

## Sex sells: promoting images of women

June 2013

[Anna Percy](#) , [Nina Powell](#) , and [Emily Pitts](#) introduced a discussion on the promotional imagery of women and how society should respond



**Advertising and propaganda** have a long history of using carefully selected images to visually substantiate claims made in words. Often, images of women for, example, are used to sell a variety of things such as cars (the sexual pose over the bonnet of a car), clothes (the slim, stereotyped version of how women should look) or lifestyle (the 1960s domestic goddess / 1990s 'girl power'). The **right to free speech**, and the right of us all to see and read messages that others don't want us to, is often claimed by those opposing restrictions on the form and content of advertising and social or political messaging, and the **right to be protected** by those wanting restrictions.



The images and words used in promotional advertising, or those that aim to create a common narrative of a wider socialising character, have long been debated. Feminist campaigners in the 1970s were energetic in developing **more progressive images** of women in society, and published a variety of pamphlets and story books for children portraying women in the way they thought they should be - deliberately and consciously countering messages of the period portraying women as housewives. Whilst there were some notable campaigns against images of topless women in newspapers, these were often seen as censorious, being associated with Mary Whitehouse prudishness. Today, similar campaigns don't seem to grate so much against society and are gaining a more popular hearing, for example there have been campaigns threatening legal action under employment legislation against newsagents selling

**lads mags**

such as

**Nuts**

,

**Zoo**

and

**FHM**

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The increased **ease of publishing** with the advent of the **internet** poses the dual prospect of the wider availability of degrading images or representations of women across society, and the unparalleled prospect of being able to promote positive images and stories of women. The era of readily available publishing via websites, mobile phones and social networking reposes some familiar discussions in a new terrain and in a new social and political context. For some, the power of advertising and concomitant representation of women require urgent action, and often the call is for more regulations to protect us from advertising offering us such things as easy access to credit, cigarettes and alcohol etc. Similarly, sexual and pornographic portrayals of women are said to be demeaning to those women who partake in it, corrupting to those

men, women and increasingly children who consume it and therefore access to it should be prevented or restricted.

Maybe it is the case that the solution should be ever more regulation of advertising for our own good, given the ubiquity of modern communications. Surely, preventing the objectification of women will help women forge an independent path without having to combat demeaning and degrading stereotypes of how they should think and behave. Likewise, restricting the promotion of other things such as alcohol and abuse will, it is argued, allow us to make healthier lifestyle choices.

However, if we are to assert our independence shouldn't we be doing this through our own actions rather than looking to the representative world of advertising or fashion magazines to do this for us? Is it really the case that advertisers have us all in the palm of their hands? Are we mere automatons primed to consume whatever product is packaged the right way? Will the sight of sexually provocative imagery lead men to see women merely as sexual objects rather than as social equals? Is the *right to free speech* so important here, and also the right of us all to see and read messages that others don't want us to?

This discussion will aim to get it all out in the open, metaphorically speaking, and work through how best to confront the **representations of women** we see around us.

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## Some background readings

[Design the Future: advertising's mission?](#) Reviewed by Simon Belt, Manchester Salon June 2011

[Living in a Sexualised Society - The Effects on Young Girls](#) , by Anna Webster, University of Essex Department of Sociology 2012

[The Negative Effects of Barbie on Young Girls an the Long Term Results](#) , by Stephanie Hoskins, Divine Caroline April 2013

[Charlotte Raven: why feminism needs to get radical again](#) , by Kira Cochrane, The Guardian 8 May 2013

[Sales of lads' mags could amount to sexual harassment, lawyers tell shops](#) , by Charlotte Philby, Independent 27 May 2013

[Facebook sexism campaign attracts thousands online](#) , by Zoe Kleinman, BBC News 28 May 2013

[Women and Advertising](#) , Huffington Post articles on Women and Advertising: Pictures, Video, Breaking News

[Who's afraid of internet porn?](#) , by Alka Sehgal Cuthbert, spiked online 12 June 2013

[We have a moral obligation to ban the airbrush](#) , by Deni Kirkova, Daily Mail 13 June 2013

[Get real, banning lads' mags would patronise women](#) , by Catherine Scott, Telegraph 13 June

2013

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Watch video of the speaker and audience discussion below. Thanks to Dan Clayton the [documentary filmmaker](#) from Leeds for this.