes place and has effects on individuals.

We further advance theorizing of workplace objectification by adding a paradox lens to the analysis of workplace objectification dynamics. Our review shows that people often objectify others to pursue performance and extrinsic goals or to reduce their uncertainty about others' subjectivity at the cost of thwarting the objectified targets' socioemotional needs and basic needs for control, belonging, and self-esteem. Our review highlights a paradoxical tension between instrumental and affective functions that underlie workplace objectification dynamics and extends workplace objectification literature by revealing this paradoxical feature.

This review also contributes to human resource management literature by revealing a dark side to the human resource function. Our integrative framework suggests that while individual knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics can be utilized to generate economic or other instrumental value, this exploitation or utilization of individuals as resources may paradoxically lead to resource depletion. On the bright side workplace objectification aids performance and extrinsic goal pursuit such as money (Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Teng et al., 2016; Wang & Krumhuber, 2017), but on the dark side workplace objectification leads to cognitive and emotional resource depletion and turnover intention (e.g., Bell & Khoury, 2016; Demoulin et al., 2021; Poon et al., 2020). Moreover, experiencing objectification harms interpersonal relationships, thus potentially inhibiting the emergence of human capital and social capital resources (Ray et al., 2023). Recognizing this paradox in human resource management through the lens of workplace objectification can help promote adaptability and sustainability.

In the following, we first review theories of workplace objectification across disciplines, clarify its definition, and distinguish it from related concepts. We also explore workplace objectification's origins in the market-pricing mode (Fiske, 1991, 1992). Second, we review empirical studies on the antecedents, consequences, and boundary conditions of workplace objectification. Finally, we address theoretical and methodological issues in workplace objectification research and suggest future research directions, concluding with a discussion of implications.

2. Theoretical foundations

The question of what objectification is has been debated for a long time and can be traced back to philosophical literature. Immanuel Kant defined objectification as "the lowering of a person, a being with humanity, to the status of an object" (Kant, 1996, p. 209). Marx (1976) discussed the effects of capitalism, whereby humans were objectified and valued based on their labor production; other qualities of humans became irrelevant to the nexus among members of society in the market economy. Building upon a great variety of works covering feminism, slavery, and Marx's analysis of capitalism, Nussbaum (1995) conceptualized objectification as "treating as an object what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being" (p. 257), which involves treating people as an instrumental tool of one's purposes, as lacking in autonomy and subjectivity, and as something that is interchangeable with other objects and that can be bought, owned, or sold.

2.1. A definition of workplace objectification

Several scholars from the psychology field have conceptualized objectification as an interpersonal behavior in which at least one

social target is treated like a tool instead of a human being by at least one agent (e.g., Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Orehek & Weaverling, 2017). However, this interpersonal view is limited, because workplace objectification can happen at other levels too, such as the group, organizational, or country level (see Bell & Khoury, 2016; Belmi & Schroeder, 2021; Demoulin et al., 2021). For instance, some organizations emphasizing “staff first, customers second” show more support for employees and treat their employees less as mere tools that serve customers’ needs than other organizations that put “customers first” (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021). Moreover, people can also objectify themselves. As an intrapersonal phenomenon, self-objectification refers to the treatment of oneself as a passive object to be looked at and evaluated (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), as if one lacks self-determination. Therefore, to offer a comprehensive definition of workplace objectification that can apply to various levels of analysis, we propose the following definition: *Workplace objectification is reducing human beings to instrumental tools as devoid of agency and experience by any entities.*

Our definition makes clear that workplace objectification is essentially characterized by instrumentality, denial of agency, and denial of experience. Indeed, researchers have identified *instrumentality*, the reducing of targets into tools to reach specific goals for the objectifier, as the key attribute of workplace objectification (e.g., Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Nussbaum, 1995; Orehek & Weaverling, 2017; Wang & Krumhuber, 2017). That is, workplace objectification occurs when the target is useful to the achievement of the actor’s active goal at that moment, such as a performance goal (Gruenfeld et al., 2008), an individual advancement goal (Shea & Fitzsimons, 2016), or the pursuit of money (Wang & Krumhuber, 2017). However, instrumentality in and by itself does not necessarily imply workplace objectification. Instrumentality is fundamental to all interpersonal relationships, such that the way people perceive, evaluate, and act toward relationship partners is shaped by the extent to which these partners are instrumental to their goals (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008).

What is involved in workplace objectification and makes it problematic is treating someone *merely* as a tool, a tool that is deprived of humanity (e.g., Gray et al., 2011; Nussbaum, 1995; Väyrynen & Laari-Salmela, 2018). Specifically, the objectified are deprived of *agency* – the capacity to plan and act – and *experience* – the capacity to sense and feel (e.g., Belmi & Schroeder, 2021; Gray et al., 2007; Gray et al., 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010). Indeed, research has shown that the objectified were attributed low agency and low experience by both themselves and others (e.g., Andrighetto et al., 2017; Loughnan et al., 2017). Defining workplace objectification and identifying its attributes help clarify how workplace objectification overlaps with and diverges from other constructs, such as dehumanization and sexual objectification.

Although workplace objectification can involve or co-occur with dehumanization and sexual objectification, they are not the same. Despite some convergence, workplace objectification is distinct from dehumanization and sexual objectification. Dehumanization refers to the denial of one’s humanity. It takes either the form of mechanistic dehumanization (the likening of humans to automata) or animalistic dehumanization (the likening of humans to animals). Whereas workplace objectification bears resemblance to dehumanization, particularly mechanistic dehumanization, in terms of denial of agency and denial of experience (Haslam, 2006), workplace objectification is different from dehumanization in that workplace objectification includes the notion of instrumentality (Gruenfeld et al., 2008). Dehumanization focuses on the notion that others lack human qualities without much regard for instrumentality.

Sexual objectification is the act of reducing a person, typically a woman, to body parts or sexual functions as if they were capable of representing the entire person (Bartky, 1990). Sexual objectification is a pertinent and prominent issue in the workplace, as highlighted by the #MeToo movement, and can be used as a form of workplace objectification through inappropriate expectations or biased judgments based on gender. Yet sexual objectification tends to focus on one’s preoccupation with physical appearance in its conceptualization and operationalization (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Kahalon et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2023), which renders it distinct from non-sexual forms of workplace objectification. For the purposes of this review, we focus on non-sexual forms of workplace objectification.

2.2. Market-pricing mode

The market-pricing mode provides a theoretical foundation for understanding workplace objectification. Alan Fiske (1992) theorized that a market-pricing mode is one of four fundamental relational models that people use to generate most kinds of social interactions. People in a work context especially tend to adopt a market-pricing mode to construct and construe relationships: They take a calculative utilitarian approach in relating to others and constantly engage in cost/benefit analyses in decision making. The market-pricing mode also shapes how a person views the self, such that the self is primarily defined in terms of an occupational or economic role, and achievement is the major motivation. In addition, under a market-pricing mode, people believe that time should be spent efficiently and effectively in terms of rates of interest, pay or productivity. In short, a market-pricing mode tends to elicit workplace objectification of both oneself and others.

The influence of the dominant market-pricing mode on workplace objectification has received support from empirical studies across disciplines and research fields. Belmi and Schroeder (2021) found that people objectified others more in work contexts than non-work contexts, because they engaged in more calculative and strategic thinking. When people worked in an environment in which their economic outcomes depended more on others, they were also more likely to view others in an instrumental fashion and choose a competent partner over a sociable one (Belmi & Pfeffer, 2018). Likewise, a salient performance goal or incentive could lead people to approach instrumental targets (Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Hur et al., 2021). In the marketing area, consumers who adopted a price conscious mentality – a singular focus on getting the cheapest deal – attributed less human qualities to customer service employees and viewed those employees in more instrumental terms (Henkel et al., 2018).

