

“Hypersexual Images and Students’ View of Oppression”

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ABSTRACT

This research, conducted on the campus of a small Christian university, studies students' views of oppression related to sexualized and hypersexualized images. Students who participated were asked their views on oppression and then asked whether or not images reflecting varying degrees of sexuality were oppressive to women. For the nine images to which students were exposed, the majority of students found each individual image oppressive to women. Few students found none of the images oppressive to women. There were marked differences in responses between females and males, as well as Christians and non-Christians. The results call for more studies to be done to test the reliability of this research. Finally, those who create sexualized media that students perceive as oppressive to women should consider this as an ethical concern.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Justification

There is considerable evidence that sexualizing media has a negative influence on society and effects on individuals (Thapan, 1995; Hammer, 2009; Carney and Louw, 2006; Aubrey, Henson, Hopper, and Smith, 2009; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Even with this research, sexualizing media continues to be created and widely disseminated. If students (or any group) see this sexualized media as oppressive to women, this calls for action. If students interpret hypersexualized images of women as oppressive to that group, this would demand an examination of ethics on the part of those who create and disseminate sexualizing and hypersexualizing images.

Research Questions

This study will attempt to answer these questions in relation to students at a small, midwest Christian university:

RQ1: Do students view hypersexualization of women in the media as oppression?

RQ2: Do men and women view hypersexualization of women in the media differently?

RQ3: Does Christianity affect students' view of hypersexualization of women in the media?

Students' views of selected hypersexualized and sexualized images as related to oppression will be studied. Students' views on hypersexualized and sexualized media in general will not be studied. This is in part to place parameters on the study. It also prevents a certain degree of speculation and subjectivity from becoming a factor. Students will be asked about images that receive a sexualization score based on a

scale developed by Hatton and Trautner (2011).

Only traditional undergraduate students at the university will be studied. It would be of interest to ask if age factors into responses regarding hypersexualization of women in the media and oppression. This question was not asked because of the homogeneous nature of the university's student population in terms of age.

Experimental Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses are proposed in light of this study:

H1: Students do not view hypersexualized media images as oppression.

H2: Men and women do not view hypersexualization of women in the media differently.

H3: Christianity will have no significant effect on students' views of media hypersexualization as oppression.

Terms

1. Hypersexualization: The over-sexualization of an object or person
2. Media: Forms of mass communication
3. Critical Theory: A social and theory related to communication developed in light of Marxism that seeks to critique social systems
4. Oppression: One group's excessive exercise of power over another group
5. Hegemony: One's participation in one's own domination
6. Emancipation: A process in which one becomes aware of one's oppression and takes action to reduce power imbalances
7. Computer mediated: Interaction negotiated by digital devices such as

computers, smartphones, and tablets

CHAPTER II – REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Relevant Research

Oppression

Critical theory has drawn into focus the systemic societally influenced inequalities between groups of people. This theory as proposed by the Frankfurt school (a particular group of academics at the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt) seeks to understand society as an “historically developing social whole” (Seidman, 1994). It not only aims to conceptually grasp society, but to critique and change it. Based partly in Hegelian philosophy, partly in Marxism, and partly in social concern, critical theory aims to make “theory into a force for human emancipation” (Seidman, 1994). Critical theorists see this emancipation as a process of the oppressed becoming aware of their own domination and taking action to reduce power imbalances. While this has traditionally been applied to economic relationships, critical theory also has a feminist branch, concerned with the systemic oppression of women (Miller, 2012).

Hypersexualization in the Media

The APA Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls describes the sexualization process in their 2010 report (APA Taskforce, 2010). They have four criteria for sexualization. Only one criterion need be present in order for sexualization to be taking place. These are the four criterion for sexualization:

- a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics;

- a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;
- a person is sexually objectified-- that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or
- sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person (APA Task Force, 2010)

Sexualization is rampant in the media. Increasingly, women are being sexually objectified in media imagery (Hatton and Trautner, 2011). Hypersexualization, according to Hatton and Trautner, is a combination of several sexualized attributes.

Hypersexualization occurs when the cumulative effect of the attributes result in the reduction of the interpretation of the image to sex. If the image includes so many sexualized features that all it represents is sexual, it is a hypersexual image.

