

Running head: STEREOTYPES ON MAGAZINES COVERS

Gender, Body Image, Sexuality & Race on the Cover Pages of Men's and Women's Popular
Magazines: A Comparative Analysis

STUDENT PAPER

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Abstract

This pilot research study analyzed the cover-pages of ten men's and women's magazines published in the November-December of 2006. Front covers give a glimpse of what is inside the magazine and by portraying the stereotypical, hegemonic ideals about body image, sexuality, race and gender, popular texts not only portray singular representations, but further the dominant ideologies in the society. After carrying out the textual analysis of different magazines, the argument was substantiated. Only two out of the ten magazines had featured people of other races on the cover pages and stereotypical gender portrayals seemed to be the norm.

Assumptions about heterosexuality was assumed across all the magazines and women were portrayed in submissive, demeaning, decorative ways where as men were shown as sexual beings, aggressive and in-charge. Hegemonic body image ideals about both sexes were furthered where masculinity in men and thinness in women were considered a virtue and an ideal to be emulated. Implications of the findings are discussed.

This study looked at the cover pages of magazines classified as men's and women's. Many magazines in some way, shape, or form reinforce traditional gender roles (Peirce, 1997; Woods, 2003), objectifies women as sex objects (Krassas, Blauwkamp, Wesselink, 2001, 2003), and lack diverse racial representations (Duke, 2000). This research study analyzed the cover pages of ten men's and women's magazines in order to substantiate the claim that popular texts further the hegemonic representations. It is important to study cover pages since they act as the mirror to the contents inside and are usually the first point of interaction between readers and the text. According to Colson-Smith (2005) "blurbs provide a glimpse of the entire magazine's content and will determine if the magazine makes it into the hands of the consumer or is simply left on the shelf" (pp. 7). Therefore it is interesting to see the portrayals front covers carry and the messages they further. Total population of United States according to the World Fact Book (July 2006) estimates is around 300 million. According to Audit Bureau of Circulation about 300 million magazines were sold in the year 2005 through both subscription and on shelf sales. Therefore one can see that magazines attract a huge readership. Thus it would be imperative to study the depictions in these publications and the possible impact on the audience.

According to Kim & Ward (2004) women who regularly consumed contemporary women's magazines (they define contemporary women's magazines as "mainstream magazines that are geared toward adolescent or young adult female audience and that express the clear intention of providing readers with advice, scripts and information about dating and sexual relationships", p. 49) believed in traditional feminine ideologies. Men's magazines were no different. In the study of Maxim and Stuff magazines, Taylor (2005) found that most of the articles focused on pleasing women, enhancing sexual performance and introducing variety. These magazines assumed heterosexuality as a norm and even when the texts discussed lesbians,

it was from the point of view of male spectatorship and male “voyeuristic” gaze (Van Zoonen, 1994). Peirce (1997) who reviewed women’s magazine fiction for gender role messages notes that though some changes have occurred, still women in these magazines are portrayed in stereotypical gender roles. Van Zoonen (1994) citing Tuchman says that the television has symbolically annihilated women. She further mentions that “media reflect society’s dominant social values and symbolically denigrate women, either by not showing them at all, or by depicting them in stereotypical roles” (pp. 17). According to Wood (2003) gender is constantly created, recreated, and negotiated in any culture hence making it a non-static entity. According to Alexander (2003) “one area in which change is unmistakable is gender roles and gender identity”. Media images however do not portray transformed realities and instead still depict gender in stereotypical ways (Colson-Smith, 2005; Signorelli, 1997; Wood, 2003).

