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To cite this article: Anna Tippett (2022): Lads' mags and the postfeminist masquerade: the aftermath of an era of inequality, Women's History Review, DOI: [10.1080/09612025.2022.2112424](https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2022.2112424)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2022.2112424>



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Published online: 19 Aug 2022.



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Lads' mags and the postfeminist masquerade: the aftermath of an era of inequality

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ABSTRACT

This Viewpoint considers the rise of lads' mags and wider lad culture between 1996–2006 as a historically illuminating period that marked a shift in societal perceptions of gender equality and contributed towards a hostile perception of feminism. Themes of pornification, hypersexualisation and postfeminism are explored within the context of recent debates on the representation of gender and sexuality in British popular culture. The key issue emerging from this analysis is that there has been a rebranding of sexism through a postfeminist discourse, referred to in this paper as the 'postfeminist masquerade', which has resulted in a wider politicisation of feminism concerned with representations of the female body. This politicisation has eroded debates on gender representation into a reductive binary, the 'exploitative-liberating dichotomy', and has consequently delimited contemporary engagements with feminism. Lads' mags and wider lad culture are thus analysed as having perpetuated this binary and serve as a historical symbol of how the state of gender relations have been subjected to contestation amongst feminist activists, media commentators and academics since the turn of the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS

Feminism; gender; hypersexualisation; lads' mags; pornification; postfeminism

This Viewpoint offers a historical analysis of lads' mags, examining them as cultural objects which symbolised a reductive state of feminism and gender relations in British popular culture and wider society. It addresses the 'era of the lad' and provides a commentary on the entrenched problem of the hypersexualisation of women in popular culture. This Viewpoint article seeks to move beyond the paralysing 'exploitative-liberating dichotomy' and analyses the sexualisation of women from traditional feminist perspectives which are sex-positive but sexism-critical. From this standpoint, I suggest that debates in the field of sexualisation should move towards an amalgamation of feminist and postfeminist arguments towards 'equality of objectification'; which involves hypersexualised representations in mainstream popular culture depicting diverse and equal representations of both sexes, even if deemed vulgar. In these discussions, I focus on lads' mags as a symbolic cultural product, which were particularly popular

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during the decade of 1996–2006, provoking feminist debate during this period and beyond. Following on from this historical analysis, the concepts of ‘hypersexualisation’ and ‘pornification’, which are pertinent to contentious debates on lads’ mags, are identified as manifestations that can be perceived as both degrading – *from feminist perspectives* – and liberating – *from postfeminist perspectives* – for women.

Although all leading lads’ mags titles have closed in recent years, this Viewpoint scrutinises the contributions they made to wider lad culture and the subsequent effects this has had on constructions of masculinity and femininity in the media and in British popular culture today. The decline in the magazines’ sales, which led to the subsequent closure of leading titles in 2015,¹ should not be seen as a complete victory for women or for feminism. Indeed, the closure of *Nuts* was not the result of a shift in cultural attitudes towards sex; it was the result of a growth in online pornography, which offered consumers the possibility of anonymous and free access to an endless variety of readily available pornographic material from the comfort of their own homes.² The predicament of accessibility and finance thus helped rescind the experience of buying the magazines themselves. As noted in a 2014 article: ‘why pay £1.80 for the watered-down porn in *Nuts* magazine when you can access all genres of hard-core porn online for free?’³ According to the website Family Safe Media,⁴ \$3,075.64 was spent on pornography every second in 2006, and the pornography industry during this time was considered larger than the revenues of the top technology companies combined (Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo!, Apple, Netflix and EarthLink). Furthermore, the growth of social media, alongside other segments of mainstream popular culture, such as music videos and advertisements, have become more sex and aesthetics-focussed in line with the growth of the pornography industry.⁵ Within this culture, women’s bodies have been rigidly constructed by the media into what Walter⁶ aptly termed in 2010 as ‘living dolls’; an artificial model of femininity constructed as a hegemonic ideal to which women should aspire.

Sexualisation as a phenomenon has consequently become a growing area of concern (see The Bailey Review⁷ from 2011 and The Sexualisation of Young People Review⁸ from 2010). Within sexualised culture, sexual attributes are classed as a measure of a person’s value and worth⁹ and ‘sexiness’ has become something that one must continually achieve, particularly for women whose sense of worth is measured by their bodies as various studies have made clear.¹⁰ The moral panics that surround sexualisation can consequently be viewed as illustrative of wider societal apprehensions over the protection of children from ‘harmful’ media, alongside what are argued to be degrading and inhumane portrayals of women.¹¹ It is therefore important to examine the meanings embedded in the representations of sex and sexuality, alongside the reactions to these representations.¹²

The era of the lad

We gave young men the tools to get ahead in life!

It’s the best job in the world. I’ve had the time of my life!

[Nuts] made me more confident, via the method of getting my boobs out. Now in the high street, I have my head held high.

- Testimonies from glamour models in the last issue of *Nuts* magazine (2014)

The era of the lad, marked by the launch of *Loaded* magazine in 1994, forced a shift in the feminist movement, disrupting traditional second-wave feminist notions of gender equality. In the words of one of *Loaded's* original editors Tim Southwell in 1998, '*Loaded* came into the market like a publishing hurricane, full of attitude and irreverence', championing what Southwell termed 'another England' beyond the 'Beefeater, fucking poncing around in Florence, kind of high-brow Britain'. The emergence of lads' mags signified a new wave of masculinity that aimed to raise attention of this 'other England' in which chauvinism, hedonism and vulgarity were embedded. Known as the 'new lad'¹³, the male consumer targeted by lads' mags consisted of a young, hedonistic man interested in sport, drinking and women. 'Whether 'new lad' was simply a necessarily new market invention, or a genuine manifestation of the zeitgeist of the early 1990s is difficult to ascertain'.¹⁴ However, the construction of this form of masculinity by Brown and Southwell, editors of *Loaded* magazine in 1994, served to portray the new lad as an idealised form of masculinity throughout the 1990s.

The category of 'new lad' as a historical label symbolises several gendered connotations. It was the embodiment of the hegemonic masculinity of the 1990s and early 2000s; unashamedly sexist and recklessly hedonistic, with 'ironic' misogyny serving to normalise its sexually charged, sometimes aggressive, tones. Lads' mags existed as cultural products of the time, aptly embodying the value-system of the new lad. The 'almost porn'¹⁵ genre of lads' mags perpetuated an increasingly sexualised media landscape, which served as a 'powerful tool in the mainstreaming of sexist images and ideals'.¹⁶ Lads' mags were a caricature of all that the new lad was; they were printed ideology of a traditional masculinity that had been forgotten due to the efforts of feminist movements. The new lad was thus a return to a traditional, hegemonic form of masculinity which celebrated heterosexuality as a patriarchal ideal. He existed in contrast to the 'new man' who was image conscious, responsible and increasingly succumbing to many of the same aesthetic pressures placed upon women.

The new lad symbolised a powerful backlash against second-wave feminism, particularly in terms of sexual equality. Lad culture opposed contemporary masculinities, such as that of the 'new man', as un-macho, self-indulged, effeminate and generally weak. The dichotomous relationship between the new lad and the new man as social constructions was perhaps best summarised by Gill in 1993¹⁷:

The 'new man' [was] generally characterized as sensitive, emotionally aware, respectful of women, and egalitarian in outlook – and, in some accounts, as narcissistic and highly invested in his physical appearance. He [was] as likely to be gay as straight. By contrast, 'new lad' [was] depicted as hedonistic, post-(if not anti) feminist, and pre-eminently concerned with beer, football and 'shagging' women.