Hatton and Trautner

Hatton and Trautner's article "Equal Opportunity Objectification? The Sexualization of Men and Women on the Cover of *Rolling Stone*" (2011) details their study of Rolling Stone magazine covers. They compared the instances and degrees of female sexualization and hypersexualization in the images on the magazine covers to that of male sexualization and hypersexualization. In order to measure sexualization and hypersexualization, a scale was developed. This scale ranges from 0 to 23 points that can be assigned to an image. Scores, which indicate higher levels of sexualization and hypersexualization as they increase are assigned based on points that the image accumulates by meeting criteria in a number of categories including clothing, pose,

and emphasis on breasts, genitals, and buttocks. Hypersexualized images are those that cannot be interpreted as having an interpretation or dimension other than sexuality (Hatton and Trautner, 2011).

Christian Theology of Sexuality

A Christian view of sexuality understand sexual interactions as a reflection of the Triune God. Just as God is self-giving and other-receiving within the Trinity, he has designed humankind in his image to express communal love through sex. Sexualization that objectifies others is a distortion of this reality (Rhea and Langer, 2015).

Similar Research

At the current time, the researcher has been unable to learn of any similar research. While there have been studies conducted exposing men and women to sexual content (Lopez and George, 1995) or gathering data on attitudes toward sexual intercourse on Christian campuses (Williams, DeFazio, and Goins, 2013), the researcher is unaware of any studies that attempt to answer questions regarding opinions of oppression related to sexualized images.

CHAPTER III - METHODOLOGY

Experimental Setting & Description

The data for this research study was collected via two identical Google Forms. University students were asked to participate in the research by visiting the web URL provided on their own personal devices-- such as computers or smart phones.

Hyperlinks were provided to students by faculty members who partnered with the researcher in the dissemination of the survey. The researcher and two volunteers distributed fliers containing a QR code and a URL, both of which linked to the one of the Google Forms. These fliers were given to students throughout the campus (library and classroom buildings). Most fliers were distributed in the campus center during mealtimes.

Students who submitted a survey response provided their gender, their age, their classification as a student, and their religion. Students were given a list of phrases that could be said to relate to oppression and asked which phrase best fit their view of oppression. Students were then exposed to nine media images portraying women either sexually or hypersexually. The students were asked about each image to respond with some degree of agreement or disagreement to the following statements: "This image emphasizes female sexuality" and "This image is oppressive to women." After having viewed each image, students were presented with the same phrases describing oppression and asked which, if any, best related to the images they had seen in the survey. Finally, students were asked which image they found most sexual and which image they found most oppressive, being given the choice to select that

none of the images were sexual or oppressive.

Experimental Variables

Variables for this study include the choice of theory, the choice of images and types of media sources, choice of students, gender, and religion. Critical theory was the theory selected. Images were selected from various media sources. Traditional undergraduate students were surveyed. Males and females and Christians and non-Christians were surveyed.

Subjects

Those who were asked to participate in the research were students of a small, midwest Christian university. Seventy-six students provided a response to the online survey. Of these, 43 were male and 33 were female. The number of self-reported Christian respondents was 71, those who selected another religion numbered 5. All of these selected “None” as their religion. Respondents’ ages ranged from 18-32.

Timing

Data was collected for this study beginning on Friday, March 4th, 2016 and continued through Sunday, March 20th, 2016.

Procedures

The following procedures were followed in conducting this experiment:

1. Once research questions and hypotheses were determined, nine media images were selected from across media platforms. Images were selected that scored varying levels of sexualization when evaluated according to Hatton and Trautner’s scale. These scores were assigned by

the researcher using the scale¹.

2. A survey was constructed around these images in order to answer the research questions².
3. Students were given access to the survey URL through Moodle, email, or a flyer.
4. Students were told that in order to participate, they should click on the link or type the link into their browser and read the informed consent. Students were told that the survey would take between 5 and 10 minutes to complete.
5. Students who asked what the survey was about were directed to the name of the survey. If they asked for this information to be expounded, the researcher described the survey process as detailed in the informed consent.
6. Results were tabulated on an observation basis and reported without enhanced statistical analysis.

Limitations

This study was limited to students of the university. Because the university's students largely identify as Christian, there were limitations in the number of non-Christian responses. There was a small sample size.