Furthermore, both behavioral and neurological data offered support for the market-pricing theorizing of workplace objectification (Harris et al., 2014; Teng et al., 2016). In an experimental context that simulated a labor market, participants showed reduced activity in the social cognition brain network (a network of brain regions subserving social cognition, enabling people to recognize others,

evaluating own and others' mental states, feelings, enduring dispositions and actions, and thus supporting social interactions; [Brothers, 1990](#)), when assigning economic value to people in the labor market or viewing purchased targets ([Harris et al., 2014](#)). Separate valuation systems were observed in reactions toward purchased versus non-purchased targets, such that activation in social cognition brain regions modulated revaluation behavior toward purchased targets, while activation in medial orbito-frontal cortex (traditional valuation regions) predicted revaluation behavior toward non-purchased targets ([Harris et al., 2014](#)).

To present a holistic picture of workplace objectification, we integrate the existing literature on workplace objectification by using an organizing framework that has two dimensions. As a first organizing principle of our review, we differentiate between antecedents and consequences of workplace objectification. As a second organizing principle, we take into account that people may objectify others, that some may objectify themselves (self-objectification), and that some may be objectified by their organization or others (experiencing objectification). Note that self-objectification is different from experiencing objectification, in that an individual who self-objectifies is both the agent and target, whereas people who experience objectification are targets objectified by others. This review seeks to reveal the tensions associated with workplace objectification by identifying agents' motives to objectify and targets' experience of being objectified and by comparing the impacts of workplace objectification on the agents with its impacts on the targets. We first report how we conducted the literature searching and sifting and data analysis before turning to the summary of the findings.

3. Method

3.1. Literature search strategy

To cover the literature as exhaustively as possible, we adopted a series of search strategies (see [Siddaway et al., 2019](#)). First, an extensive search was conducted for studies containing “objectification” or “objectify” or “objectified” in their titles, abstracts, and keywords up to July 2023 in the following databases: EBSCO, PsycINFO, Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, Business Source Complete, EconLit, PsycARTICLES, Eric, and Open Dissertations. Note that the use of multiple databases with different foci (business, psychology, etc.) is a recommended practice (see [Siddaway et al., 2019](#)). Second, we used Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar to obtain the studies that had cited the key reference [Gruenfeld et al.' \(2008\)](#) paper and that contained the term “objectification.” [Gruenfeld et al.' \(2008\)](#) paper was chosen as the key reference, because this paper presented an objectification measure that has been widely used ever since. Third, we searched the reference sections of relevant articles for additional studies.

3.2. In- and exclusion criteria

Studies were included if they fulfilled the following requirements: (a) The conceptualization of objectification was consistent with our definition to a substantial extent, i.e., at least one of the three attributes of objectification (instrumentality, denial of agency, denial of experience) was explicitly included, which allowed us to review existing conceptualizations of objectification more systematically; (b) the study examined objectification in a work context; (c) the study was empirical (quantitative or qualitative); (d) the study examined the antecedents or consequences of objectification; (e) the study was reported in the English language.

The search yielded 8900 potentially relevant articles, and they all were imported into Endnote for screening (see [Fig. 1](#) for our procedure). After duplicates were removed, 6548 articles were left for further screening based on title and abstract. Three hundred and fifty-nine articles were left after further screening and were thoroughly examined for their eligibility for inclusion based on the full text. Additional forty-five articles were identified through citation searching and assessed for eligibility. In the end, 45 articles (78

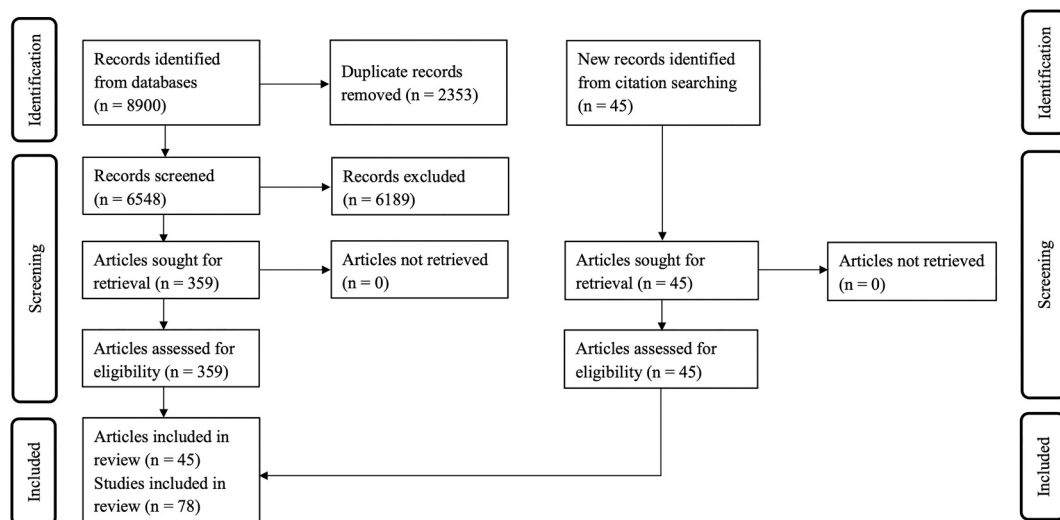


Fig. 1. Literature search and inclusion procedure.

studies, 75 of which are quantitative) were considered eligible and included in our review (see Table S1 in the supplemental material for the details of the studies included in this review).

3.3. Analytical approach

We took an abductive approach to analyze our data (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013). Abduction is a logical inference that starts with an observation and then seeks to find the simplest and most likely explanation. It involves iteratively going back and forth between data and theory. That is, we first observed the data and recorded for each study the conceptualization and operationalization of objectification, antecedent-process-consequence relationship, and research design. We coded the data based on the constructs that could be retrieved from research questions, hypotheses, and models. When data converged to surface a theme, we grouped them together to form a category. For instance, Belmi and Pfeffer (2018) and Hur et al. (2021) examined how reward interdependence and the interaction of performance incentive and peer evaluation could lead to the objectification of others in teamwork contexts. These factors were aggregated into a category of “performance evaluation and rewards” as antecedents of objectifying others. To further aggregate data at a higher level, we categorized antecedents based on sources emanating from the self, supervisor, team, and organization as levels of theory. The consequences of objectification were categorized as personal and interpersonal outcomes.

We considered our data in tandem with various theories throughout, such as market-pricing and subjectivity uncertainty. These theoretical perspectives facilitated the classification and synthesis of objectification mechanisms. When the findings of different studies could be explained by the same theoretical account, they were combined to enhance parsimony. We reviewed and revised categories through constant comparison to ensure convergence within categories and distinctions across categories. For instance, love of money and power were subsumed under individual goal pursuit and distinguished from abusive supervision. After theory-data iteration, we generated an integrative framework of workplace objectification, which contained refined categories and relationships between categories.

4. Results

Below we summarize and integrate the results by antecedents and consequences, and further within each section by objectifying others, self-objectification, and experiencing objectification (see Table S2 in the supplemental material for a summary of the research findings).

4.1. Antecedents of workplace objectification

4.1.1. Objectifying others

Most of the available research has studied the antecedents of objectifying others (28 studies) by using an experimental design (26 studies) in which workplace objectification was measured as instrumentality (19 studies), denial of agency and experience (3 studies), or all three attributes combined (4 studies). Those antecedents can be categorized as sources emanating from the individual, team, and organization. Market-pricing theorizing indicates that market-driven profit expectations at the organizational level can transmit a calculative utilitarian frame, leading to workplace objectification. Indeed, marketization of work in retail banks, characterized by electronic performance management monitoring, fostered workplace objectification among co-workers (Laaser & Bolton, 2017). Bureaucratic and racialized framing of clients led health care providers to objectify their clients (Desai et al., 2023). Consistent with market-pricing theorizing, consumers objectified employees of a thrift-oriented brand (emphasizing prices, deals, and savings) more than employees of a non-thrift-oriented brand (emphasizing full-service and experience), such that they attributed less agency and less experience to those employees (Henkel et al., 2018).

