



BRIEFING PAPER

Number 2039, 12 August 2016

Adult magazines in shops

By John Woodhouse and Philip Ward

Contents:

1. "Top shelf" magazines
2. "Men's lifestyle" magazines
3. The effects of viewing sexualised images and pornography



Contents

Summary	3
1. “Top shelf” magazines	4
2. “Men’s lifestyle” magazines	5
3. The effects of viewing sexualised images and pornography	7

Summary

The availability of “soft” pornography and “men’s lifestyle” magazines in newsagents and shops has been criticised as these titles are often on display where they can be seen by children.

What do the guidelines say?

Top shelf material

Guidelines issued by the National Federation of Retail Newsagents (NFRN) advise that “soft” pornography should be placed on the top shelf of newsagents.

Other material

The NFRN guidelines recommend that “men's lifestyle” magazines - sometimes referred to as “lads’ mags” - should not be displayed next to children’s titles or at eye-level or below. If this is not possible - e.g. where there is limited display space - the NFRN says that front covers can be part-overlapped with other titles to minimise offence to parents.

Guidance issued by the Association of Convenience Stores makes similar recommendations. It also suggests the use of “modesty boards”.

1. "Top shelf" magazines

National Federation of Retail Newsagents guidelines

There is a voluntary code, operated by newsagents, whereby adult "soft" pornography is placed on the top shelves in shops, out of the reach of children.

The code is operated by the [National Federation of Retail Newsagents](#) (NFRN) and applies to titles that publishers categorise as "top shelf" rather than to any title by name. The [guidelines](#) (dated November 2014) state:

Adult Top-Shelf Titles:

- Adult Titles should be displayed on the Top Shelf only and out of the reach of children
- Adult Titles should not be sold to any person under the age of 18 years.
- Adult Titles should only be acquired from bona fide trade channels (on the basis that these will have been vetted by the suppliers' lawyers for compliance with legislation)
- Care and sensitivity should be exercised over the display of Adult Titles with explicit front covers

Members are also advised to be responsive to the views of their customers and, in particular they are advised that they are not obliged to stock these titles if they have objections on religious, moral or other grounds.

The Indecent Displays (Control) Act 1981

As far as the external appearance of "top shelf" publications is concerned, the relevant legislation is the *Indecent Displays (Control) Act 1981*. This makes it an offence to display "indecent matter" in, or so as to be visible in, a public place - the cover of a magazine, rather than its contents, is therefore what matters for the purpose of the Act.

"Indecency" is not statutorily defined, but the degree of offensiveness of indecent material is lower than that of material which risks being obscene under the *Obscene Publications Act 1959 Act* (i.e. "having a tendency to deprave and corrupt"). It is possible, therefore, that a publisher who wants to put a particularly explicit cover on a magazine could wrap it in order to avoid prosecution under the 1981 Act.

Alternatively, the publisher could make it available only through a licensed sex shop to which only persons aged 18 or over have access under the *Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982* and which is not therefore a public place.

2. “Men’s lifestyle” magazines

NFRN guidelines for display

The NFRN [guidelines](#) also make a number of recommendations for the display of “men’s lifestyle” magazines, often referred to as “lads’ mags”:

Men’s Lifestyle Magazines (Lads’ Mags) with front covers that may offend some customers

Although these are not top-shelf titles, we do urge members to be sensitive to the concerns of consumers, particularly in relation to the display of titles with front covers and/or content that may be inappropriate to display at a young person’s eye-level or below.

To minimise complaints from consumers, without adversely affecting the sale of these titles, we recommend:

- Do not display them adjacent to your display of children’s titles and comics.
- Do not display them at, or below, children’s eye level to ensure that they are not in the direct sight and reach of children.
- Part-overlap potentially problematic front covers with other titles to minimise offence to parents where your display space precludes the above suggestions.
- That similar care and consideration is given to the display of any Point of Sale material for these titles.
- A free, industry-agreed [planogram](#) indicating the preferred placement of titles is available to download. For further information please visit www.ppa.co.uk/retail.

Association of Convenience Stores guidance

The [Association of Convenience Stores](#) (ACS) has also published [guidance](#) (2013) on how to display “men’s lifestyle” magazines.¹ This includes the following advice for retailers:

- Ensure that lad’s mags are placed on shelf away from any children’s titles...
- In stores with smaller units, where moving the product out of the eye line of children is not possible, you can part obscure the titles with other magazines to ensure potentially offensive images can’t be seen
- You may decide that none of the above options are practical or sufficient to meet your customers concerns. In this case you should consider the use of modesty boards

¹ Available from this section of the ACS website: <https://www.acs.org.uk/advice/lads-mags/>

“Lose the Lads’ Mags” campaign

In 2013, [UK Feminista](#)² and [Object](#)³ coordinated a “Lose the Lads’ Mags” campaign. This called for supermarkets and newsagents to stop selling the magazines, claiming they portrayed women as “dehumanised sex objects”.⁴

Some commentators argued that lads’ mags were an easy target and that “gossip” magazines also objectified and portrayed women in demeaning ways but were not the subject of any campaigns.⁵

In July 2013, the Co-op said that it would no longer sell lad’s mags unless they were supplied in sealed modesty bags to prevent children seeing “overtly sexual images”.⁶ In September 2013, the Co-op announced that it would no longer sell Nuts, Zoo, Front, or the midweek and Sunday Sport newspapers.⁷

Nuts, FHM, Loaded and Zoo have now stopped publishing. According to reports, the magazines had seen circulation drop with customers turning to content on mobile phones and social media.⁸

² A group campaigning for gender equality: <http://ukfeminista.org.uk/about/>

³ A group campaigning “for better representation of women & girls in the media & against sex object culture”: <http://objectupdate.tumblr.com/>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ “Even lads’ mags aren’t as bad as the gossip rags”, *Telegraph*, 4 August 2013; “Get real, banning lads’ mags would patronise women”, *Telegraph*, 13 June 2013

⁶ “Co-op threatens to withdraw sale of uncensored ‘lads’ mags’”, *Guardian*, 29 July 2013

⁷ “The Co-operative pulls lads’ mags and sport for not covering up”, Co-operative Group news release, 9 September 2013

⁸ “FHM and Zoo closure marks end of lads’ mags era”, *Guardian*, 17 November 2015

3. The effects of viewing sexualised images and pornography

A February 2010 [report](#) by Linda Papadopoulos referred to research showing that adults, including women, who viewed sexually objectifying images of women in the mainstream media were more likely to be accepting of violence:

The evidence gathered...suggests a clear link between consumption of sexualised images, a tendency to view women as objects and the acceptance of aggressive attitudes and behaviour as the norm.

Both the images we consume and the way we consume them are lending credence to the idea that women are there to be used and that men are there to use them.⁹

Other impacts on young women and girls of “exposure to the sexualised female ideal” can include lower self-esteem, negative moods and depression.¹⁰

Reg Bailey’s [Letting children be children](#) report (June 2011) said there was “a widespread and specific concern” about the display of magazines “with sexualised front covers or front pages on shelves where young children can see them”:

Although the content of such ‘lads’ mags’ and newspapers is not pornography in the accepted sense (that is, not strong enough to be considered as ‘top shelf’ magazines), they trade on their sexualised content and many parents think retailers should treat them in the same way as they treat pornography....¹¹

Pornography

The Government’s February 2016 [consultation](#) on age verification for online pornography looked at some of the research on the harms of pornography.¹² The document said that “widespread exposure of minors to pornography before they would normally be sexually active may”:

- cause them distress;
- impact on their relationships, development and
- lead to the normalisation of the behaviours depicted in pornography

⁹ Linda Papadopoulos, [Sexualisation of young people: review](#), February 2010, p11

¹⁰ Ibid, p58

¹¹ Department for Education, [Letting children be children: report of an Independent review of the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood](#), June 2011, p24

¹² DCMS, Child Safety Online: Age Verification for Pornography, February 2016, Annex 2

8 Magazine displays in shops

A DCMS commissioned [report](#) on how children view pornography was published alongside the consultation.¹³

¹³ Victoria Nash et al, [*Identifying the Routes by which Children View Pornography Online: Implications for Future Policy-makers Seeking to Limit Viewing Report of Expert Panel for DCMS*](#), November 2015

About the Library

The House of Commons Library research service provides MPs and their staff with the impartial briefing and evidence base they need to do their work in scrutinising Government, proposing legislation, and supporting constituents.

As well as providing MPs with a confidential service we publish open briefing papers, which are available on the Parliament website.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available research briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing only with Members and their staff.

If you have any general questions about the work of the House of Commons you can email hcenquiries@parliament.uk.

Disclaimer

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties. It is a general briefing only and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific advice. The House of Commons or the author(s) shall not be liable for any errors or omissions, or for any loss or damage of any kind arising from its use, and may remove, vary or amend any information at any time without prior notice.

The House of Commons accepts no responsibility for any references or links to, or the content of, information maintained by third parties. This information is provided subject to the [conditions of the Open Parliament Licence](#).