

OBJECT speech for July 2012 debate against the Advertising Standards Authority in Parliament.

MOTION: "Sexualised imagery in advertising needs to be controlled by statutory regulation."

Whatever our views of advertising, we have to recognise its power and reach. Advertising is inescapable in the Western world - and increasingly elsewhere too. It is estimated that the average U.S. citizen sees or hears 3,000 adverts each day (Kilbourne 2000), and it is unlikely that figures would be considerably different in the UK.

As well as its ubiquity, advertising is central to the political economy of the media as a whole, thereby influencing the content of media more broadly (Gill 2008). The impact of the advertising industry in terms of reflecting and shaping the wants, views and perceptions of society, has therefore led to the industry being compared to education and organised religion in terms of its reach and influence (Lazer-Smith 1989).

In relation to gender ideologies, advertising has long been criticised for its heavy reliance on gendered stereotypes, with both scientific studies over the last few decades, and the most casual viewing demonstrating the way in which women have been, and continue to be, portrayed almost exclusively as housewives or sex objects (Kilbourne 2000).

One of the most notable changes over the last decade, however, has been the extent to which these roles have converged so that rather than distinguishing between the 'mother' and the 'sex object', women are now increasingly sexualised across the board, no matter their identity. Studies show that this has led to, and been accompanied by, a significant increase in the more overt portrayals of women as sex objects, which has no parallel for men (Henthorne and LaTour, 1995; Mayne, 2000; Reichert et al., 1999; Soley and Kurzbard, 1986).

This is important as it demonstrates the **gendered nature of the 'sexualisation' debate**. Indeed, according to their website, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) continues to receive many more complaints about the way women are shown in ads than it does men, with the most common complaints objecting to the gratuitous use of the female image (e.g. nudity or women in sexually suggestive poses) or ads seen to reinforce negative gender stereotypes.

How is sexualised imagery currently regulated by the Advertising Standards Authority?

The ASA background briefing paper on the issue of the portrayal of women (last updated in December 2011¹) is entitled: 'Taste and Decency: Depiction of Women' and refers to the 'subjectivity' of what it describes as 'taste and decency' issues. It states the rules as:

"Ads should contain nothing that is likely to cause serious or widespread offence. Particular care should be taken to avoid causing offence on the grounds of race, religion, sex, sexual orientation or disability."

¹ http://www.asa.org.uk/Resource-Centre/~media/Files/ASA/Background%20Briefings%20new/TandD_women_background_briefing_Jan%202012_ecopy.ashx

And it explains that: "Compliance is judged on the context, medium, audience, product and prevailing standards of decency."

As well as these general rules, further guidelines have been issued in relation to sexualised advertising in outdoor settings, largely in response to the Bailey Review².

These attempts to address the increased hyper-sexualisation, mainly of women, are welcomed as an important first step. However, there are fundamental weaknesses in the ASA approach to sexualised imagery.

Firstly, **to define the sexual objectification of women and girls as an issue of 'taste and decency', as opposed to an aspect of discrimination, is to trivialise the issue by rendering it subjective.**

Secondly, **attempts to judge complaints on the basis of 'prevailing standards of decency' is problematic.** It relies upon interpretation of what would be considered to cause widespread offence within a culture which is itself influenced by media and advertising; and it allows for the case that a form of discrimination can become so normalised that it no longer stands out as 'indecent', even though the harms associated with the discrimination remain. Indeed, it can be argued that this is the case with the pornification of society, that as pornography and pornified images have become increasingly mainstream and seeped into every aspect of our popular culture, it has become increasingly normal for women's bodies to be sexualised and objectified in different media forums. But does the ubiquity of the image make it okay? Does a discriminatory portrayal of a group suddenly become acceptable because it is placed in and amongst other discriminatory images and therefore doesn't stand out? This does not sound like a reliable basis on which to judge complaints related to discrimination.

Why should we regulate against sexual objectification? What are the harms?

The UK, two recent Government commissioned reviews into 'sexualisation'; The Bailey Report (2011) and Dr Linda Papadopoulos review into the sexualisation of young people (2010), both highlight the extent to which women and girls are increasingly sexualised and objectified in the media, and the harmful effects this 'sex-object' culture has on society.

The effects of this sexual objectification on women and girls is devastating, with recent studies showing that pressures to become sexualised has led to girls across all social strata reporting mental disorders at a rate of 44% - making them the most depressed section of the population³. Furthermore, the British Medical Association published a report in 2000 linking the use of 'abnormally thin' women in the media to the rise in the number of girls and women suffering from eating disorders; and research conducted by the Future Foundation think tank (April 2012) found that one in four girls has low self-esteem, concluding that Britain could lose some 319,000 future businesswomen, lawyers and doctors, as well as more than 60 women MPs by 2050 unless young women can be helped to retain confidence in their own abilities⁴. There is nothing trivial about this.

As well as stifling the self-esteem and aspirations of girls, the persistent portrayal of women as objects to be judged negatively, impacts the attitudes of boys and men and the ways in which they are conditioned to view and treat women and girls.

² <http://www.asa.org.uk/Media-Centre/2011/~media/Files/ASA/Misc/ASA%20Chief%20Executive%20statement%20to%20No10.ashx>

³ Sweeting H, Young R, West P. GHQ increases among Scottish 15 year olds 1987-2006. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 2009; **44**:579-86.

⁴ <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/girls-interrupted-revealed--the-true-cost-of-low-selfesteem-7606258.html>

Indeed, emerging evidence suggests the sexual objectification of women and girls is “reinforcing the views of many young men that women are always available for sex”⁵, and in its review of the literature on this topic the American Psychological Association (APA) states that ***“overall it is argued that exposure to sexualised depictions of women may lead to global thoughts that women are seductive and frivolous sex objects... and foster an overall climate that does not value girls’ and women’s voices or contributions to society”***⁶.

Alarmingly, the APA further found that **after being exposed to images that sexually objectify women, men are significantly more accepting of sexual harassment, interpersonal violence, rape myths, and sex role stereotypes**⁷. This link between sex object culture and male violence is supported by the UK-based End Violence Against Women coalition, which has persistently called on the UK Government to tackle the sexualisation of women and girls because it provides a ‘conducive context’ for violence against women⁸.

It is clear that, although advertising images may not cause these problems in and of themselves, they have been shown to play a major contributory factor and, unless challenged, they will continue to create a climate in which the marketing of women's bodies as sex objects is seen as acceptable. This is far from harmless.

So, how should sexually objectifying images be judged and regulated?

When we acknowledge that the sexual objectification of women is an issue of discrimination and harm, not one of taste and decency, then it is possible to draw upon academic criteria and evidence-based scientific research to both construct new guidelines and to back up the need for regulation. For example, a recent article in Ms magazine builds upon the criteria outlined by Nussbaum (1995) and Langton (2009) in relation to the objectification process, to devise what the author calls the Sex Object Test to measure the presence of the sexual objectification of women in images. In this article, the author proposes that sexual objectification is present if the answers to any of the following questions is "yes"⁹ (you can see the author's examples if you follow the link to the original article):

1) Does the image show only part(s) of a sexualised person’s body?

2) Does the image present a sexualised person as a stand-in for an object?

3) Does the image show sexualised persons as interchangeable?

4) Does the image affirm the idea of violating the bodily integrity of a sexualised person who can’t consent?

5) Does the image suggest that sexual availability is the defining characteristic of the person?

6) Does the image show a sexualised person as a commodity that can be bought and sold?

And, 7) Does the image treat a sexualised person’s body as a canvas?

⁵ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1116554/Could-teenage-boys-lessons-porn.html>

⁶ American Psychological Association (2007) *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls*

⁷ Ibid

⁸ [Realising Rights, Fulfilling Obligations: An Integrated Strategy to End Violence Against Women \(EVAW\)](#)

⁹ <http://msmagazine.com/blog/blog/2012/07/03/sexual-objectification-part-1-what-is-it/>

Similar criteria could easily be adopted by the ASA to make their judgements less subjective and more evidence based.

What next?

When discussing sexualised imagery in advertising, it is important to be specific about where exactly the issues and potential objections lie. **It is not the portrayal of sex or nudity in advertising but rather the persistent sexual objectification of women that we challenge.**

There is much research into the harms associated with this objectification process in relation to male-female relations and gender roles. This has been shown to impact upon the health and well-being of girls and women, and to play a role in reinforcing discrimination and even violence against women and girls.

In the light of such evidence, it is wholly **inadequate and inappropriate to regulate sexually objectifying imagery in relation to subjective notions of taste and decency**, which actually serve to trivialise the issue.

A more appropriate guide for regulation would be to use and to build upon criteria which addresses objectification and, in particular, sexual objectification.

There is no reason why a self-regulatory system could not devise and impose such guidelines. However, it is clear that thus far no such system has done so effectively. This is perhaps not surprising given the profitability of the marketing of women's bodies in this way.

Considering the inability of the industry to impose these restrictions on itself, and given the harms associated with this persistent portrayal of women, it becomes clear that ultimately responsibility must lie with Government to ensure that action is taken.

This action could take many forms, and should not undermine principles of freedom of expression, and would not even necessarily undermine the self-regulatory system. **In Spain**, for example, a 2004 **law against violence against women effectively bans advertising which uses women's image in a humiliating or discriminatory way**. This does not undermine the principle of self-regulation, rather it provides a clear framework for the industry to operate within. In 2007, further legislation was introduced to include measures to combat advertising with discriminatory content¹⁰.

Indeed, although a self-regulatory regime is generally preferred, the **European Council Committee Members** stated that "**the Committee of Ministers does not deem it indispensable that incitement to discrimination in advertising be classed as a criminal offence in the member states' domestic law**"¹¹.

This further demonstrates the possibility for legislation against sexually objectifying imagery as a means of complimenting and supporting self-regulation.

This is important as **ultimately, it is the responsibility of Government to promote equality and to challenge discriminatory attitudes and behaviours which impact upon the equal opportunities of its citizens.**

In fact the legally binding United Nations Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has repeatedly called on the British Government to take action against the objectification of women in the media¹².

¹⁰ <http://www.asa.org.uk/Resource-Centre/~media/Files/ASA/Reports/2008EASAREportportrayalofgender1.ashx>

¹¹ Ibid

¹² 1979 Convention on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Article 5

What is clear is that **the Government can no longer hide behind 'self-regulation' and allow for the sexual objectification of women, and the effects that it has on the sexualisation of children, to continue unchecked.** Action is needed, and we call on the Government to take a leading role in ensuring an evidence-based approach to tackling the widespread sexual objectification of women in advertising. Women and girls make up over half of our population, and equality for women and girls is therefore no trivial matter.