In terms of job characteristics (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), a job that restricts autonomy, independence, and task identity tends to elicit workplace objectification. Andrighetto et al. (2017) found that workers whose job was characterized as fragmented, repetitive, and dependent on the machine were perceived as more instrument-like and less able to have mental states. People objectified a factory worker more than an artisan, because they perceived the job of the factory worker as more alienating than the job of the artisan (Baldissarri, Valtorta, et al., 2017). Similarly, people objectified a socially tainted worker (having a subordinate relationship with others) more than a morally tainted worker (employing methods that are immoral) or physically tainted worker (working under dangerous and dirty conditions; Valtorta et al., 2019).

Performance evaluation and rewards at the team level can lead people to objectify others. More specifically, people engaged in more workplace objectification when their teamwork featured reward interdependence (Belmi & Pfeffer, 2018), performance-based (vs. fixed) incentive (Hur et al., 2021), and high (vs. low) peer evaluation (Hur et al., 2021). In these studies, workplace objectification was measured as perceived instrumentality of teammates or coworkers. These effects could be attributed to a heightened instrumental focus in workplace relationships in the pursuit of performance goals (Hur et al., 2021).

Not all individuals objectify others equally. Individual differences in extrinsic aspirations, such as money and power, predict workplace objectification. In these studies, workplace objectification was measured as perceived instrumentality. More specifically, love of money enhanced the objectifying appraisal and approach of the social targets who were instrumental to goal achievement (Teng et al., 2016; Wang & Krumhuber, 2017). The effect of money on workplace objectification diminished when people were competent in achieving the goal themselves (Teng et al., 2016). Likewise, power led to viewing and approaching social targets as instruments for goal attainment, regardless of pursuing a performance or sociability goal (Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Schaefer et al., 2018). Shea and Fitzsimons (2016) found that individuals with an individual advancement goal viewed people more on the basis of their

instrumental value than did individuals with an interpersonal affiliation goal. Conversely, gratitude reduced instrumental perceptions of general others (i.e., people who are not the benefactors; Shi et al., 2023).

Subjectivity uncertainty also contributes to workplace objectification. According to Landau et al.' (2012) subjectivity uncertainty theory, people objectify others when they desire successful interactions with others but feel uncertain about their capability to navigate others' subjectivity (i.e., idiosyncratic personality characteristics and mental states). Supporting this account, they found that when participants were led to feel uncertain about their managerial ability through test feedback (vs. control) and were concerned about their ability to handle employees' personality quirks (vs. subjectivity-unrelated concern), they objectified employees more by viewing them in terms of instrumental value for workplace goals than their personal attributes. The subjectivity uncertainty account complements market-pricing theory by suggesting workplace objectification as a means of reducing uncertainty or restoring control.

4.1.2. Self-objectification

Fewer studies (23 studies) have investigated the antecedents of self-objectification in comparison with objectifying others. In these studies, self-objectification was measured as self-instrumentality (9 studies), self-denial of agency and experience (3 studies), or all three attributes together (11 studies). These antecedents can be categorized as sources emanating from the self, supervisor, and organization. Subjectivity uncertainty theory suggests that workplace objectification can be considered as a means of reducing uncertainty by downplaying one's subjective attributes (Landau et al., 2012; Landau et al., 2015). Organizational justice, support, and culture can help reduce uncertainty and hence self-objectification. Indeed, organizational unfairness and economic inequality led people to perceive themselves as mere tools for organizations' interests (Sainz et al., 2023). Organizational innovation, goal, rule, and support orientations were positively associated with employees' self-attribution of mental states (i.e., less self-objectification; Auzoult & Personnaz, 2016). However, organizational cultural tightness, characterized by strong norms and severe sanctions of deviance, could lead employees to self-objectify, including a more self-instrumentality focus and less self-attribution of mental states (Wang et al., 2022).

Self-objectification shares some job features (fragmentation and repetitiveness) as antecedents with objectifying others. That is, people who performed a more fragmented, repetitive, and other-directed job perceived themselves as being more instrument-like and as having less human mental states including emotions, perceptions, thoughts, wishes, and intentions (Andrighetto et al., 2018; Baldissarri, 2017; Baldissarri et al., 2019; Baldissarri et al., 2020; Baldissarri, Andrighetto, et al., 2017; Sainz & Baldissarri, 2021; Valtorta & Monaci, 2023). Job insecurity was another source of self-objectification (Baldissarri, 2017; Baldissarri et al., 2023). Baldissarri (2017) attributed this to the notion that the state of uncertainty over one's job resembled the state of objects as passive entities at the mercy of external forces.

Interpersonal and personal factors play a role in self-objectification. Abusive supervision could lead workers to self-objectify (Sainz & Baldissarri, 2021). The perception of being objectified by supervisors and/or colleagues was positively associated with self-objectification (Auzoult & Personnaz, 2016; Baldissarri, 2017; Baldissarri et al., 2019), and this association was weaker for those who had a higher private self-consciousness (Auzoult, 2021; Auzoult & Personnaz, 2016). Auzoult and Personnaz (2016) explained that a heightened private self-consciousness facilitated the regulation of experiences of being objectified. Additionally, individuals with higher performance expectancy engaged in more job search related self-objectification (Nistor & Stanciu, 2017). Employees who experienced more burnout also self-objectified more (Auzoult & Personnaz, 2016). These findings indicate the importance of interpersonal and personal resources in the process of regulating self-objectification.

4.1.3. Experiencing objectification

The experience or perception of being objectified has its own unique antecedents with its focus on the objectified target rather than the objectifying agent as discussed above. Despite the limited number of studies (5 studies), several individual and organizational factors have been investigated, and measures of experiencing objectification either tapped instrumentality (3 studies) or covered all three attributes of objectification (2 studies). People can feel objectified by either their organization or others, when their fundamental needs are thwarted. Specifically, employees whose needs for control, belonging, and self-esteem were thwarted felt objectified by their organization (Demoulin et al., 2021). Job seekers perceived more workplace objectification from the companies that used more calculative and strategic language in their mission statement, such as Amazon's "we value calculated risk taking" and "accomplish more with less" (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021). Procedural, distributive, and interpersonal justice were negatively correlated with workplace objectification assessed four weeks later (Bell & Khoury, 2016). Bell and Khoury (2016) explained that justice satisfied fundamental existential, relational, and self-esteem needs and hence reduced perceived workplace objectification. The effect of procedural justice on workplace objectification was stronger for women than for men, arguably because women felt more uncertain of and sensitive to procedural justice.

Individual extrinsic motivations not only drove people to objectify others more, but also led people to feel more objectified by others. Two experimental studies showed that after receiving a favor or ingratiation, high-power individuals felt more objectified by others than equal-power individuals, such that they rated power-relevant attributes to be more important to their self-definition (Inesi et al., 2014).

4.2. Consequences of workplace objectification

4.2.1. Objectifying others

Workplace objectification has very different implications for the objectifying agent than for the objectified target. In line with the instrumental nature of workplace objectification, people objectify others by appraising them in terms of goal-relevant attributes and by

approaching others that aid goal achievement (Orehek & Weaverling, 2017). This focus on instrumentality embodies the market-pricing transaction in the pursuit of personal gains. It has been consistently observed that people showed a greater approach tendency toward instrumental others (Martínez et al., 2017; Teng et al., 2016). Individuals who thought of coworkers in a more instrumental way chose a competent coworker over sociable one (Belmi & Pfeffer, 2018). Likewise, people who perceived more goal instrumentality of work ties were more willing to socialize with work ties over non-work personal ties (Hur et al., 2021). Correspondingly, an instrumental view of social contacts led to the activation of sparser social networks (Shea & Fitzsimons, 2016).