The study is also limited in its selection of images. Students who responded to the survey answered questions about nine media images that do not represent all

¹ The researcher first practiced assigning scores to images that Hatton and Trautner had scored, and then comparing the two to ensure that the researcher had an adequate grasp on the scale.

² Images can be found in Appendix A, and survey questions in Appendix B.

forms of media. Students were not asked about their feelings toward sexualizing media in general.

While it is probable that an interview process may have resulted in data that more accurately answered the research questions, this study was confined to the gathering of quantitative data. This was necessary due to time constraints imposed on the researcher.

CHAPTER IV - RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Hypersexual Images and Students' View of Oppression

In order to evaluate students' view of how sexual an image is, their responses were given numerical values (Strongly Agree=3, Agree=2, Slightly Agree=1, all forms of Disagree=0). Then scores which equaled the sum of all responses were assigned. With 76 responses, the scale for each image's female sexuality emphasis rating was 0 to 228. For simplification and easy comparison with Hatton and Trautner's scale, these individual ratings were divided by 10 in order to create a 0-23 scoring scale comparable in range to Hatton and Trautner's³. Image number 7 received the highest score for emphasizing female sexuality at 18.8 (see Table 1). Students' responses to images as oppressive were evaluated as binary-- the student either expressed some level of agreement or disagreement. 78.95% of students found this image oppressive to women. Image 3 received the next highest score at 18. 75% of students found this image oppressive. The third highest score was assigned to Image 9 at 17.4. 73.68% of students found this image oppressive to women. The lowest scoring image for emphasizing female sexuality was Image 8, which scored 7.8. 67.11% of students found this image to be oppressive to women.

Are the students who see these images as sexual the same students who find these images oppressive to women? For some images yes, for others, no. In order to answer this question, the responses of students who answered with some level of

³ Comparable in range as it does not measure the same criteria, nor use a similar method for evaluating sexualization.

agreement to the question about the image's sexuality were isolated and analyzed. For Image 4, 70.49% of those who found the image emphasizing of female sexuality also found the image oppressive, compared to 46.67% of those who did not find the image emphasizing of female sexuality. However, for Image 9, 72.06% of those who found the image emphasizing of female sexuality also found the image oppressive, compared to 87.5% of those who did not find the image emphasizing of female sexuality. So for some images finding the image emphasizing of female sexuality correlates with finding the image oppressive, and for others, it does not.

Hatton and Trautner's (2011) scale was used to assign scores to each image denoting a level of sexualization or hypersexualization. Hatton and Trautner's scale evaluates several criteria in order to determine a level of sexualization, including pose, clothing, touch, and focus on breasts, buttocks, and genitals. Hatton and Trautner's scale is a 24 point scale with three classifications: non-sexualized (0-4), sexualized (5-9), and hypersexualized (10-23). Images 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8 fall under the classification of sexualized. Images 1, 2, 7, and 9 fall under the classification of hypersexualized⁴.

The following table lists each image by the identification number assigned it for the survey. Listed with the image are the sexualization score assigned using Hatton and Trautner's 0-23 point scale, the 0-23 sexual emphasis score assigned by quantifying student responses, and the percentage of students surveyed who answered in agreement to the statement, "This image is oppressive to women":

⁴ For information about the score assignment process, see Chapter Three: Methodology.

Table 1

Image Number	Image Score Using Hatton and Trautner's Scale	Image Score Using Student Responses	Percentage of Students Who Found Image Oppressive
1	12	15.6	65.79%
2	10	14.9	57.89%
3	8	18	75%
4	8	13.4	65.79%
5	9	10.9	55.26%
6	9	15.4	73.68%
7	13	18.8	78.95%
8	7	7.8	67.11%
9	11	17.4	73.68%

For the question: "Which definition of oppression most closely relates to the images you reviewed in this survey:" 59.21% of students selected the response "Exploitation of one group of people by another group of people." The next most popular response was "Subjugation and unfair restraints" with 14.47%. The percentage of those who answered that none of the images related to oppression was 13.16%.

For the question: "Which image do you find most oppressive?" 40.79% of students responded that Image 8 was the most oppressive. Image 7 had the next

highest number of responses with 14.16%. In response to this question, only 3.95% of respondents said that none of the images are oppressive.