Researchers have already established stereotypical portrayals in the popular texts. Most of the studies however, focus either on the content inside the magazines or on the advertised portrayals carried in these texts (Kaplan & Cole, 2003; Krassas et al, 2001, 2003; Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman, 1998; Thomas & Treiber, 2000). Also, most of the past research adopted the methodology of content analysis to study these texts (Krassas et al, 2001, 2003; Signorielli, 1997; Thomas & Treiber, 2000). Moreover most authors either looked into several issues of one magazine (Kaplan & Cole, 2003; Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman, 1998), or compared different women’s magazines to one another such as comparison of Glamour to Cosmopolitan (Peirce, 1997), or conducted a comparative analysis of different magazines for men such as Maxim versus GQ (Krassas et al, 2003), or compared men’s and women’s magazines with each other (Krassas, 2001). This study however is different from most other research studies carried out in the past because it compares the cover pages of men’s and women’s magazines rather than the

inside content. As stated above, front pages are important to study because these give a preview of the content inside the magazine and are usually initial point of contact between readers and the publication. Malkin, Wornian, & Chrisler (1999) note that since catch phrases, titles and pictures depicted on the magazine covers attract readers to buy it, therefore examination of these covers is important. Portrayals on the front could determine, in part about the philosophy of the publishers and what can be expected inside. If these pages further the stereotypes, then the magazines on the whole could be suspected of the same. Dearth of research on examination of magazine covers makes this study all the more interesting and valuable to the representation and stereotyping scholarship. Before going into the detailed analysis however, the first part of this paper explores related past literature.

Common Portrayals in Men's and Women's Magazines

Most of the men's and women's magazines have stereotypical patterns in which they talk about gender, body image, sexuality and race. Body image ideals presented in these magazines affect both men and women. Frederick, Fessler, & Haselton (2005) selected covers of magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Men's Fitness*, and *Men's Health* (among others) and coded them for muscularity levels of individuals pictured on the front. They found that "female-audience magazines present representations of ideal male body that are less muscular than male-audience magazines" (p. 84). However muscularity in men was considered an important feature.

Research suggests that women more often than men are expected to follow "ideal weight" rhetoric and hence become prey to eating disorders (Colson-Smith, 2005; Malkin et al, 1999; Wolf, 1990). Levine, Smolak, & Hayden (1994) conducted a study of girls aged 10-14 years in age to find the correlation between their eating behavior, body satisfaction and influence of parents, peers, and magazines on the former two variables. Authors found that almost 60% of

their sample read and considered magazines as an important source of information for shape, diet, fitness, and general beauty. According to Schlenker et al (1998) most of the models featured in popular magazines are often much lower than their normal weight recommendations. Since many women turn to these magazines to learn about beauty and fitness, it complicates the situation manifold. By popularizing body image ideals, magazines promote unhealthy practices in the society and since many women turn to these texts to learn about fashion and strategies to achieve “model like” image, women might get embroiled into the issues of obsession with body image and eating disorder.

Sexual portrayals presented in the magazines are also gendered. Traditionally most magazines show women in lesser clothes than men, though other trends can also be seen in more recent magazines. Shirtless men for example can be seen on the cover pages of many magazines aimed towards men. In the present study, Brad Pitt was featured as shirtless on the December issue of *Vanity Fair*. Other studies have also reported similar findings. Therefore representation ideals for men are also witnessing winds of change. Pope, Olivardia, Borowiecki, & Cohane (2001) content analyzed the advertisements in *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* and found that in the last 40 years, proportion of undressed female models remained the same where as that of male models increased sharply.

Finally race has also been portrayed in very typical ways such that the most popular magazines hardly show any diversity. According to Thomas & Treiber (2000) magazines show more white than black women while discussing the messages about beauty and glamour. Many different studies have already proven that media is partly responsible for furthering racial stereotypes. According to Downing & Husband (2005) gender and racial stereotyping often overlap, such that women of color are often shown as “pliant and sexually available to white

men” (pp. 34). Following sections of the literature review deal with each of the above-mentioned issues in more detail.

Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender in popular texts

“What is female and what is male is transmitted to individuals by various societal forces” (Peirce, 1997, p. 581). According to Van Zoonen (1994) societies define man-woman and feminine–masculine. Since we are born in a predefined society we come to think of ourselves in those terms. Thus “gender becomes a seemingly natural and inevitable part of our identity and for that matter often a problematic one” (Van Zoonen, 1994). According to Woods (2003) gender is socially constructed and media plays a huge role in communicating and constructing gender.