An experimental study showed that participants who objectified employees more in terms of occupational roles were more likely to fire the employee who violated company policy (Landau et al., 2012). Workplace objectification also undermined ethics of care among bank workers (Laaser & Bolton, 2017). Taken together, workplace objectification led to more positive appraisals and approach toward useful others that aided goal attainment, while it increased avoidance or even punitiveness toward people who were deemed less useful.

4.2.2. Self-objectification

In contrast to the favorable implications that objectifying others has for the self, self-objectification has numerous negative implications for oneself, particularly for one's well-being. Self-objectification was linked to reduced belief in personal free will (Baldissarri et al., 2019; Baldissarri, Andrighetto, et al., 2017) and reduced well-being (Baldissarri, 2017; Baldissarri et al., 2023). Self-objectification had a negative impact on work-related outcomes, including less job satisfaction (Sainz et al., 2023; Sainz & Baldissarri, 2021), reduced affective organizational commitment (Valtorta & Monaci, 2023), less dignity at work (Sainz et al., 2023), and more conforming behavior (Andrighetto et al., 2018; Baldissarri et al., 2020). Only in one study that used a self-developed self-objectification scale was self-objectification positively associated with job-related self-efficacy and well-being (Nistor & Stanciu, 2017). Electroencephalography data showed that people who self-objectified exhibited decreased vigilance and increased mind-wandering, as indicated by beta and gamma event-related synchronization decrements on the temporo-occipital area and incremental brain connectivity (partial directed coherence) in the gamma band between occipital and frontal brain regions (Angulo-Sherman et al., 2022).

4.2.3. Experiencing objectification

Research has indicated that the experience of being objectified by organizations and by others is related to negative personal and interpersonal outcomes. People who felt more objectified by their organization experienced more negative emotions, reported lower organizational-based self-esteem, used more avoidance coping strategies (Demoulin et al., 2021), and had a higher intention to quit (Bell & Khoury, 2016). Likewise, prospective job seekers who perceived more workplace objectification showed less interest in applying to work at that organization, because workplace objectification undermined people's sense of belonging (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021). When diversity was promoted for more instrumental reasons (benefits for privileged racial groups and organizational success) in a not racially diverse organization, Black and Latinx individuals (as marginalized racial group members) reported lower sense of inclusion, greater need to educate their colleagues, and feeling more in the spotlight (Chaney, 2022). This minority spotlight could have negative implications for marginalized racial group members (Chaney, 2022).

People who felt more objectified by their supervisor and/or colleagues were more likely to internalize objectification and self-objectify (Auzoult, 2020; Baldissarri et al., 2014; Baldissarri & Andrighetto, 2021; Loughnan et al., 2017). Experiencing objectification triggered negative emotions (Poon et al., 2020) and burnout (exhaustion and cynicism; Baldissarri et al., 2014). The experience of being-objectified has further impacts on one's identity. After receiving a favor from a coworker, high-power participants felt more objectified by the coworker than did equal-power counterparts, which led them to rate power-relevant attributes to be more important to their identity and to be more willing to pay for high-status goods that were consistent with their identity (Inesi et al., 2014). Additionally, experiencing objectification harmed interpersonal relations, such that objectified people reported less sense of interpersonal closeness (Grünfelde, 2023), more sense of alienation (Grünfelde, 2023; Køster et al., 2023), more relative deprivation (Zhang, Chen, et al., 2023), less pro-sociality (Zhang, Chen, et al., 2023), and more aggression (Poon et al., 2020).

With regard to mediating mechanisms, research found that a thwarted sense of control explained the effect of workplace objectification on aggression (Poon et al., 2020). Moreover, restoring objectified targets' perceived control weakened their aggression (Poon et al., 2020). Likewise, workplace objectification reduced subjective well-being through limiting authenticity, and allowing objectified people to restore authenticity enhanced subjective well-being (Cheng et al., 2021). Experiencing objectification could also lead to worse performance indirectly through increased self-objectification and decreased task engagement (Baldissarri & Andrighetto, 2021).

Taken together, those findings show that an objectified target who is treated as a passive instrument for the agent's goal pursuit feels that their fundamental psychological needs are thwarted. From a psychological needs perspective, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs is essential to employee well-being and thriving (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). As experiencing objectification frustrates the basic needs for control, belonging, and self-esteem, experiencing objectification leads to negative affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes. Because thirteen out of these fourteen experiments took a two-cell study design in which a high level of workplace objectification was compared either to a low level of workplace objectification or to a control condition unrelated to workplace objectification (e.g., recalling last visit to a grocery store in the Experiment 4 of Poon et al., 2020), it was unclear whether workplace objectification could have non-linear effects or whether different attributes of workplace objectification could have distinct effects.

The consequences of observing objectification have received much less attention. Although an objectifying supervisor was perceived as less desirable and afforded less power by their subordinates than a non-objectifying supervisor, high (relative to low) power distance subordinates regarded objectifying supervisors as more desirable and afforded them more power (Zhang, Wisse, & Lord, 2023). Another study found that the more people observed workplace objectification, the less job satisfaction and prosocial

behavior, and the more incivility and turnover intention people reported at a later point in time (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021). Reduced sense of belonging mediated the relationship between observing objectification and those various outcome variables (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021).

5. Discussion

This review summarizes and integrates what is known about antecedents and consequences of workplace objectification. The integrative model in Fig. 2 shows key constructs and higher-order categories that extant research has empirically examined as antecedents and consequences of objectifying others, self-objectification, and experiencing objectification. The extant research shows that people are sometimes reduced to tools with their intrinsic value and needs being neglected. Consistent with market-pricing theory, performance and extrinsic goal pursuit can contribute to objectification of others, because those factors tend to elicit calculative, utilitarian thinking about others. From a subjectivity uncertainty perspective (Landau et al., 2012), people objectify others when they desire successful interactions with others but feel uncertain about their capability to navigate others' subjectivity. Workplace objectification, in turn, leads to more positive appraisals of and approach toward instrumental others that aid goal attainment, whereas less (or counter) instrumental others are devalued, avoided, or even punished.

With regard to the experience or perception of being objectified, people feel objectified by their organization or others when their fundamental control, belonging, and self-esteem needs are thwarted. As psychological needs theories highlight the essential role of need satisfaction in one's optimal functioning or alternative outcomes when basic needs are thwarted (Dweck, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000), individuals who are objectified exhibit more negative emotions, more avoidance coping, less pro-sociality, and more aggression than those who are not objectified. The experience of being-objectified also results in self-objectification, such that people come to view and monitor themselves from a third-party's standpoint. Job characteristics (e.g., fragmentation), job insecurity, organizational injustice, and personal factors (e.g., performance expectancy) can also contribute to self-objectification. Self-objectification is in turn linked to negative outcomes for oneself (e.g., reduced well-being).

Taken together, our review synthesizes market-pricing (Fiske, 1992), subjectivity uncertainty (Landau et al., 2012), and psychological needs perspectives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and shows that people often objectify others in order to pursue performance and extrinsic goals (e.g., money and power) or to reduce their uncertainty about others' subjectivity at the cost of thwarting the objectified targets' basic needs for control, belonging, and self-esteem.