Gender

There were marked differences in female and male responses. For all images other than Image 9, a higher percentage of females than of males agreed that the image emphasized female sexuality. For all images, a higher percentage of females than of males agreed that the image was oppressive.

For the question: "Which definition of oppression most closely relates to the images you reviewed in this survey:" 75% of females selected the response "Exploitation of one group of people by another group of people" compared to 46.71% of males. The percentage of females who answered that none of the images related to oppression was 0.06%, compared to 18.60% of males. For the question: "Which image do you find most sexual?" 3.03% of females responded that none of the images were sexual, compared to no males. For the question: "Which image do you find most oppressive?" no females responded that none of the images were oppressive, as opposed to 6.98% of males.

Religion

There were some marked differences in response between those who identified their religion as Christianity and those who selected "none." For all images but 8 and 9, a higher percentage of nones agreed that the images were sexual. For six of the images, 100% of nones agreed that the image was sexual. For all images but 4 and 7, a higher percentage of Christians agreed that the images were oppressive (-- and for

Image 7, 78.87% Christians found the image oppressive as compared to 80% of nones).

For the question: “Which definition of oppression most closely relates to the images you reviewed in this survey:” 80% of nones selected the response “Exploitation of one group of people by another group of people” compared to 57.75% of Christians. The percentage of nones who answered that none of the images related to oppression was 20%, compared to 12.68% of Christians. (Though here it seems especially important to note that that 20% represents only one response.) For the question: “Which image do you find most sexual?” none of nones responded that none of the images were sexual, compared to 1.44% of Christians. For the question: “Which image do you find most oppressive?” no nones responded that none of the images were oppressive, as opposed to 4.23% of Christians.

Contaminants

Google Forms recorded two identical set of responses with two unique timestamps. Because the names provided for the informed consent were also identical, the response marked with the earlier timestamp was retained for data analysis and the later response was truncated.

Conclusions

H1: Students do not view hypersexualized media images as oppression.

This null hypothesis was disproved. No one question secures this conclusion, but rather the totality of the data set. The lowest number of students to find any individual image oppressive was 55.26%. When percentages of students who found

images oppressive were averaged, the average number of students to respond that any of the given media images was oppressive is 68.13%. In addition, the lowest number of students to find any individual image categorized as hypersexual oppressive was 57.89% and the when the percentages of students who found hypersexual images oppressive were averaged, the average number to respond that any of the the given hypersexual media images was oppressive is 69.08%.

Even more telling are the individual percentages associated with the images that received the highest female sexuality emphasis score. The three images the students received the highest score are images 7, 3, and 9. The percentages of students who found these particular images oppressive are 78.95%, 75%, and 73.68% respectively.

When asked which image is most oppressive, only 3.95% answered that none of the images were oppressive. When asked which definition of oppression best related to the images seen in the survey, only 13.16% of students selected: "None of the above--the images do not relate to oppression."

While it is arguable that without being asked, students may not have articulated their view of sexualization of women in the media as oppression, this research suggests that students would agree with this view. Further research on this topic is recommended to ensure the reliability of these results. Should these results prove to be reliable, there arises an ethical crisis for those who produce sexualizing and hypersexualizing media.

H2: Men and women do not view hypersexualization of women in the media differently.

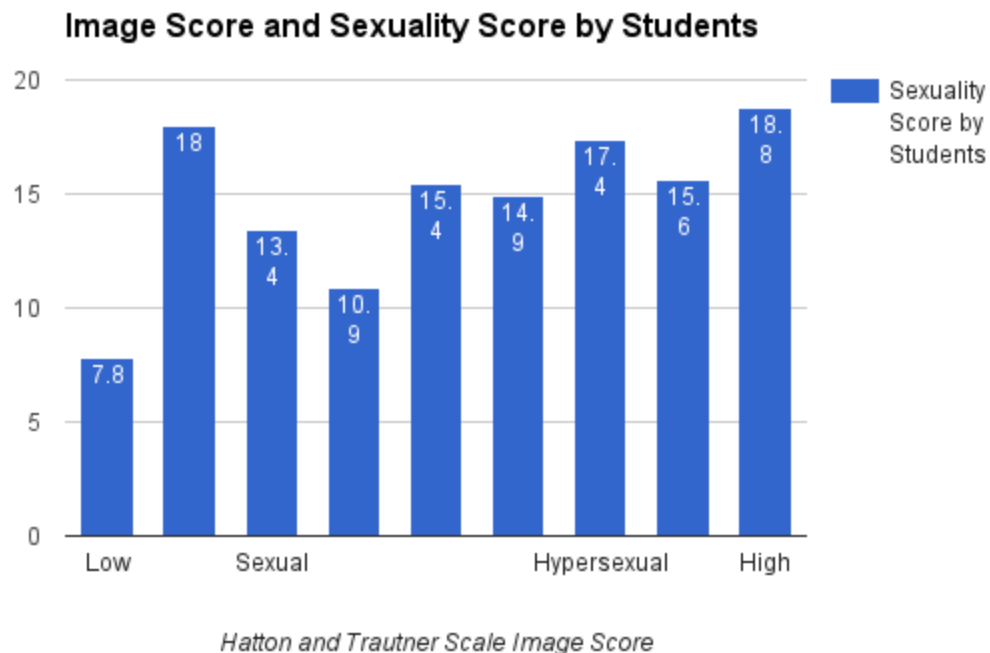
This null hypothesis was disproved. There was a distinct trend that emerged in the analysis of male vs. female respondents. For each image, a higher percentage of females agreed that the image was oppressive. At 75%, almost 30% more females than males selected “Exploitation of one group of people by another group of people” to answer which definition of oppression best related to the survey images. For this same question, 0.06% of females answered that none of the images were oppressive, compared to 18.6% of males. No females answered that none of the images were oppressive in answer to the question about which image was most oppressive, compared to 6.98% of males. Consistently, more females than males found sexualized and hypersexualized images of women oppressive.

H3: Christianity will have no significant effect on students' views of media hypersexualization as oppression.

This null hypothesis was not confirmed by the study. For the majority of images, a lower percentage of Christians found the images sexual. This is of note because it seems counterintuitive. Are not Christians hypervigilant regarding sexual content in the media they consume? Yet this seems to suggest that some do not recognize for what it is what seems immediately understandable as sexualized to others. Also for the majority of images, a higher percentage of Christians found the images oppressive. This would seem to indicate that Christianity has some impact on how students perceive hypersexual media images. However, with the limitation of only 5 “none” respondents, this comparison may not be representative.

Critique of Hatton and Trautner

Students surveyed do not appear to agree with Hatton and Trautner about the sexuality of images. The following chart depicts that while the lowest scoring image was also rated lowest by students and that the highest scoring image was also rated highest by students, in between these two extremes there is notable variance between Hatton and Trautner's scores and students' evaluation. While generally the images' sexual emphasis score increases, there are exceptions: notably Images 3 and 5. Image 3 was assigned an 8 on Hatton and Trautner's scale whereas Image 5 received a 9. However, students scored Image 3 at an 18 and Image 5 at 10.9. Though the images scored closely, students overall did not rate them closely and rated the lower scoring image as more emphasizing of female sexuality.



While the student score is not measuring the same element (an emphasis on

female sexuality as opposed to elements of sexualization) or measuring it in the same way (a score measured in cumulative opinions rather than cumulative image elements), one might expect that if Hatton and Trautner's scale reliably evaluates sexualization, students would have given the images higher sexual emphasis scores as the sexualization scores increased. This raises questions regarding the validity and reliability of Hatton and Trautner's scale. Is it truly a valid scale useful in determining sexualization from hypersexualization? Student responses generated a higher score for some sexualized images than for some hypersexualized images. Are there limitations to the scale that confine it to use with magazine covers? Is it a reliable scale if another researcher follows the same process for categorizing images and yet the research subjects reject this categorization?

Recommendations for Future Studies

From these findings, several recommendations for future studies emerge. Primarily, the validity and reliability of Hatton and Trautner's scale should be investigated further. Is this a valid way to evaluate and determine sexualization? Are other researchers able to use the scale with any degree of consistency?

It may behoove future studies conducted with identical or similar research questions to conduct interviews rather than collect survey data. This would add the dimension of respondents' reasoning behind choices. This would also enable the question, "Is it hypersexualization itself that students view as oppressive?"

