

## **The Relationship among Self-Objectification, Emotional Regulation and Perceived Stress in University Students**

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The study examined the relationship among self-objectification, emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression), and perceived stress in university students. The sample of university students (N=200) aged 19-24 was recruited. Assessment measures included demographic form, the Self-Objectification Scale (SOQ) (Fredrickson et al.,1998), the Emotional Regulation Scale (ERQ) (Gross & John, 2003), and the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) (Cohen, 1983). Data were analyzed by using SPSS 22. The results showed that emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal) is significantly positively related to perceived stress. However, the relationship between self-objectification and perceived stress is not significant. Moreover, Regression analysis revealed that the emotional regulation(cognitive reappraisal), and type of institute are significant predictors of perceived stress. Furthermore, emotional regulation significantly mediated the relationship between self-objectification and perceived stress. Implications are discussed.

**Keywords.** Self-Objectification; Emotional Regulation; Perceived Stress; University Students

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The prevalence of perceived stress is alarmingly increasing in university students. The researchers reported that the prevalence of stress in university students was 84.4% (Asif et al., 2020). Self-objectification causes stress and affects mental health (Tiggemann & Slater, 2015). Self-objectification refers to valuing oneself based on appearance. It is linked to negative emotions such as anxiety and body shame (Winn & Cornelius, 2020). Emotional regulation is the ability to regulate emotions. It is influenced by self-objectification. Emotional dysregulation causes stress (De la Fuente Arias & Vera Martínez, 2020). Perceived stress is related to self-objectification and emotional dysregulation (Dimas et al.,2021). Therefore, it is important to study the relationship among self-objectification, emotional regulation, and perceived stress in university students.

Self-objectification can be defined as viewing oneself as an object instead of a human being. It affects the well-being of an individual (Arroyo et al.,2014). The concept of self-objectification is based on objectification theory. According to this theory, three types of self-objectification exposures are direct comments from others, indirect communication from others, and content of media that objectifies the body of women (Fredrickson & Roberts,1997).In self-objectification individuals judge themselves based on appearance which affects emotional regulation (Monachesi et al., 2023).

Emotional regulation can be defined as the ability to manage and control emotions. Two major types of emotional regulation are cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Cognitive reappraisal refers to reinterpreting a stressful situation. It is a healthy and adaptive emotional regulation strategy. Expressive suppression is defined as suppressing one's emotions to deal with stressful situations. It is an unhealthy and maladaptive strategy of emotional regulation (Gross & John,2003). Emotional dysregulation causes stress. Katana and colleagues

(2019) reported that emotional regulation is negatively related to perceived stress.

Perceived stress can be defined as the degree to which situations are appraised as stressful. It measures an individual's thoughts and feelings about unpredictability, uncontrollability of stress, and coping ability (Phillips, 2016). Perceived stress affects the mental health of students (Alwhaibi et al.,2023). Therefore, it is important to study the relationship among self-objectification, emotional regulation, and perceived stress in university students.

## Objectives

The objectives of the present study are:

- To investigate the relationship among self-objectification, emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression), and perceived stress in university students.
- To find the mediating role of emotional regulation in the relationship of self-objectification and perceived stress in university students.

## Hypotheses

The hypotheses of the following study are mentioned below:

- There is likely to be a significant positive relationship among self-objectification and emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression) and perceived stress in university students.
- Self-objectification and emotion regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression) are likely to be significant positive predictors of perceived stress in university students.
- Emotional regulation is likely to mediate the relationship between self-objectification and perceived stress in university students.
- There are likely to be significant gender differences in perceived stress in university students.

## Method

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship among self-objectification, emotional. Regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression) and perceived stress in university students.

## Research Design

The correlational research design was used to investigate the relationship among self objectification, emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression), and perceived stress in university students.

## Participants

The sample comprised 200 (male and female) university students. A hundred males and a hundred females were recruited. The age range of ample was 19 to 24 years. The sample was recruited from different universities in Lahore. Regular university students were recruited. Students suffering from any physical disability or psychological illness were excluded from the study.

## Instruments

### ***Demographic Sheet***

A demographic information sheet was used to gather personal information. It included age, gender, level of education, semester, institute, number of siblings, family members, birth

SELF-OBJECTIFICATION, EMOTIONAL REGULATION AND PERCEIVED STRESS order, relationship with father, relationship with mother, socioeconomic status, and daily Social media Usage.

### ***Self-Objectification Questionnaire (SOQ)***

This scale was developed by Fredrickson and colleagues (1998). This scale comprised two subscales: self-objectification trait and self-objectification state. The trait form (SOS-T) measures how much a person in general self objectifies. The state form (SOS-S) measures how a person is objectifying right now. It consists of 15 items. All the items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Cronbach's alpha reliability was 0.88.

### ***Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)***

It was used to measure emotional regulation. It consists of 10 items. It has two subscales: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. All items are rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The Cronbach's alpha was 0.83 (Gross & John, 2003).

### ***Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)***

It was used to measure perceived stress. It consists of 14 items. It uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never (0) to very often (4). Seven items are reverse scored: 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 13. The total score is the sum of all items. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .79. (Cohen et al., 1983).

## **Procedure**

First of all, Permission was taken from the authors of the scales. Permission was taken for data collection from respective authorities. A general overview of the purpose of the research was briefly described to the participants. Consent was taken from the participants. Instructions regarding the questionnaire were also provided to the participants. They were assured of confidentiality. Participants were also informed about the right to withdraw if they wanted at any point. After the data collection, the data was entered into SPSS and analyzed.

## **Results**

The study aimed to assess the relationship among self-objectification, emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression), and perceived stress in university students. It was hypothesized that there is likely to be a significant positive correlation of self-objectification and emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression), with perceived stress in university students. For this purpose, Pearson Product Moment analysis was run and the results are shown in Table 1.

### **Table 1**

*Inter-Correlation Among Self-objectification, Emotional Regulation and Perceived Stress in University Students (N = 200).*

Variables	Institute	SOS	PSS	Cog. R	Exp. S
Institute	1	.237**	.190**	.147*	.076
SOS		1	.097	.172*	.130
PSS			1	.226**	.122
Cog. R				1	.620**
Exp. Sup					1

*Note:* \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , SOS=Self-Objectification, Cog.R=Cognitive Reappraisal, Exp.S=Expressive Suppression, PSS=Perceived Stress Scale

Table 1 shows that cognitive reappraisal and perceived stress are significantly positively related. Additionally, among demographics, the type of institute also has a

significant positive correlation with perceived stress.

Moreover, it was postulated that self-objectification and emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression) are likely to be significant predictors of perceived stress in university students. Results are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Self-objectification and Subscales of Emotional Regulation as a Predictor of Perceived Stress in University Students (N=200).*

Predictors	Perceived Stress				
			95% CI		
	B	SE	B	LL	UL
Institute	4.378	2.76	.154	.385	8.371
SOS	.019	2.02	.027	-.081	.119
ERQ					
Cog. R	.158**	.065	.251**	.029	.288
Exp. S	-.025	.085	-.026	-.192	.142
$\Delta R^2$	.077**				
F	4.082				

Note: SO=Self-objectification, ERQ=Emotional Regulation Questionnaire,  $\Delta R^2$ =Change in R square, B=Beta, B=Standardized Beta, p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001.

This table shows that emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal) and type of institute are significant positive predictors of perceived stress. Likewise, it was postulated that emotional regulation significantly mediates the relationship between self-objectification and perceived stress. Mediation analysis was carried out via PROCESS. Results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Emotional Regulation as a Mediator between Self-objectification and Perceived Stress (N=200).*

Types	Estimates	95 CI			t	P
		SE	LL	UL		
Indirect Effect	.02	.01	.001	.05		
SO ----- ER	.26	.10	.04	.47	2.4	.01
ER ----- PS	.08	.03	.02	.15	2.6	.01
Direct Effect	.05	.05	-.05	.14	.92	.35
Total Effect	.07	.05	-.02	.16	1.3	.17

Note: SO=Self-objectification, ER=Emotional Regulation, PS=Perceived Stress, SE=Standard Error, CI=Confidence Interval, LL=Lower Limit, UL=Upper Limit.

This table shows that the indirect effect is significant which indicates that emotional regulation significantly mediates the relationship between self-objectification and perceived stress. Furthermore, it was assumed that there is likely to be significant gender differences in perceived stress in university students. An Independent sample t-test was applied to test gender differences. Results are shown in Table 4.

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**Table 4**

*Gender Differences on Perceived Stress in University Students (N=200)*

Variable	Male	Female	95% CI			Cohen's d	
	(N=100)	(N=100)	M(SD)	M(SD)	t(198)	P	LL
Perceived Stress	19.950(5.8987)	21.430(5.1683)	-1.887	.061	-3.026	.0665	0.26688

*Note:* p=significance level, LL=Lower Limit, UL= Upper Limit.

Table 3 indicates no significant gender differences in perceived stress in university students.

## Discussion

The purpose of our research was to assess the relationship among self-objectification, emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression), and perceived stress in university students. It was hypothesized that there is likely to be a significant positive correlation among self-objectification and emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression) and perceived stress in university students. The results indicated that emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal), has a significant positive correlation with perceived stress. Similarly, the researchers reported that emotional regulation and stress are positively related in university students (Peixoto et al., 2022).

Moreover, It was postulated that self-objectification and emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression) are significant predictors of perceived stress in university students. The results revealed that emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal) is a significant predictor of perceived stress. Likewise, the researchers reported that the ability to regulate emotions predicts stress significantly (Kadović, et al.,2022).

Furthermore, it was assumed that emotional regulation significantly mediates the relationship between self-objectification and perceived stress in university students. Mediation analysis was run via PROCESS. The results indicated that emotional regulation significantly mediates the relationship between self-objectification and perceived stress. Specifically, the mediating role of emotional regulation in the above-mentioned relationship is not studied yet. However, self-objectification causes stress, and emotional regulation helps in responding to stressful situations adaptively (Kadovic et al.,2022). Consequently, emotional regulation may mediate the relationship between self-objectification and perceived stress significantly.

Additionally, it was hypothesized that there is likely to be significant gender differences in perceived stress in university students. The results show no significant gender differences in perceived stress. Likewise, Graves and colleagues (2021) reported nonsignificant gender differences in perceived stress in university students.

## Implications

Awareness programs should be planned to reduce self-objectification in university students as it affects emotional regulation and leads to perceived stress. University students who are vulnerable to self-objectification should be identified and interventions should be planned for their emotional well-being and stress management.

## Limitations and Suggestions

- The sample size was small. For external validity, a larger sample should be recruited.
- The sample comprised of young adults, self-objectification should be studied in adolescents as well.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal) is significantly related to perceived stress. Moreover, emotional regulation significantly mediates the relationship between self-objectification and perceived stress.

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