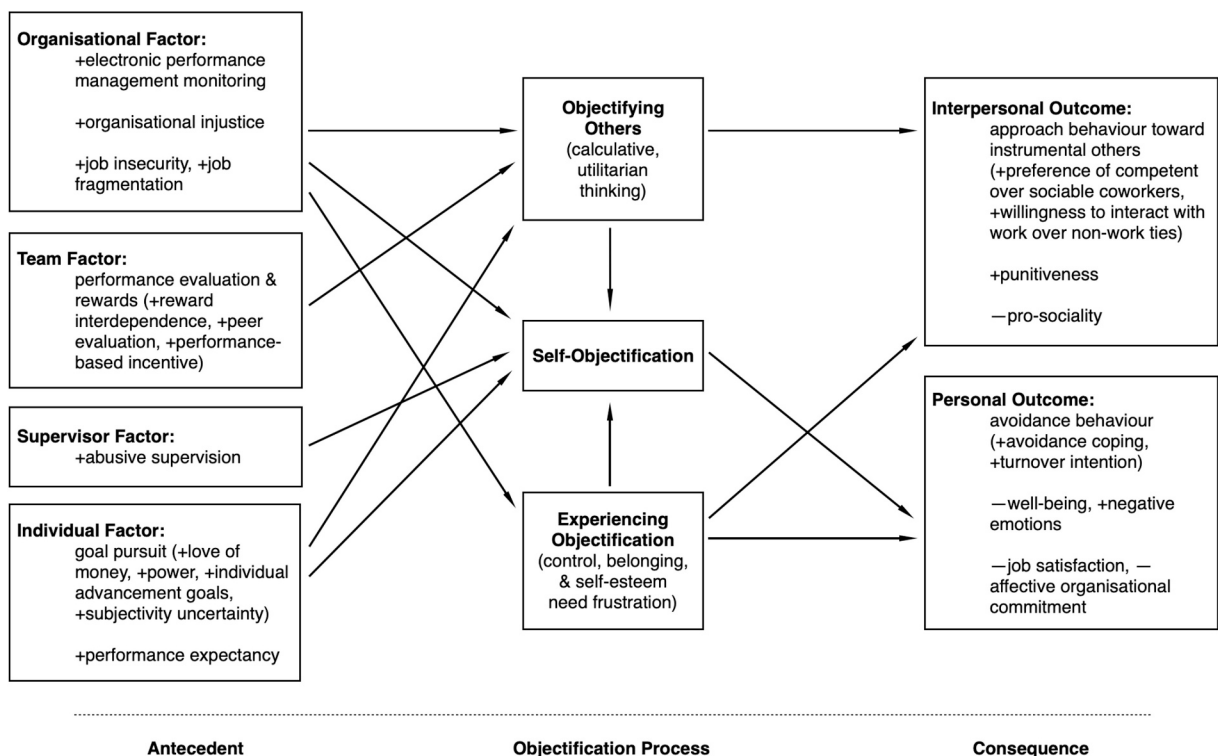


Fig. 2. An integrative model of workplace objectification.

5.1. Toward a paradoxical model of workplace objectification

A paradoxical model of workplace objectification emerges from our review (see Fig. 3). This model builds on extant studies and suggests how these key constructs are interrelated to form a holistic picture of workplace objectification. This model shows that on the bright side, workplace objectification facilitates the agent’s performance, extrinsic goals, and subjectivity uncertainty reduction, but that on the dark side, workplace objectification thwarts the target’s basic needs for control, belonging, and self-esteem. Workplace objectification can facilitate the objectifiers’ goal pursuit through an instrumental focus, but it can also hinder their goal pursuit because they are unlikely to gain continuous support from the objectified, whose psychological and socioemotional needs are thwarted by workplace objectification.

A paradox lens enables us to identify “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382), highlighting the tensions between instrumentality and affect as well as between performance and well-being at the interpersonal level. Our model accentuates the tension between instrumental and affective functions in workplace relationships and interactions. Transactional exchange and an associated instrumental focus are central to workplace relationships and can be incompatible with socioemotional needs (Ingram & Zou, 2008; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018; Weber, 1968). That is, instrumental concerns are paramount and often take precedence over affective needs in the workplace (Ingram & Zou, 2008; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). Workplace objectification exemplifies such a focus on instrumentality and the disregard for the affective component in workplace relationships and interactions. Workplace objectification triggers utilitarian thinking and stimulates approach behavior toward those who may be instrumental for goal attainment, and it leads to avoidance behavior and punitiveness toward those who are less instrumental to goal attainment. Indeed, individuals who are objectified experience more negative emotions (Poon et al., 2020) and less interpersonal closeness (Grinfelde, 2023) than those who do not feel objectified.

Yet, the formation and maintenance of beneficial workplace relationships are not only dependent on instrumentality or desired resources derived from the relationships, but also dependent on affective support (Colbert et al., 2016; Ingram & Zou, 2008). The lack of affective support can result in avoidance behavior and lead a person to distance oneself from others (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008). Furthermore, the extent to which one wants to provide instrumental support to others is contingent on how close one feels to them and to what extent one experiences positive affect in the relationship (Ferris et al., 2009; Ingram & Zou, 2008). Conversely, negative affect inhibits one from accessing others’ instrumental value and from providing instrumental benefit to others (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008). Moreover, instrumental exchange tends to be reciprocal over time, whether positive or negative (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). That is, over time the objectifiers can be treated as tools too. Therein lies the paradoxical tension between instrumentality and affect in the dynamics of workplace objectification.

Relatedly, our paradoxical model delineates the tension between performance and well-being at the interpersonal level. These two considerations can conflict, for instance when an employee expresses concern for a colleague’s well-being, while simultaneously setting high performance expectations that increase that colleague’s stress levels. While workplace objectification can be driven by performance goals and aid such goal attainment (Hur et al., 2021), it undermines the target’s well-being (Cheng et al., 2021). Yet, job performance is dependent on one’s well-being, such that happier employees tend to perform better (Tenney et al., 2016). People whose basic needs are thwarted by workplace objectification may experience reduced well-being (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brewer, 1991), and consequently they are less likely to continue performing at an adequate level. That is, people who are objectified experience psychological need frustration and resource depletion (Baldissarri et al., 2014; Demoulin et al., 2021), which can reduce their well-being and also limit future performance. The reciprocal norm in social exchange indicates that the objectified are inclined to withhold or take away resources from those who hold responsible for their misfortune, which in turn can negatively affect performance

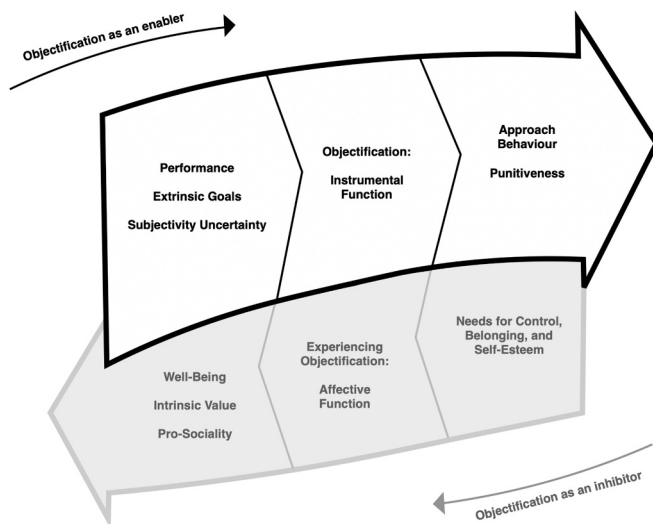


Fig. 3. A paradoxical model of workplace objectification.

(Gorgievski et al., 2011). This suggests the need to accommodate the conflicting yet interrelated elements of performance and well-being in the workplace objectification processes. Treating others as tools may be driven by performance goals, but the reduced well-being in the objectified may over time make it more difficult to reach those performance goals.