Conducting similar research in various contexts (private Christian college vs. public university, for example) would also add insight to this research. Some future

studies may want to investigate this question pertaining to groups other than students. In that case, age is a notable variable that was excluded from scrutiny in this study. Some research may want to explore further the difference between Christian and non-Christian responses to sexualized media. Future studies may want to investigate the relationship between oppression and media sexualization outside of images (sexualization in song lyrics, for example). Ideally, future studies will be able to gather data from more respondents.

APPENDIX A: Images by Identification Number

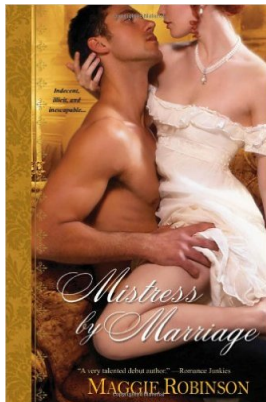
Image 1.



<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/pictures/getting-naked-big-names-show-some-skin-on-the-cover-of-rolling-stone-20>

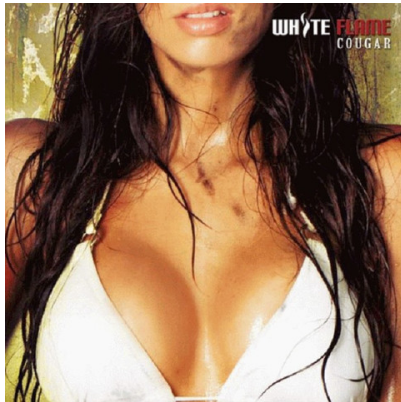
100205/gossip-girl-0309570

Image 2.



<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/9769448-mistress-by-marriage>

Image 3.



<http://www.demondollrecords.com/products/white-flame-cougar>

Image 4.



<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/11118048/Marvel-cancels-two-upcoming-covers-following-uproar-over-new-Spider-Woman-character.html>

Image 5.



<http://skyangels.webcindario.com/Shakira/CD/OFV2.php>

Image 6.



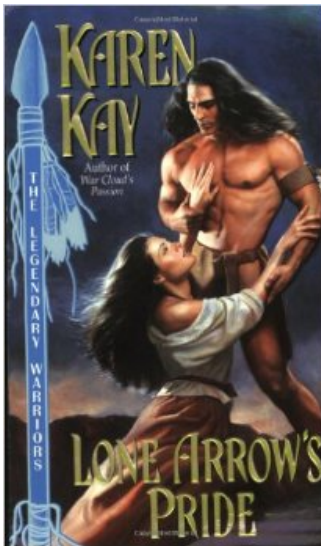
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starfire_\(comics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starfire_(comics))

Image 7.



http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/05/sports-illustrated-swimsuit-cover-2015_n_6620106.html

Image 8.



<http://www.paperbackswap.com/Lone-Arrows-Pride-Karen-Kay/book/0739426567/>

Image 9.



<http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/gossip/miley-cyrus-topless-vogue-germany-cover-article-1.1606341>

APPENDIX B: Survey Questions

- Gender
 - Male
 - Female
- Age
- Classification
 - Freshman
 - Sophomore
 - Junior
 - Senior
 - Other:
- Religion
 - None
 - Christianity
 - Islam
 - Buddhism
 - Hinduism
 - Sikhism
 - Other:
- Select the phrase that most closely reflects your own view of oppression:
 - Long-term unjust treatment and control of another
 - Subjugation and unfair restraints

- Direct and cruel control over another's personhood
 - The exploitation of one group of people by another group of people
 - Legal ownership of another human being
- For Images 1-9: This image emphasizes female sexuality.
 - Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Slightly Agree
 - Slightly Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
- For Images 1-9: This image is oppressive to women.
 - Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Slightly Agree
 - Slightly Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
- Which definition of oppression most closely relates to the images you reviewed in this survey:
 - Long-term unjust treatment and control of another
 - Subjugation and unfair restraints
 - Direct and cruel control over another's personhood

- The exploitation of one group of people by another group of people
 - Legal ownership of another human being
- Which image do you find most sexual?
 - Image 1
 - Image 2
 - Image 3
 - Image 4
 - Image 5
 - Image 6
 - Image 7
 - Image 8
 - Image 9
 - None of the images are sexual
- Which image do you find most oppressive?
 - Image 1
 - Image 2
 - Image 3
 - Image 4
 - Image 5
 - Image 6
 - Image 7
 - Image 8

- Image 9
- None of the images are oppressive

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