

Lad Mags and Their Contribution to Rape Culture

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Jennifer Metcalfe, Emily Attack, and Jennifer Love Hewitt are only three out of many women who have shed their clothes to be featured on the cover of April 2012's lad mags, *Loaded* (UK), *FHM* (UK), and *Maxim* (US). Lad mags are the UK term for men's magazines targeting young men that often showcase gadgets, fashion, and scantily clad women ("lad mag"). Lad mags are just one example of postfeminist backlash, which began to take way in the 80's and 90's, continuing today, and is characterized by the idea that gender equality exists and thus feminism is no longer needed (Projansky 11). Postfeminism stresses resistance to feminism and backlash on violence against women, while at the same time, stressing female power, choice, and sexual liberation (Projansky 20). Because females are choosing to take their clothes off, postfeminists explain this as a sign of female empowerment. On the contrary, this limited form of female power (sexual power), illustrates that equality is not achieved and feminism is necessary. Namely because gendered acts of violence against women, such as sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and sexual harassment continue to be problems that females face. Matthew Ezzell explains that we live in a rape culture, "a culture in which rape is pervasive, prevalent, and normalized through societal attitudes about gender, sex, and sexuality." Living in a rape culture does not affect men as much as they do women, based on the staggering number of women who have been sexually assaulted or been in a situation of attempted sexual assault; the fear of potentially being a victim of sexual violence is common for females (9).

After studying three lad mags from April 2012, I discovered a variety of material, which I will argue are harmful in encouraging and condoning sexual violence against women. I will describe the themes discovered in my analysis and illustrate how they are used to minimize and justify sexual violence against women. Lastly, I will discuss the impact this has on society and suggest ways we can combat this issue.

The content in all the lad mags often represents and encourages stereotypical male characteristics such as aggression, dominance, and power. For instance, *FHM's* article on cell phone and gaming addiction display bloodied cell phones and controllers (72-79), and *Maxim* featured a military article titled, "When In Doubt, Take Them Out" (86-91). Men can determine if they are real men by taking masculinity quizzes with questions about power tools and whether or not they have a scar. The majority of images of men, whether they are models in advertisements or average people, depicted them in dominant and active roles. Men are either working in an office, eating and drinking, fighting, smoking, playing an instrument, or participating in a sport. Unlike the women, they are never in positions of passivity or sexual objectification.

Instead, males were viewed as the people dominating and aggressing towards the passive and sexually objectified females. One ad in *Loaded* features male construction workers standing inside a window and staring out at provocatively dressed woman as they walk by on the street (1-2). *Maxim* features an ad for ACM Wallet that shows a woman in a bikini next to the wallet. The caption reads, "Look. (Then touch...)" (94). These ads portray the idea that females exist simply as decoration, posing seductively to

make products look good. They depict that females are to be gazed at, enjoyed, and touched, even without their consent.

These depictions are not only limited to ads. *Maxim* sent a busty woman wearing a “cleavage cam” out to the streets to ask men what they first noticed about a woman. Although almost all of the 30 men interviewed answered the face, eyes, or smile, at least half of them peeked down her shirt. Instead of addressing these results, the article states, “She hates it when guys do this. (Wear stone-washed jeans, we mean),” and plays the experiment for laughs (96). These cases of men seeing women as existing only as sexual objects are examples of how men exert their dominance over women. Although sexual harassment is a serious issue, with 87% of Canadian women reporting having experienced it (Statistics Canada), the issue is not addressed, but is viewed as humorous.

Male dominance over females was also noticed in the language used. Women who are viewed as having any power, other than sexual power, are referred to as ‘bitches.’ Multiple references are made to be ‘obsessed’ with women for being sexy and attractive, and ‘stalking’ is often taken lightly. By calling women derogatory names and dismissing gendered violence that women often face, lad mags promote and encourage sexist attitudes and ignorance towards such issues. Sexist language found in lad mags was also supported in a study at Middlesex University and the University of Surrey in 2011, where researchers found that when subjects were presented with quotes about women, both from convicted rapists as well as lad mags, most of them could not differentiate between the sources of the quotes (“Are Sex Offenders and Lads’ Mags Using the Same Language?”). These frightening results indicate that language used in lad mags in

reference to women are indeed violent and derogatory, another medium that exerts male dominance over women.

In addition, men who possess the stereotypical qualities of aggression and power, especially over women, are depicted as role models. In *Loaded's* countdown of the top 100 heroes of television, number six went to Ari Gold of *Entourage*, a “driven, highly-offensive misogynist” (23). The top spot went goes to Kenny Powers of *Eastbound & Down* who is a “sex-crazed, coke fuelled arrogant dick-wad” (23-24). *FHM* provides nine reasons why Nicholas Cage “might just be the most awesome man on earth,” being his connections with celebrities for bailing him out when he was arrested for disturbing the peace, public drunkenness, and domestic abuse (102-106). The article does not speak to the allegations of violence against his female partner, but instead provides his ability to obtain bail as a reason to worship him. Thus, these lad mags idealize misogynist, dominant, and powerful men.

On the other hand, men who do not portray these male characteristics are viewed as gay or feminine and thus subjected to heteronormative male power. One of *Loaded's* readers, Elliot, wrote into the advice column wondering how to get his friend, Ben, to stop tackling him so roughly during football. The response provided from the magazine was that Elliot was out of line for wanting Ben to “tone down his style of play to accommodate the vagina man in [Elliot]” and the advice given was to “get [his] ass off the field, go home and draw a bubble bath, and to further sooth [his] worry, grab a pacifier to suck on” (118). Because Elliot does not portray the aggression and dominance that is desired in the stereotypical man, he is given female attributes to degrade his

masculine identity, a “vagina man,” and weak like a child. Similarly, *Loaded* highlighted a celebrity quote, saying that UGG’s boots in prison is “as bad as having your pockets out in prison,” an indication of being a sex slave (16). Comments like these illustrate that if a man appears feminine, he is subject to sexual assault. Studies on advice columns in men’s magazines found this similar theme in the focus on sex combined with the promotion of male entitlement by using power, manipulation, and control, providing groundwork for sexual violence and domestic abuse (Spalding et al. 219).

Male dominance and aggression over feminine men and females are thus justified by the ideas that men are just carrying out what is expected of them. Some men argue that these traits are innate in real men. *Loaded* explains that men are powerful; testosterone has the word ‘test’ in it for a reason, and “whenever faced with one, [men should] let this hormone flow like a raging river and not try to ever apologize for it” (118). By arguing that male dominance is innate, something that may become out of control, but never wrong, sexual violence against women is viewed as inevitable. Lehmann and Simmons argue that by seeing manhood as something biological as opposed to socially constructed, men feel like they do not have a choice about their actions. Even men who have abused their partners and want to stop feel like they are just being men (113).

All three lad mags contain one extremely dominant theme: the objectification of women. The problem with these images is that they show only one type of woman: a woman who is passive, hypersexual, and solely existing for male pleasure. Unlike the men who are in active poses, the women look identical, touching themselves in pornographic positions, mouth slightly parted, and seductively staring into the camera.

Some advertisements use the female body as decoration to enhance products; the collection of watches in *Maxim* does not even display the model's face in three out of the four models, but focuses on her bikini bottoms and white top (38-41). On the same line, the shopping guide to backpacks in *Loaded*, labeled "Baby got back (packs)" (84), shows the same female model sporting the products naked and indicates that the "lovely lady is not included." Advertisements such as these not only display women as passive and hypersexual, but they degrade women to objects. Models also pose in nurse uniforms, business suits, or suck on lollipops. By playing out these male fantasies, women are again displaying themselves for male pleasure. Even punk rock star Avril Lavigne is sporting tights on a bed and running her hand through her hair instead of singing or playing her guitar (16-20). She explains, "of course it's for *FHM*, so it's sexy" (18). Regardless of these women's personalities or achievements in real life, the women featured in lad mags resume the passive, self-objectifying poses for male viewers.

Moreover, the women in the lad mags are depicted as *wanting* to be objectified and gazed at by men. Four time *Maxim* cover girl, Jennifer Love Hewitt explains how thrilled she is when she is asked to model because "it is [her] scale of how good [she] looks." She also states that her favorite part of her body is her boobs and her secret skill is pole-dancing (55) – her answers are everything male readers want to hear. The love for male attention is not only limited to celebrities. Unlike the contests for male readers to test physical strength, each lad mag examined features contests that allow regular women to enjoy a few pages of fame by taking their clothes off, and calls for voters to help find the world's sexiest woman. These women are engaging in what Ariel Levy says is the

kind of “empowered women” who actively participate in raunch culture (4). As argues, because women are voluntarily objectifying themselves and appear to be enjoying it, they are there for male sexual pleasure. Unfortunately, this leads to male entitlement, feeling like they deserve this pleasure whenever they want, regardless of a woman’s consent.

Many people may view lad mags as an acceptable magazine, with harmless articles and images meant to entertain male audiences. The magazines are not considered pornography, so are easily bought in bookstores and convenience stores. In 2010, *Maxim* took the top spot for the highest circulated men’s magazine (“Top Ten U.S. Men’s Magazines”). Although the print circulations of lad mags have decreased over the past few years, it does not mean that there is a decreased audience. Magazines such as *Maxim* are now focusing on expanding to digital platforms, with an average of nearly 80,000 paid subscriptions (Ives, “Maxim Cuts Circulation 20%”). With such a large audience, and now with even easier access via the internet, we must ask: What messages are these lad mags sending to boys and men? Researchers have examined how similar themes of gendered ideas and objectification of women in these lad mags impact the attitudes and behaviors of men regarding sexual violence. Murnen et al. found that there is a consistent relationship between men’s adherence to sexist and patriarchal attitudes and their use of violence against women (1). These men stick to strict gender roles and are thus more likely to exert their power over women. Lanis and Covell discovered that subjects who are exposed to ads depicting women as sex objects were significantly more accepting of rape supportive attitudes when compared to subjects who were exposed to progressive roles or product oriented advertisements (637). Since women are viewed as sex objects,

they are seen as subordinates to men, making them appropriate targets for male sexual aggression (647). When men are exposed to the same type of woman, one who is willing to please and objectify herself for men, this becomes their image of what all women are like. Thus, men come to expect sexual gratification and view all women as sex objects. A study by Rudman and Mescher discovered that men who implicitly dehumanized women as either animals, objects, or tools in a word association task were more likely to sexually victimize them (1). These studies support the idea that when men adhere to the traditional characteristics of aggression and dominance, seeing women as sex objects for male gratification, they are more likely to exert sexual aggression against women. As discussed, lad mags show prominent themes of encouraging male power and aggression, as well as portraying women as objects of male sexual pleasure.

These ideas of aggression and dominance are also harmful for young boys. Boys who are exposed to sexualized media are more likely to see women as sex objects (as cited in Coy and Harvath 145). In a survey asking 5000 young people if “It’s okay for a boy to make a girl have sex with him if she has flirted with him or led him on,” 14% of boys agreed (as cited in Flood 128). Lad mags contain themes of male power and control, and female objectification that are shaping the way boys view women, and themselves. When lad mags are so easily accessible, especially to boys who may be learning about manhood and sexuality through this medium, we are forced to question its content. By promoting the current content of lad mags, we are not only creating a sexist attitude amongst men, we are training boys to be the same. We are training boys to objectify women.

Sexual violence is a worldwide problem that deserves our attention. When one in three women experience sexual assault worldwide (The World Bank), we should examine the culture we live in and challenge the practices that promote violence against women. Although I have only examined three lad mags released in April 2012, I have discovered themes supporting male aggression and dominance over women and constant female objectification that promotes sexist attitudes in readers that may be influential in sexual violence offending. These cases illustrate that women are still in subordinate positions to men, except instead of fighting against it, we are now embracing it. Hence, it is important that we continue to study these influences and create a dialogue about what changes are necessary in ending violence against women, and the culture that promotes this. Male interests and male sexuality should not be ignored in lad mags; however, there is a need for variation. Traditional male characteristics that stress dominance and power, along with the hypersexual and willing-to-please female that is redundant in lad mags are placing audiences in unhealthy gender constraints. Additionally, we must recognize that sexuality is a limited form of power and work to encourage different forms of empowerment for women.

By challenging media that produces these potentially harmful products and by working together to create media that allows for sexual expression that is respectful of everyone, we can take steps away from living in a rape prone world and instead take steps towards a world of equality. When this equality is achieved is when we can truly say that we are living in an era that is postfeminsm. Until then, there is much work to be done.

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