Our review adds to a more nuanced understanding of workplace objectification by recognizing these tensions between instrumentality and affect and between performance and well-being. We suggest that employees adopt a paradoxical frame to recognize and embrace these tensions. A paradoxical frame can also enable managers to leverage interdependence of these tensions to enhance both employee well-being and performance.

5.2. Theoretical limitations of current literature and suggestions for future research

Research on workplace objectification is in an early stage and requires further theoretical guidance and empirical examination. Researchers who have studied workplace objectification based on theories of market-pricing, self-determination, and subjectivity uncertainty have made some progress. Yet empirical tests of each theory remain relatively scarce and need further verification. It would be beneficial to integrate different theoretical insights from a paradox perspective. The topic of workplace objectification presents tremendous opportunities for future research, and this review hopefully provides some directions (see Table 1 for a list of recommendations).

First, regarding antecedents of workplace objectification, there is a need to examine whether critical work practices that are popularized today induce people to objectify others more or feel more objectified. As suggested by market-pricing theory, work conditions that elicit calculative mindsets are likely to trigger objectification (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021). Apart from identifying performance incentives as a cause of objectification (Hur et al., 2021), more research is needed to examine the potential effects of reward systems and other organizational practices on objectification as well as self-objectification. In particular, it is plausible that hourly payment, billing time, temporary contracts, and contingent rewards might induce people to think of themselves and their coworkers in a more calculative, objectifying fashion, for the reason that those practices could elicit a more economic view about time use (DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2007; Wright et al., 1993; Yakura, 2001), and that such an economic frame might shape how one views oneself and others (Fiske, 1992). In addition, organizational practices, such as lack of health care and lack of career development, may enhance employees' perception of being objectified by the organization, as those practices show little concern about employees' wellness or growth. The Covid-19 crisis highlighted how some workers (e.g., meatpackers) were objectified by their organization that required them to work in an unsafe environment (Lussenhop, 2020). By studying the impact of those practices on objectification, we would develop a better understanding of how those practices work out and hence move forward to provide a better work environment.

Second, goal orientations can play a key role in how people objectify others and how others respond to objectification. In line with the instrumental element of objectification, people evaluate others based on their usefulness in aiding goal achievement (e.g., Feeney, 2004; Fitzsimons et al., 2015; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010, 2011). Yet, it remains unclear how agents' diverse goals affect objectification. It would be interesting to investigate the possible different impacts of personal achievement goals and interpersonal affiliation goals on objectification. A two-cell experiment by Shea and Fitzsimons (2016) found that people with an individual advancement goal viewed social network contacts in a more instrumental manner than did those with an interpersonal affiliation goal. Nevertheless, no definitive conclusion can be drawn yet, because it cannot be excluded from that experiment the possibility that both advancement and affiliation goals would increase objectification, relative to a baseline condition. Moreover, other goals could be investigated (hedonistic goals,

Table 1
Suggested research questions for theoretical and methodological development.

Theoretical Development	Methodological Development
How do reward systems that elicit an economic frame affect objectification and self-objectification?	What are the psychometric properties of objectification measures?
How do organizational practices that imply little concern for employee wellness and development affect objectification and self-objectification?	Can the measurement of the three attributes of objectification (instrumentality, denial of agency, and denial of experience) be supported by factor analysis and generalized across contexts?
How does the pursuit of diverse goals (e.g., personal achievement goals, interpersonal affiliation goals, and pursuit of prestige) contribute to objectification?	Do attributes of objectification have unique or interactive effects in predicting outcomes?
Does objectification affect various kinds of performance, and if so how?	How can objectification be investigated as a multilevel phenomenon?
How can objectifiers' motivations (extrinsic goal pursuit and subjectivity uncertainty reduction) and the satisfaction or frustration of needs experienced by the objectified influence each other reciprocally in an integrated model?	How does objectification unfold over time?
When do objectifiers travel down a slippery slope through moral disengagement and when do they take reparative actions through moral cleansing?	Do between-person effects observed in prior research apply to within-person effects?
How do people perceive and respond to the perpetrators of objectification? Can individuals' paradoxical frames help reduce objectification?	How to reduce demand effects when objectification is manipulated? Can experimental designs be developed that allow for a more fine-grained differentiation between levels of objectification and between attributes of objectification?
How can different coping strategies adopted by the objectified influence their experience of objectification over time?	How to reduce endogeneity and method variance in field studies of objectification?

altruistic goals, pursuit of prestige, etc.). Notably, it is important to consider that although certain goals can lead to objectifying and undesirable behavior, there are boundary conditions. For instance, instrumental networking for professional goals led people to feel more dirty than personal, spontaneous networking, especially when people had a low (vs. high) power (Casciaro et al., 2014). It is an intriguing area for future research to investigate under which circumstances diverse goals affect objectification and its downstream consequences.

Third, more research is needed on how objectification can affect performance. Although it has been found that objectification predicts work attitudes and behavior, we know little about whether and how objectification (of various levels) affects individual, team, and organizational performance. It is plausible that objectification may undermine individuals' performance by diminishing their sense of competence and motivation to learn. In addition, objectification likely has a more negative impact on objectified victims' performance than objectifiers' performance, for the reason that people being objectified may experience greater "cognitive deconstruction" (Bastian & Haslam, 2011; Twenge et al., 2003).

It is also important to consider types of performance or performance in different types of tasks when examining the effect of objectification on performance. Christoff (2014) challenges the commonly held belief that suppressing empathy is necessary for problem solving in work settings by examining evidence from social psychology and neuroscientific research. More specifically, a distinction needs to be drawn between problem solving in physical domains and social domains: Reduced empathy may benefit mechanistic reasoning about physical objects (Jack et al., 2013), whereas empathy is not only compatible with but also crucial for problem solving in the social domains (Amodio & Frith, 2006; Harris & Fiske, 2006). That is, objectification may lead to worse performance on the social tasks that require more empathy, such as consultation. Moreover, objectification may predict poorer performance on complex tasks than simple algorithmic tasks, because it can undermine intrinsic motivation that is needed for complex tasks (see Deci et al., 2017; Hon, 2012; Weibel et al., 2010). Objectification may also hinder performance on the tasks that entail creative thinking (Ellamil et al., 2012).

Fourth, more research is needed to examine objectification processes or mechanisms. Limited research effort has been devoted to examining the underlying psychological processes of objectification and being-objectified experience, and even fewer on seeing objectification (see Belmi & Schroeder, 2021; Poon et al., 2020 for some exceptions). Although our review suggests a paradoxical model that integrates market-pricing, subjectivity uncertainty, and psychological needs perspectives of objectification, this model needs more direct empirical evidence. Future research could explore paradoxical models that simultaneously consider objectifiers' extrinsic motivations and need satisfaction or frustration of the objectified and examine underpinning functions of instrumentality and affect. These studies could also investigate the reciprocal effects between objectifiers and the objectified to better understand how these dynamics influence each other.

With regard to agents of objectification, it would be interesting to study how agents react to their own objectifying behavior over time and whether they travel down a slippery slope through moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al., 1996) or take reparative actions through moral cleansing (see Liao et al., 2018). In addition, system justification theory can contribute to objectification research by illustrating how people respond to the perpetrators of objectification, an overlooked topic in objectification literature. System justification theory (Jost, 2020; Jost & Banaji, 1994) suggests that people tend to rationalize and perpetuate the status quo, even when it implies inequality or unfair treatment. A system justification account helps to explain why objectification is sometimes accepted and why objectifiers sometimes fare well in organizational contexts.

Last but not least, the next stage of objectification research can be to study interventions or factors that protect against objectification. Supporting market-pricing and psychological needs theories, prior research has shown that a reminder of a low calculative mindset could effectively decrease objectification (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021), and that restoring sense of control could alleviate the detrimental impact of objectification (Poon et al., 2020). Future research could further leverage theoretical insights identified in this review to develop interventions, such as subjectivity uncertainty reduction and sense of belonging restoration. Future research can look into whether enhancing inter-subjectivity is another approach to reduce objectification. It could also be beneficial to enhance individuals' paradoxical frame to accommodate conflicting interests (Hahn et al., 2014).

In addition, from the perspective of the targets of objectification, public self-consciousness – the degree to which people are aware of themselves as social objects to be perceived and evaluated (Scheier & Carver, 1985) – may play a key role in reaction to objectification. Individuals who have a lower public self-consciousness might be less subject to the influence of objectification, as they attend less to social cues (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Another promising direction for future research would be to examine how different coping strategies that objectified targets use might influence their experience and occurrence of objectification over time. According to power-dependence theory (Emerson, 1962), the targets of objectification might engage in approach balancing operations (i.e., coalition formation and value enhancement) as coping strategies to reduce the occurrence of objectification through increasing the objectifier's dependence on them (see Wee et al., 2017).

5.3. Methodological limitations of current literature and suggestions for future research

Our review suggests five major methodological issues that temper the conclusions we could draw from the extant research on workplace objectification. It is of critical importance to address these issues to make strides forward. First, although studies predominantly used measures of objectification (59 out of 75 quantitative studies), the psychometric properties of these measures need to be further investigated and improved. It is imperative to establish both validity and reliability of objectification scales to advance this field. Despite the asserted importance of incorporating all three attributes (instrumentality, denial of agency, and denial of experience) into the definition of objectification (e.g., Baldissarri, Valtorta, et al., 2017), in practice the extant research has often measured objectification by assessing only one or two of the three attributes. Researchers have most frequently operationalized objectification in

terms of instrumentality, such as Gruenfeld et al.' (2008) Objectification Scale and Andrighetto et al.' (2017) Instrument-Like Attribution Measure. Other researchers have operationalized objectification in terms of denial of agency and experience, such as the Mental State Attribution Measure by Haslam et al. (2008) and the Mind Attribution Scale by Kozak et al. (2006). Notably, there are measures that incorporate all three attributes, such as Belmi and Schroeder's (2021) Objectification Scale and the relatively short Role Objectification Scale from Landau et al. (2012), which we encourage future work to consider.

Notably, a measure that incorporates all three attributes and is specifically focused on objectification taking place in the work context might be very useful. Such further examination can include validation through factor analysis and the investigation of whether such validation would be applicable across different samples and contexts. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate the potential unique effect of each attribute of objectification or to study their potential interactive effects on outcome variables. Furthermore, there is a need to examine convergent and discriminant validity to empirically map workplace objectification in relation to other close constructs, such as dehumanization.

In terms of internal consistency reliability, the frequently applied 10-item Objectification Scale developed by Gruenfeld et al. (2008) requires further examination and improvement, as its Cronbach's alpha value turned out to fall in a low-to-moderate range (from 0.67 to 0.79 with one exception of an adapted version reported as 0.91 in Study 6 of Belmi & Schroeder, 2021). Moreover, it might not be appropriate to use Cronbach's alpha to estimate internal consistency reliability, for the reason that the strict assumptions underlying Cronbach's alpha were often violated, including tau equivalence, continuous items with normal distributions, and uncorrelated errors (e.g., McNeish, 2018). We would like to recommend that future researchers verify the assumptions prior to calculating Cronbach's alpha or utilize alternative methods that do not make rigid assumptions as Cronbach's alpha to assess reliability, such as omega coefficients (e.g., McNeish, 2018).

Second, it would be beneficial for studies on objectification to move beyond the individual level of analysis, which has been the predominant approach of existing research, and to investigate objectification as a multilevel phenomenon. It has been argued that some organizations objectify employees more than others (Bell & Khoury, 2011; Belmi & Schroeder, 2021; Caesens et al., 2017), but the empirical investigation of objectification at an organizational level is scarce. It would be advantageous for future research to look into objectification at group, industry or country levels.

Third, little is known about how workplace objectification unfolds over time. The majority of field studies have studied objectification as a between-person variable, using a cross-sectional design. Consequently, it is unclear whether those between-person effects observed in prior research apply to within-person effects. Investigating how workplace objectification varies over time and to what extent the theoretical frameworks that we reviewed could explain the intra-individual processes of workplace objectification would enhance our understanding of the topic. For instance, future research might consider examining whether workplace objectification undermines one's sense of control over time as a within-person process by adopting a longitudinal study design (in contrast to the between-person process studied by Poon et al., 2020). The use of longitudinal models can be helpful because they allow for the separation of within-person and between-person effects and provide additional advantages, such as the establishment of temporal precedence, an increase in statistical power, a decrease in alternative explanations, and more comprehensive measurement (e.g., Curran & Bauer, 2011). Longitudinal designs would be especially relevant when it comes to intervention research of workplace objectification.

Fourth, regarding experimental studies of workplace objectification, there is a need for more nuanced and rigorous study designs. One issue with the existing manipulations of objectification is that they may induce demand effects, such that participants are aware of what the experimenter expects them to do (Orne, 2009). For instance, a common manipulation is to ask participants to recall an experience in which they feel objectified (e.g., Loughnan et al., 2017; Poon et al., 2020, Experiment 4). Such a recall task is problematic because it may lead participants to form an idea of the experiment's purpose and it may subsequently trigger responses that align with what they believe the researchers expect to find. As such, the results derived from such a manipulation are confounded with demand effects. One approach to reduce demand effects is to use more subtle or implicit manipulations of workplace objectification. Manipulations that bear more experimental realism could be a better alternative to recall tasks, such as receiving objectifying feedbacks from a work partner during collaborative tasks (Poon et al., 2020, Experiment 1). It would also be advantageous to use manipulations that allow for a more fine-grained differentiation between levels of objectification and between attributes of objectification.

Lastly, field studies on workplace objectification have mostly relied on cross-sectional self-reports, which poses a threat to the validity of the research findings considering the endogeneity and common-method concerns. That is, in field studies variables are usually observed rather than manipulated, and therefore they often share underlying causes with the outcome variables. This so called endogeneity makes it impossible to assess if observed relationships between variables are causal or just correlated due to shared hidden factors (Antonakis et al., 2010). Moreover, all measures in such a study share a common source (or sources) of method variance, which can inflate or bias observed relationships among measured variables (e.g., Spector et al., 2019). Social desirability could be a notable source of method variance in the use of self-reports. To reduce method variance, future researchers might consider obtaining measures of predictor and criterion variables from different sources, introducing temporal separation between the measures of predictor and criterion variables, varying response formats of scales (e.g., agreement vs. frequency), and/or using statistical control (e.g., Podsakoff et al., 2012).

6. Theoretical contributions and practical implications

6.1. Theoretical contributions

This review makes three primary contributions. First, our review contributes to workplace objectification literature by integrating

disparate studies and relatively siloed perspectives. Prior studies have largely focused on either the objectifier or the objectified. The lack of integration obscures the full implications of objectification. Our review synthesizes market-pricing (Fiske, 1992), subjectivity uncertainty (Landau et al., 2012), and psychological needs perspectives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and shows that people often objectify others in order to pursue performance and extrinsic goals (e.g., money and power) or to reduce their uncertainty about others' subjectivity at the cost of thwarting the objectified targets' basic needs for control, belonging, and self-esteem. While market-pricing and subjectivity uncertainty accounts explain how objectifiers can benefit from objectification, psychological needs theories suggest that objectification can have detrimental effects on the objectified.

Our review captures the paradoxical feature of workplace objectification. This model highlights the dual nature of workplace objectification: On the bright side objectification facilitates the agent's goal pursuit and need to reduce uncertainty, but on the dark side objectification undermines the target's fundamental needs. The model accentuates the paradoxical tension between instrumental and affective functions underlying objectification processes, such that despite the contrast, instrumental and affective functions are closely tied to each other. Our review adds to a more nuanced understanding of objectification by recognizing these tensions and suggests that juxtaposing these tensions can foster more constructive responses. Through viewing objectification as an integrated dynamic process between the objectifier and the objectified, we can identify opportunities for interventions and develop strategies that address the complexities of objectification, ultimately leading to a more virtuous and sustainable cycle of interactions.

Relatedly, this review speaks to an ongoing debate about whether objectification yields negative outcomes. On the one hand, some scholars argue that objectification is detrimental and immoral (e.g., Belmi & Schroeder, 2021; Poon et al., 2020), for the reason that a person cannot and should not be reduced to a tool devoid of humanity. On the other hand, some suggest that objectification is inevitable and can be benign (e.g., Orehek et al., 2018; Orehek & Weaverling, 2017). For instance, Orehek and Weaverling (2017) contend that people are generally mentally represented in the same way as objects, following the same means-goal principles. That is, people are unavoidably seen as means to goals and evaluated in terms of instrumentality to goals. Thereby the consequences of objectification depend on what goal is relevant and on whether the objectified person wants to serve that goal. However, by considering the objectified target's consent, the latter acknowledges the target's self-determination and conceptualizes objectification primarily as instrumentality. As such, perceiving others in terms of instrumental value may have benign effects, when it is not combined with assuming lack of agency and lack of experience (Converse & Fishbach, 2012; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008).

Our review suggests that an important distinction needs to be drawn between the objectifying agent and objectified target regarding the implications of objectification, as objectification can have favorable implications for the agent who objectifies others in terms of goal pursuit and subjectivity uncertainty reduction, but unfavorable outcomes for the target. Our review helps recognition of this conflicting feature of objectification and fosters responses to accommodate conflicting interests and needs.

Second, our review adds to the debate about how organizations should balance the concerns related to profitability versus employee thriving. There is a long-standing and widely-utilized perspective that the primary purpose of an organization is to earn profits (e.g., Friedman, 1970), and that labor is a cost that can be cut or eliminated through outsourcing, automation and such wherever possible (Pfeffer, 1998). Such a belief system seeks an alignment of social concerns with economic objectives (Hahn et al., 2014), and social concerns such as workplace friendships are deemed as a hindrance to be eliminated (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). In contrast, some suggest that an organization should put people first and be dedicated to employee thriving (e.g., Pfeffer, 1998; Pollard, 1996). This people-centered approach recognizes the importance of people to organizational success and challenges the former profit-oriented approach by arguing that an exclusive focus on profit can be counterproductive through destroying employees' work motives. Moreover, it is important to note that labor commodification, as one of the defining features of the capitalist mode, does not necessarily imply workplace objectification (Shields & Grant, 2010). Our review suggests that an exclusive focus on profit may not be sustainable, because employees may feel objectified and in turn show ill-being and intend to leave their organization. Rather, attending to conflicting goals can foster adaptability and sustainability.

Third, our review contributes to human resource management literature by revealing how utilization of individuals as resources can paradoxically result in resource depletion. Our review suggests that while individual capacities can be utilized to generate economic or other instrumental value, people can feel objectified and consequently experience burnout, reduced organization-based self-esteem, and heightened turnover intention. Because workplace objectification undermines one's self-determination, it can exert a profound adverse impact on well-being and work performance (e.g., Cerasoli et al., 2014; Deci et al., 2017). Moreover, experiencing objectification harms interpersonal relationships, which may inhibit or disrupt the emergence processes of human capital resources and social capital resources (Ray et al., 2023). That is, the exploitation of humans as resources can potentially lead to resource depletion through objectification.

6.2. Implications for practice

One practical suggestion is that an organization can reduce workplace objectification by diminishing the use of objectifying language when referring to employees. For example, the term "human resource management" can be replaced by "people management," for that "human resource" likens people to value-conferring tools or fungible resources. More importantly, an organization needs to enact such a people-oriented narrative by providing learning opportunities, increasing employee participation, promoting employee voice, and enhancing employment security. Performance management practices can be designed in a way that supports (rather than thwarts) employees' psychological needs (Kubiak, 2022). Finding a synergy that accommodates conflicting goals and interests can enable organizing to become more sustainable and resilient (Hahn et al., 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Our review also provides practical implications on how to deal with the challenges posed by surging gig economy. Over 20% of US and EU workers now work in gig economy (McKinsey & Co., 2016), and this number continues growing worldwide (Kässi &

Lehdonvirta, 2018). The gig economy transfers market uncertainty and risk onto workers and renders social relations at work highly transactional (Gandini, 2019). While people embrace independence and flexibility afforded by gig work, some can feel objectified by the job insecurity and the precariousness of the work. To improve gig workers' experience, we suggest that more legal protections be granted to these workers with respect to their working conditions, and that digital platforms through which gig workers offer services cultivate sense of relatedness between workers and clients, build experience-sharing communities, and grant more autonomy to gig workers (e.g., the rights to set pay rates, to determine schedule, and to accept or deny clients' requests). At the same time, to thrive in gig economy, workers need to combat objectifying forces and manage uncertainty by embracing the challenge with an entrepreneurial spirit.

7. Conclusion

Should a person doubt his or her existential value if that person is judged as useless (e.g., low productivity)? Or should a musician (or music-lover as the market would define) stop playing music if there is no market value? A market-pricing view would discourage people from doing any useless thing in terms of economic returns. Meanwhile, it renders the purchase of a human (surrogacy) or other forms of objectification possible. Our review supports the notion that workplace objectification originates in a market-pricing mode, such that people think of themselves and others in a calculative utilitarian way.

Furthermore, our review debunks the argument that workplace objectification is inevitable and inconsequential (e.g., Harris et al., 2014). The empirical evidence shows that people often objectify others in order to achieve their extrinsic goals or reduce subjectivity uncertainty, while undermining the objectified targets' fundamental control, belonging, and self-esteem needs. As such, workplace objectification often sabotages targets' work motives and engagement, which might have (financial) implications for organizations. That is, employers who aspire to earn profits by objectification might pay a price. Juxtaposing contradictory elements in objectification can help create a more virtuous cycle where competing forces enter synergy.

Our review is certainly not without limitations. First, although we propose that objectification is essentially characterized by instrumentality, denial of agency, and denial of experience, prior studies have often measured objectification by incorporating only one or two of these attributes. This may have weakened the empirical foundation of our conclusions. Future research could benefit from a thorough examination of the construct validity of existing objectification measures. Second, our literature search efforts were limited to objectification terms. We did not include alternative terms such as dehumanization in our search. However, if these alternative research domains suffer from similar problems like the ones we identified for objectification, some of dehumanization literature might actually focus on objectification, and therefore using a wider range of search terms could potentially have offered more insights to this review. Third, while our analytical approach shed light on certain dimensions and their interrelations, it inevitably overlooked others. Different scholars might identify alternative dimensions and theoretical frameworks. Lastly, this review has largely focused on quantitative studies, and future research could benefit from a more thorough examination of qualitative studies. We hope that this review will serve as a platform for scholars to continue building theory and advance practice.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Bibi Zhang: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Barbara Wisse:** Supervision, Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. **Robert G. Lord:** Supervision, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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Appendix A. Supplemental material

Supplemental material to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2025.101104>.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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