In analysis of sexual rhetoric in *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy* magazines, authors Krassas et al (2001) found that women were pictured in traditionally “feminine” ways and non-verbal messages and body positions communicated “dependency, submissiveness and sexual availability” (p. 763). They say that women were depicted as decorative sexual objects where as men were shown as more functional, active, masculine, and aggressive. These portrayals suggest that even today after so many decades of feminist movements and “awareness” women are still objectified, commodified, and given a secondary status in the society (Krassas et al, 2001, 2003). The way these magazines define femininity as “ability to attract a man-to undergo male gaze and be judged suitable” further demeans women (Krassas et al, 2001, p.766). Milkie (2002) analyzed girls magazines to see how femininity was constructed and communicated through these texts. After interviewing staff members at popular magazines, the author found that publishing offices received constant requests to portray more genuine, everyday like, realistic images from readers across the country. Even though legitimate, these requests were ignored for various reasons (Please see Milkie, 2002 for details) and popular texts still continue to depict singular

representations of women in which femininity is constructed in very traditional ways. It is appropriate to quote Krassas et al (2001) here:

“Our study of *Cosmopolitan* supports Gigi Durham’s conclusion that women’s magazines offer a “paradoxical construction of female sexuality” (Durham, 1996, p23). Women are instructed to shed their traditional roles and become more independent, while at the same time they are ingrained with the necessity of finding and sexually satisfying a man” (p.766).

Not only magazines, but most popular media images also stress on this paradoxical role women are required to play. For example television show *Sex and the City* portrays four young, successful, and independent women who are constantly looking for a man to feel fulfilled and complete. These constructions further ground the assumptions that women should be in subservient roles and should find a man to feel complete, while at the same time furthering a rhetoric that stresses independence of women. The way gender is portrayed in the magazines can also be understood in the terms of Foucault and power differentials. Magazines show men as dominating and women are portrayed as submissive, docile and powerless (Krassas et al, 2001, 2003; MacKay & Covell, 1997). Thus “traditional” and “stereotypical” portrayal of gender discursively produces the knowledge (in the society) that male sex is better than female sex and there by dis-empowers women (while empowering men). Many scholars have been trying to study how much these biased portrayals impact the individual and thus the society at large. The fact that little has changed in last so many years at the basic level in media is especially alarming. According to Vigorito & Curry (1998) even though women have actively started to participate in the labor force, still they are more likely to be depicted as “models and consumers rather than in occupational roles”.

However shred of light is imminent in the form of some newer magazines that have started to portray gender in somewhat nontraditional manner. Consumption for example, typically considered a feminine trait (Breazeale, 1994) has been the focus in many recent men's magazines (Alexander, 2003). Magazines at the surface level have started to show seeds of change. As one flips through the pages, tension between traditional and "modern" portrayals of femininity and masculinity becomes evident. This conflict, even though shallow, can pave way for deeper changes. This conflict also furthers the notion of postmodern world. It compels one to branch out from the modernist perspectives of generalizations and embrace the reality of conflict, confusions, chaos and de-centralization. Depictions of sexuality, however still lurks in modernist project where by heterosexuality is considered a given and women are treated as pleasers and men as the "sexual beings" (Krassas et al, 2003). Continuing with the issue of sexual portrayals and depictions of sexuality, the next paragraph elaborates on how magazines reify and construct the notions of normative sexuality in the society.

Sexuality & Sexual Intimacy

Ford, LaTour, & Lundstrom (Peirce, 1997) found that portrayal of women as sex objects have increased over the years. Krassas et al (2001) used Goffman's classifications of gender to compare how Playboy and Cosmopolitan magazines portrayed pictures to communicate about sexuality and sexual relationships. They say that sexuality is constructed rhetorically through popular culture and found that though more nudity was shown in Playboy, both the magazines "reflect male gaze and promote the idea that women should primarily concern themselves with attracting and sexually satisfying men" (p. 751). These portrayals not only objectify women but also reinforce the stereotypical gender roles. The portrayals in the magazines that Krassas and his coauthors analyzed also assumed the universality of heterosexuality. In another study Krassas,

Blauwkamp, & Wesselink (2003) coded 994 pictures of adult human (with texts) in the six issues (each) of *Stuff* and *Maxim* magazines. They found that women more than men were portrayed as “sex objects”, white people were depicted sexier than people from the other races, and homosexuality was once again assumed normative in both the magazines. Sexual stereotypes furthered in women’s magazines popularize the notion that men are “driven by sexual urges, are fearful of commitment and that women should be sexually assertive and direct in attracting men’s interest” (Kim & Ward, 2004).

Researchers hold conflicting views about the functional aspect of sexual portrayals in popular texts. On the one hand these could be seen as educational that help readers experiment with their sexuality (Taylor, 2005) and on the other hand these depictions can be damaging at many levels. First most magazines assume heterosexuality as a norm thereby marginalizing gays and lesbians. Secondly magazines depict sex in such a way that promotes free sex without any consequences, which according to Kim & Ward (2004) can result into many psychological and medical complications and unwanted pregnancies. Thirdly women in these magazines are portrayed as sex objects aiming to please men and most of the depictions reflect male gaze that further demeans women (Krassas et al, 2001). Other most common portrayals in popular magazines are concerned with the way body image is portrayed and how people of other races are symbolically annihilated from the media. The next paragraphs elaborate on the same.

Body Image

Study conducted by Pope et al (2001) found that the number of undressed men has been increasing in the magazines and masculinity is considered as a desirable trait for the male body. They say that this has important implications in terms of body image issues in men. The increased attention on male body (and male muscularity) has led to enhanced use of cosmetics,

gymnasium and fitness facilities, dietary supplements and anabolic steroid (Hatoum & Belle, 2004; Pope et al, 2001). According to Hatoum & Belle (2004) many men have started to experience specific bodily concerns and at some levels underweight men can have similar concerns as overweight women.

Media forces are instrumental in defining the ideals of beauty and femininity. According to Milkie (2002) “narrow image of female beauty presented in pervasive form in media- magazines, television, film and the like” results into “distorted self image” and leads to “cultural oppression”. Kim & Ward (2004) say that different studies using content analyses report that the messages magazines convey about women, are filled with gender biases such that women are expected to perform the docile role and put her own interests on the back burner in order to sustain her relationships and follow physical beauty ideals enmeshed in the society. Ever increasing cases of eating disorders, psychological problems and decreased self esteem among women show the constant struggle women experience in order to attain the “perfect body” as portrayed by the media (Colson-Smith, 2005; Hatoum & Belle, 2004; Kim & Ward, 2004; Levine et al, 1994; Malkin et al, 1999; Markey & Markey, 2005; Milkie, 2002; Schlenker et al 1998; Wolf, 1990). According to Markey & Markey (2005) dieting and issues related to body images have become so systemic that they can be considered almost normative in women. According to the Federal Government Source for Women’s Health Information (2000) eating disorders are “one of the key health issues facing young women”. They also say that out of the entire population of patients who suffer from eating disorder, 90% are women. Studies have shown that women who are shown in popular texts such as Cosmopolitan and Glamour are sometimes drastically underweight (Malkin et al, 1999). Since many women try to attain the media perfected bodies, they fall prey to anorexia, bulimia and similar other maladies and also

lower their self-esteem leading to body dissatisfaction and other body image issues. Gender, body image ideals, and sexuality are deeply intertwined and overlapping. According to Durham (1998) “through hetero-eroticized beauty ideals, girls are encouraged to cast themselves as objects of male desire” (p. 386). By depicting idealized bodies, “appropriate” gender roles, and sexuality on the front page, magazines establish and reinforce the hegemonic ideals and widen the power differentials. Therefore a study of the cover pages is appropriate and assumes enhanced importance to unearth the stereotypical and hegemonic depictions about gender, sexuality and body.

Postmodernism

Modernism started with the age of enlightenment. One of the main features of modernist project was the search for “grand meta-narratives and “big T truth” about the world we live in. Consequently modernist put forth big picture stories relating to science, religion, and discourse among many other things. Scientific method was privileged in modernism and the language was viewed as is, on the surface, representing objective reality. Postmodernism which is considered the extension of modernist project, on the other hand, focuses on producing micro-narratives about issues such as culture, identity and individual. Leotard says that the postmodern world has given rise to divergent communities and complexities and thus, in order to understand these, we have to produce small narratives and grow out of the search for “grand meta-narratives”. Postmodernists argue that since the world has changed so much with the globalization, technologization, outsourcing and consequent transnationalization therefore one explanation just won’t suffice. Post modernist researchers look for emergent, contextual explanations rather than searching for bigger, all encompassing explanations.

According to Ashcraft & Mumby (2004) discourse in postmodernism is one of vulnerability. It is always shifting (anti-foundationalist) there by producing new meanings of knowledge and associated power with it. There are no clear, on the surface meanings since discourse, which produces meaning, in itself is layered in each other. Discourse is privileged in postmodernism and resistance for these scholars is an alternative reading of what is missing. Derrida proposed the concept of “differance”, binary constructions, and dichotomy. According to his notion, world is made up of opposites. By stating one, other is automatically implied, but not talked about explicitly. Postmodernists try to play out these oppositional tensions and try to unearth the multiple meanings.

Portrayals of gender roles, men, women, femininity, masculinity, body image and sexuality in the popular texts, I believe is situated somewhere in between modern and postmodern era. It seems that regarding some issues, texts adopt postmodern approaches (such as male body as consumer: Alexander, 2003) while for most others such as sexuality and gender, they are still struggling with modernity. However the conflict and discord is clear. As one does the close reading it is clear that on some levels modernist values of finding a man, acting as a caregiver and homemaker is stressed for women, while at the same time on another level independence, dominance, and equality is stressed. Power struggles in the texts are implicitly visible. Today’s “Cosmo” women wants a sexual partner (which most often is portrayed as man: Another modernist preconception) and security to feel complete but at the same time declares her independence and detachment by announcing that she does not need one. On the one hand while male gaze objectifies women in sexual rhetoric and places her in subservient roles, on the other hand the same rhetoric encourages her to take charge, be aggressive and enjoy her sexuality. Thus one can appreciate the conflict and struggle between modern and postmodern views in the

media. This study tries to tease out the same by analyzing the front cover pages of different men's and women's magazines. It is argued that sexuality, body image, race and gender will be portrayed in very stereotypical ways; however underlying postmodernist struggles will shadow the grand meta-narratives.

Methodology

This study was started out as an attempt to analyze the content inside the men's and women's popular magazines. Consequently trip was made to a bookstore in a large university town in the southern part of the country. While at the bookshop it was observed that most people glanced first at the front covers, and if something caught their attention, they picked up the magazine and looked through. However if they did not like the messages on the cover page, most often they moved on to the next magazine till they found something that caught their attention. Hence the idea for the present study was born. Since front cover pages are the first point of contact with the readers it was thought that images and texts featured on the covers could have an impact on the audience and therefore analysis of the same would make an interesting and informational study. According to Frederick et al (2005) covers are very widespread (since they are visually obvious) and "even non-subscribers are exposed to the covers at stores and newsstands, hence the cover presumably impacts the largest audience".

What is it that readers like (or dislike) about the front pages, do texts portray stereotypical notions about sex, women, and body image or are they more adventurous and creative, what is the rhetoric behind the messages, and how does the message "processing" take place: Such and similar other questions are not only interesting but important to explore. However due to obvious reasons, going into each and every aspect in this study was not possible. Also, the present study should be considered as a pilot study forming a base for the future, more detailed, and exhaustive

research. Due to abundance of issues and limitations of time, it was decided that the focus of this study would mainly be on the images and texts carried on the cover pages of five men's and five women's magazines. The five men's magazines that were chosen were: Maxim, GQ, Men's Fitness, