



# THE CONVERSATION

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## Lads' mags, sexual violence and the need for feminist intervention

### AUTHORS



**Susan Hopkins**

Lecturer in Communication  
at University of Southern  
Queensland



**Jenny Ostini**

Postdoctoral Research  
Fellow (Digital Futures and  
Personalised Learning) at  
University of Southern  
Queensland

Queensland



The sexist language of lads' magazines is increasingly provocative and extreme. Rob Beyer

Mainstream men's magazine Zoo has generated outrage in recent weeks. It's been accused of "promoting rape culture" by, among other grubby things, educating young men on how to coerce drunk women into sex.

While extreme sexism is nothing new in men's magazines, the problem, according to activists such as Laura Pintur of Collective Shout, is that these new style lads' magazines are on sale and open display in "family" supermarkets such as Coles and Woolworths.

Pintur is campaigning to remove Zoo from the supermarket shelves and out of the realm of easy accessibility. The campaign has already attracted more than 35,000 supporters.

### The outrage engine

Zoo is revelling in the controversy – which is its stock in trade.

Only last month Zoo also caused outrage by managing to sexualise Anzac imagery with a bikini model holding a poppy and the title “lest we forget”.

In the interview component of this photo story, the Anzac bikini model declares her passion for soldiers: “They’re bad arses, they have guns.”

The most recent issue of Zoo is equally provocative with its cover story on “the most evil phone apps ever!” It promises its young male readers “sex!” and “violence!” among other things.

In the photo story “Filthy Rich” in this issue, the narrative which accompanies the soft porn imagery is of an apparently wealthy and well educated young woman who studied at “one of Britain’s most expensive private schools” yet who chooses her own objectification because it makes her feel like a “star”. She’s quoted as saying:

*Women are always going to be objectified and I’d rather it was me doing tasteful shots like these than some of the horrible stuff you see on the internet.*

Ironically, the Zoo glamour model is not naked here – she is clothed in an increasingly ubiquitous post-feminist story of empowerment. She makes a claim that she is in control of her own objectification.

Of course all interpretations of “taste”, even and especially in a magazine such as Zoo, speak to power relations of both gender and class. Such language and imagery is also illuminating because it speaks to both post-feminist discourses of sexual choice and sexual power as well as the shifting cultural landscape of media forms.

## The life of lads' mags

Lads’ magazines such as Zoo have sprouted in recent years, against a backdrop of decline in other mainstream media forms, by targeting young male readers in weekly formats with fast, low production values. According to recent commentary by Mumbrella, Zoo is struggling:

*The magazine, which has seen its circulation drop 36% last year, is already seen as being on its last legs. In 2012, the publication had a circulation of 61,000 on average – that has since dropped to 24,000.*

Sold for less than A\$6 in Australia and New Zealand, Zoo is literally cheap. It is also accessible – sold without plastic wrapping alongside other mainstream magazines in newsagents and supermarkets.

Like the internet, it has removed embarrassment from accessing soft porn.

Although relatively tame in its “girlie” pictorials, the sexist language or discourse of Zoo, and magazines like it, is increasingly provocative and extreme. It is appropriate and timely to consider the cultural location and effects of this discourse, and not just for children and

young people.

## Mainstreaming sexual violence

Magazines such as Zoo not only reproduce and legitimise sexist and predatory views of sexual violence and gender roles. They also make such attitudes seem normal and acceptable.

Laura Pintur's accusation that Zoo reproduces "rape culture" is particularly insightful because of the emphasis on cultural and socio-political contexts of these media texts. The implied understanding is that sexual violence is woven into the very fabric of our wider society and culture.



A 2007 cover of Zoo Weekly. AAP Image/Zoo Magazine

It is not just mens' magazines that mainstream and eroticise sexual violence.

The novel, and now film *Fifty Shades of Grey* with its romanticised sadomasochism, was made a commercial and cultural phenomenon by its mostly female readership.

It's no surprise that *Fifty Shades of Grey* began its life as fan fiction on the Twilight website. *Fifty* author EL James made explicit the undercurrent of sexual sadomasochism that runs through Twilight's teenage vampire romance.

The perversely attentive and controlling lover Christian Grey (lurking in his bondage "red room of pain") is really an adult version of the vampire stalker/lover of the Twilight books and films.

As the male monster fantasy figure he becomes the manifestation of both female fears and desires. Now more than ever such media representations of sexual violence are popular and profitable. The challenging question remains, why is the most educated and empowered generation of women in history embracing such discourses of female submission as romantic "surrender"?

## Relax, it's just irony

Ironically, the post-feminist generation has become a victim of the shift away from traditional feminist "victim discourse". In the neoliberal, post-girl power age, resisting extreme sexualisation has been interpreted as outdated, or worse, uncool.

Even within the academy, the pro-porn school of cultural and media studies has reinterpreted



A 2010 Zoo Weekly cover. AAP Image/Zoo Weekly

porn as “chic” and emancipatory; an opportunity to test boundaries, express and explore diverse sexual identities.

Pro-porn academics also argue the point that pornography does not promote violence against women or lead to a rape culture, in fact they suggest the growing accessibility of porn “has been good for many people.”

Robin Morgan’s famous second wave feminist mantra that “pornography is the theory, rape is the practice” is now frequently dismissed, even by some feminists, as too simplistic.

Moreover the post-feminist and pro-porn approach seems to be sending the message to women and girls that they are at their most powerful when they are sexual or sexualised which may make it increasingly difficult for young women in particular to step outside that process of objectification.

Postmodern readers are frequently celebrated as ironic and knowing, able to clearly delineate between fantasy and reality. Feminism has been mainstreamed to the extent that now even men’s magazines cloak sexual objectification in the language of a woman’s “choice.”

The editors of mens’ magazines also frequently hide behind the defence of ironic humour – but it is questionable whether all their readers see the irony in advice like, “try all sorts of humiliating acts to help live out her filthy fantasy” (an example cited in this 2012 study).

That study also found that the statements about women and sex within lads’ magazines to be equally or more derogatory than the recorded statements of convicted rapists.

There is emerging research that suggests, young people in particular may need some help in this area of sexual “choice”, consent and respectful relationships. Results from the National Community Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women 2013 survey found that many Australians still accept or excuse sexual violence against women, in some cases blaming the victim for overt sexualisation.



Is sexualisation a source of strength or strife? Baba G/Flickr,  
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Research conducted by The Line campaign, in which 3000 young people were surveyed, also found that controlling behaviour by boys was frequently reinterpreted as being “protective” and “caring,” that women should expect to “suffer for love” and that a “relationship is a form of ownership that assumes some control.”

The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012 Personal Safety Survey reported that one in five Australian women over the age of 15 had experienced sexual violence. According to this dataset women are still far more likely than men to experience physical and sexual violence by a partner – the person they live with or have lived with at some point.

While in the “rational” world of our workplaces, explicit and formal sexism is no longer tolerated, in the emotional and intimate realm of male/female relationships traditional gender roles persist, sometimes with tragic consequences.

### **A third way for feminism**

New style feminist intervention needs to challenge these attitudes while also rethinking postmodern assumptions about “choice,” “control” and sexual power. As Monash sociologists Anita Harris and Amy Dobson point out in their important work on “post-girlpower times” young women may now be constrained, limited and “over-determined” by the language of their own empowerment.

While choosing and controlling her own sexualisation may feel empowering for the individual “glamour model” – her “choices” can never be entirely separate from a wider culture of sexual violence and gender inequality.

The question remains: how can consent be determined within a wider culture of inequality? The challenge remains, how to carve a culture of respect out of a culture that reads dehumanisation as ironic humour.

We need not position girls or women as helpless victims, or puppets of patriarchal society, but we do need to take account of the shifting socio-cultural conditions in which their choices are made.

Now more than ever, mediated sex and sexualisation must be linked to power relations.

**See also:**

No, feminism is not about choice