By the time lads' mags were in significant decline (which, for most titles, was from 2010 onwards), the phenomenon of lad culture crossed over to UK universities, with platforms such as Uni Lad aiming to capitalise off the successes of lads' mags in the online world. There was a wave of interest in lad culture amongst UK students from the early 2010s, 'with a variety of articles citing activities such as sports initiations, sexist-themed parties, the sexual pursuit of women freshers (termed 'seal clubbing' in one institution) and a culture of casual verbal and physical sexual harassment in the night-time economy and student social space'.¹⁸ An article from the online lads' mag Uni Lad¹⁹ in 2012 said

the fact that many rapes go unreported represented ‘fairly good odds’ and that attackers should call out ‘surprise’.²⁰ Uni Lad borrowed from the misogynistic tones of lads’ mags, adopting morally reprehensible manifestations of sexism which became normalised through ironic/postfeminist discourse. ‘Cut your ex’s face so that no one will want her’²¹, ‘a lot of women fantasise about things like rape’²², ‘wrap a woman’s head in cling film then defecate on her’²³; all quotes from lads’ mags that, if presented outside of the context of the magazines, would be deemed either illegal or morally unacceptable. However, due to the guise of irony, the promotion of misogynistic values became something else; something that could be construed as sexy, satirical and light-hearted.

The contemporary crossover of lad culture to universities has allowed for a deeper manifestation of problematised masculinity to emerge in modern Britain. As outlined by Morgan²⁴, lad culture was leaving a ‘black mark’ on university life, with ‘the modern student living in a world defined by pictures of objectified women, directions on how to get laid, and why you should down as many Jägerbombs as possible on a night out’. Research in 2015 unveiled ‘misogynist banter, objectification of women and sexual pressure and harassment’²⁵ within the cultures that surround undergraduate students. In 2014, the National Union of Students ‘convened a summit on lad culture, attended by students of all genders, where a committee aiming to develop a national strategy was launched’.²⁶ It was evident that, even after the departure of lads’ mags themselves, lad culture and the legacy of the new lad had not been completely eroded. Lads’ mags were even used in a promotional campaign for Macmillan Cancer Support in 2015, with the following quote appearing above an image of a pile of mock lads’ mags: ‘My younger cousins bought me a load of lads mags. My parent’s faces were a picture’. This was accompanied by a statement from Macmillan who claimed that the patient’s cousins’ antics ‘kept his spirits high’.²⁷ The construct of the new lad was being adopted by a leading UK cancer charity in an attempt to humanise young male cancer patients. Lad culture had even found its way into cancer treatment.

The effects of lads’ mags have undeniably surpassed the closure of the titles. Even the longest-serving editor of lads’ mag *Loaded* spoke out in 2012 to say that he ‘bitterly regret’ that the lads’ mag he edited ‘turned a generation on to porn’:

Looking back, I think magazines like *Loaded* did give young men a ‘taste’ for soft porn that led to deeper and darker desires. But we operated in a bygone, almost innocent age compared to today, when internet pornography is being pumped out on an industrial scale – straight into the bedrooms of our children ... Two years after my exit, I can finally admit that I was part of the problem. By speaking out, in some tiny way I hope to be part of the solution.²⁸

When contextualised in their time period of the 1990s and early 2000s, lads’ mags were perceived as tongue-in-cheek; pushing boundaries and ‘getting away with it’.²⁹ However, the subsequent availability of online pornography and instant gratification content the online world offered placed the original values of laddism under more obvious dispute.

In the years that followed, the concept of ‘rape culture’ and the complexities it embodied due to the normalisation of sexual violence in mainstream culture continued as a topic of debate. The Me Too movement and rise of feminist activism across the UK, and the globe, demonstrated the continuance of debate surrounding misogynistic culture. The more recent Women’s Marches against Donald Trump show modern feminism in action.³⁰

The now infamous 'grab them by the pussy'^{31, 32} remarks made by Trump could easily have been mistaken for commentary in a lads' mag. His subsequent presidency and support emphasise the normalisation of misogyny guised as irony on a global scale.

Lads' mags and pornification

During the 1990s, new laddism was at its height, with growing political concern surrounding the *Loaded* generation and the hedonistic culture it had invoked.³³ Lad culture was, however, well received by wider popular culture, with shows such as *Men Behaving Badly* and *Fantasy Football*, and bands such as Oasis and Blur, all aiming to capitalise on the popularity of laddism. The extent of public leaning towards this shift in popular culture ensured that the men's magazine market was booming and provided opportunities for more lads' mags to eventually emerge, notably *Front* in 1998 and *Zoo* and *Nuts* in 2004. The style and content of the different titles were generally similar, particularly *Zoo* and *Nuts*, with scantily clad women, sports news (overwhelmingly concentrated on football), and the best places to go for a weekend of drinking being prescribed to readers.

Laddism promoted a culture of care-free thrill-seeking, where women were offered as readily available sexual objects, creating what has been termed a 'natural' and 'honest' form of masculinity that legitimised previously criticised behaviour.³⁴ Jackson et al.³⁵ emphasised in 2001 that *Loaded* promoted a risk culture, encouraging men to 'drink to excess, drug-take, be unfaithful/avoid commitment ... new laddism [was] a high-risk culture of carefree consumption and sexual hedonism regardless of the personal consequences'. Although lads' mags had always been sexualised to some extent, they quickly became subject to a process of hypersexualisation, whereby the amount of topless images of women and sexual rhetoric in the content of the magazines increased. Hypersexualisation, also referred to as 'oversexualisation', 'sexploitation', 'raunch culture' and 'pornification'³⁶ places emphasis on the ways in which something or someone is made excessively sexual, and thus contributes towards what has been dubbed a hypersexualised society where 'sexual imagery is commonplace'.³⁷ There is therefore an emphasis on sex in excess as opposed to subtler sexual connotations.

When a body is hypersexualised, its sex appeal is marketed through the commodification and commercialisation of sexual body parts. In lads' mags, this process was accompanied by an ironic sexual discourse that served to normalise the pornographic tones of the magazines as mainstream tongue-in-cheek humour. Within this ironic discourse, sexualised displays of the female body were also viewed as symbolic of women's new confidence³⁸ in which postfeminist ideals of sexual agency and emancipation were aligned with the freedom of choice supposedly offered by hypersexualised culture. In this sense, the feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s were perceived as being undermined, with postfeminist rhetoric suggesting 'that equality is achieved in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings, which emphasise that [feminism] is no longer needed, that it is a spent force'.³⁹ The representation of women in lads' mags was consequently torn between two worlds of perception: of *degradation*, in keeping with second-wave feminist ideology, and *liberation*, in keeping with postfeminist ideology.

By the time *Zoo* and *Nuts* arrived on the scene in 2004, competition between the lads' mags had intensified, with older titles being forced to transition from sexualised content

to hypersexualised content, particularly in terms of their depictions of women. The imagery shown on the front covers alone changed dramatically over time, becoming increasingly pornified, at least to the extent permitted by wider popular culture. For instance, the front cover of the first issue of *Loaded* in 1994 included a winking head shot of the comedian Frank Skinner with the strapline '*Frank Skinner's World of Smut*'. Yet eighteen years later in 2012, *Nuts* magazine was displaying topless women on the front cover (albeit without showing their nipples, as was the rule), and with straplines such as '*100 Very Booby Babes!*' summarising the main feature of the lads' mag. Content analysis on this transition found that the number of images of topless women in *Nuts* magazine in 2004 was a mere two, compared to forty in 2012.⁴⁰ This transition from cheeky laddism to hypersexualised representations of women symbolised a pushing of boundaries and an over-reliance on the selling of women's cosmetically enhanced bodies.

Depictions of women in lads' mags and wider British popular culture have therefore become pornified over recent decades, aligning themselves with the bodies, discourses and scenarios used in the pornography industry. Given this alignment, the female body existed in lads' mags as a site of social and political contestation in four prevailing ways: 1) through the aestheticisation of the body; 2) through the implementation of the fantasy-reality dichotomy; 3) through the parallels the construction of the body shared with pornography; and 4) through the masculine narrative of sexual entitlement. The 'Assess My Breasts' section of the *Nuts* website signified these four characteristics in action, as images of women were decapitated and cropped to show nothing but the breasts themselves, which were subsequently rated out of ten by readers. This feature of the *Nuts* website relied on submissions from readers' girlfriends and other young women, which served to emphasise the 'real girls' phenomenon and fed into the magazine's wider ethos. Although most of the women featured had not undergone breast augmentation surgery, they still upheld a fundamental ideal of conceptualisations of beauty and desirability in the eyes of the new lad. Those who did not fit this ideal, usually women with smaller breasts, were consequently ranked as lower in worth. This occurrence fed into the discourse of femininity created by lads' mags, which deemed a woman more worthy if her body was in keeping with pornographic stereotypes. It was this discourse that came to symbolise women's worth in lads' mags, constructing them as bodies that were not embodied. This was suitably in keeping with the narratives of the pornography industry, as women in lads' mags were often depicted in states of undress, as targets for men to sexually coerce, and in lesbian erotic poses, all aimed at the heterosexual male voyeur.⁴¹

Lads' mags and wider lad culture therefore marked a shift in societal perceptions of gender equality and triggered a move towards, what Gill termed in 1993, 'new sexism'.⁴² New sexism refers to the contemporary – and still current – discursive practice of patriarchy, where sexism is made increasingly complex by cultural objects such as lads' mags. It legitimises patriarchal values and promotes social benefits for women who comply with such values by accepting an inferior and subordinated status to that of their male counterparts. However, this inferior status is not perceived as such by the women who choose to embody it and is instead branded as free choice and liberation.⁴³ This rebranding of inferiority has become symbolic of a postfeminist era in which gender equality is assumed to have already been achieved. Described as by Benwell in 2007 as 'sexism-by-subterfuge'⁴⁴, new sexism legitimises male power through the integration

of postfeminist discourses that are received as liberal and progressive.⁴⁵ Anything considered sexist by feminist movements of the past, such as the degrading nature of pornography to women, is instead considered a career move for women. Free choice, in this context, becomes exclusive to those who comprise the positions of sexual representation. It is a glamour model's free will to model naked on the front cover of *Nuts* magazine and tell readers that '*when girls are with girls, we hardly ever keep our clothes on!*'.⁴⁶ Postfeminism therefore signifies a micro approach to understanding sexism, focusing on sexual agency at the individual level, and thus overlooks the impact on women as a wider social group.

The postfeminist masquerade and the exploitative-liberating dichotomy

Although there is much dispute as to how postfeminism can be defined, it was aptly described by Gill⁴⁷ in 2007 as an epistemological position, a feminist backlash and a historical moment. Postfeminism is characterised by a range of discursive practises that include sexual agency, bodily autonomy, freedom of choice and sexual capital. As outlined by Jackson et al.⁴⁸ in 2012, research has 'emphasised the location of postfeminism within consumer culture where feminist arguments for choice, independence and agency have been appropriated and commodified in the marketing of goods to women'. The ideology of postfeminism was described by researchers in 2012 as a 'sexualisation of feminism'⁴⁹ and, in 2016, as a form of female subjectivity that denotes a 'shift from objectification to subjectification'.⁵⁰ Postfeminist ideology thus recognises hypersexualised representations of femininity as signs of empowerment and success⁵¹, designating a 'sociocultural climate where gender equality is assumed to have been achieved'⁵², and attacking feminism as inadequate in addressing the concerns and experiences of women today.⁵³

From this perspective, imagery that was previously regarded by critical feminists as degrading to women has now come to be perceived as sexually liberating, and thus provides a means through which women can achieve sexual agency.⁵⁴ Lads' mags were symbolic of this shift towards postfeminist ideology and offered an important insight into how sexuality and the body came to be more deeply commodified and sexually exploited in British popular culture throughout the early 21st century. However, the debate surrounding the morality of lads' mags was often over-simplified into binary questions of exploitation/degradation and liberation/freedom of choice; a debate that this paper terms the 'exploitative-liberating dichotomy'. It is this dichotomy that characterised much of the commentary on lads' mags and, in their aftermath, continues to permeate contemporary discourses on sexualisation.

The negotiation of feminism in British popular culture vacillates between perceptions of sexual exploitation, aligned with feminist thought, and sexual agency, aligned with postfeminist thought. Even after the disappearance of lads' mags there existed a contradictory media culture that contributed to a complex cultural landscape.⁵⁵ The backlash following the banning of 'Walk-On Girls' by the Professional Darts Corporation and of 'Grid Girls' by Formula 1 in 2018 aptly embodies the continuation of the exploitative-liberating dichotomy and endorses the notion that women using their bodies for profit is empowering.⁵⁶ With media headlines in 2018 such as '*Grid girl hits back at middle class feminists who are forcing other women out of work*'⁵⁷ and '*Why is it only middle class feminists who have the right to do what they want with their bodies?*'⁵⁸, it

was clear that there remained a hostility towards feminism as a classist and outdated ideology that was no longer pertinent to the lives of women today. This postfeminist backlash, which arises out of debates concerned with the hypersexualisation of women, is characterised by perceptions of feminism as homogeneous and exclusionary. Issues of identity politics and the struggle to define what feminism is⁵⁹ consequently feed into the construction of, what I call, the 'postfeminist masquerade'; the way in which unequal depictions of gender and sexuality are bolstered as empowering for women, creating a deceptive framework in which women are disadvantaged.⁶⁰ The postfeminist masquerade offers an inauthentic version of gender equality and promotes an illusionary state in which women are encouraged to view objectification as liberating due to the fact that such objectification presents women with the freedom to choose. The construction of sexist representations as celebratory is the postfeminist masquerade in action. It is rebranding sexism as sexiness, objectification as liberation, and exclusionary representations as free choice.

This contradictory media culture suggests that there is still an issue of inequality in terms of representation in British popular culture with which feminists should seek to engage. This paper proposes that instead of focusing on the exploitative-liberating dichotomy, the black and white linear arguments that have come to characterise much of the debate in this field, research should instead move towards the amalgamation of feminism and postfeminism, a process I have termed 'equality of objectification'. This encourages research to shift its focus from affect (potential harms, gains and impacts) to the field of representation (constructions which embody societal values, ideas and beliefs). If we ask who are the represented, instead of what harm do such representations cause, we may more readily highlight the discrepancies that exist within the cultural production of gender. To implement this approach from a critical feminist perspective would mean adopting the championed aspects of postfeminism, such as sexual autonomy and freedom of choice, and encouraging these opportunities to be made available to men. In order to move towards equality, there needs to be a stronger focus on hypersexualising the male body to counterbalance hypersexualised representations of the female body. Doing so would allow for postfeminist arguments of liberation to be accessible to men, whilst also allowing critical feminist arguments of inequality to be addressed through more diverse representation.

The cultural landscape post-lads' mags has seen academic debate and media discussions focus on 'toxic masculinity'; hegemonic stereotypes of idealised masculinity. Understood as 'traditional forms of masculinity that are harmful to others'⁶¹, this toxic masculinity reflects the continuance of misogynistic (and misandrist) norms and values that were once embodied by the figure of the new lad. The surge in feminist societies on university campuses from the early 2010s onwards⁶², alongside the emergence of organisations such as HeForShe⁶³ and Beyond Equality (formerly known as the 'Good Lad Initiative'), are asking young people to rethink social constructions of both masculinity and femininity in order to 'promote positive, equal gender relationships'.⁶⁴ Such efforts mark a move away from the reign of the postfeminist masquerade and serve to address not just the aftermath of the culture of laddism, but the many decades of normalised gender inequality that went before it.

It is therefore essential that research on sexualisation, feminism and masculinities look to historical accounts of gender relations in British popular culture from the 1970s to the

early 2000s in order to understand whether contemporary constructions of gender are, in fact, contemporary at all. The move towards sexual vulgarity in British popular culture through cultural products such as the *Carry On* franchise in the 1970s and eventual emergence of new laddism in the early 1990s have merely manifested themselves in new and (un)evolved forms in the 2020s. With tabloid newspapers such as *The Sunday Sport* and *The Sun* continuing to include softcore pornographic images of women, it is clear that Carry-On-Lad culture is still amongst us. However, such content now appears disjointed as it exists within a transforming cultural landscape, where the Me Too movement⁶⁵, Everyday Sexism Project⁶⁶, rise of feminist organisations and innumerable women's marches are creating a counter-cultural attack on the continuity of normalised misogyny.

Although recent years have seen a greater focus on the aestheticisation of the male body in British popular culture, there continues to be an obvious gender disparity when it comes to sexualised imagery in advertising and media, with women still bearing the greater weight of sexual objectification. The issue of the lack of hypersexualised male bodies has been recognised by Eck⁶⁷ in 2003, who argues that 'women are just learning to be voyeurs. Although women may be more accustomed to seeing male bodies, they are not as accustomed to having those bodies 'offered' to them'. It is this lack of offering that should be a cause for concern for sex-positive feminists, and also offers new grounds for discussion in debates regarding the merits and drawbacks of hypersexualisation. Whilst this paper adopts a critical feminist approach, this is never intended to be through the lens of anti-sex or anti-choice advocacy. If we are to move beyond the moralist bounds of sexual conservatism and accept that pornified imagery is the new normal in contemporary society, we should first seek equality of objectification and *then* negotiate the uses and pleasures of sexual media.

Concluding thoughts

Although the era of lads' mags is now in the rear-view mirror of feminist critique, the culture of vulgarity to which it contributed manifests itself in similar forms across British popular culture (*The Only Way is Essex* [ITV]; *Ibiza Weekender* [ITV]; *Love Island* [ITV]; *Hooters* [American restaurant chain in Nottingham]; *Sunday Sport* [tabloid newspaper]; *Transform Cosmetic Surgery* [breast enlargement advertisement shown on daytime television]). Current debates on hypersexualisation and feminism should therefore be observed closely by scholars and activists, as they highlight the tensions that continue to exist surrounding gender identity, sexual agency and human rights. Furthermore, signs of what has been termed a 'third wave feminism' in society are apparent, adopted in large part by a younger generation of women. This third wave has been under-theorised, with contested definitions being advanced.⁶⁸ With this in mind, there needs to be a broader focus on analysing and responding to third wave feminism and postfeminism, as they continue to adapt and transform in accordance with the changing media culture that surrounds them. The lack of recognition of equality of objectification in cultural discourse should also be a key motif in future feminist analyses and will allow for a more comprehensive examination of what constitutes sexual liberation, alongside engagement with contemporary visions for gender equality. In sum, the era of lads' mags can still be seen in pockets of popular culture, with the misogynistic values they upheld leaving behind a damaging legacy in which women, *the objectified*, lose.

Notes

1. J. Jackson, 'FHM and Zoo Closures Mark End of Lads' Mag Era', in *The Guardian*, 2015, available online <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/nov/17/fhm-zoo-magazines-suspend-publication> (accessed February 15, 2018)
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4. Family Safe Media, *Pornography Statistics*, 2017, available online www.familysafemedia.com/pornography-statistics (accessed August 11, 2017)
5. See: M. Coy, 'Milkshakes, Lady Lumps and Growing up to Want Boobies: How the Sexualisation of Popular Culture Limits Girls' Horizons', *Child Abuse Review* 18 (2009): 372–83; R. Gill, 'The Sexualisation of Culture?' *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6, no. 7 (2012): 483–98; J. Gwynne, "'Andrea Dworkin was Probably turning in her grave": Pornography (post)feminist backlash and contemporary women's memoirs', *Journal of Literary Studies* 29, no. 1 (2013): 20–32; F. Gabriel, 'Sexting, Selfies and Self-harm: Young People, Social Media and the Performance of Self-Development', *Media International Australia* 151, no. 1 (2014): 104–12
6. N. Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago Press, 2010).
7. The Bailey Review, also entitled 'Letting Children Be Children' (2011), conducted by the Chief Executive of the Mothers' Union Reg Bailey was commissioned by the Department for Education offering an independent report on the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood. It made various recommendations to protect children from sexualised media, stating that magazines such as lads' mags with sexualised images on their covers should be kept out of the sight of children.
8. The Sexualisation of Young People Review (2010) conducted by the psychologist Dr Linda Papadopoulos looked at how sexualised images and messages may be affecting the development of children and young people and influencing cultural norms. It also examines the evidence for a link between sexualisation and violence. Lads' mags were cited as 'blurring the lines between pornography and mainstream media'.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mother, Julia Tippett, for taking care of my newborn daughter, often for days at a time, to allow me to finish this Viewpoint and complete other projects. That is what liberation really means. Women helping women – we rise by lifting others.

My thanks also go to Dr Peter Wilkin and Dr Sharon Lockyer for the many years debating lad culture. They will be pleased to know that the suitcase of lads' mags has since been taken to the recycling centre.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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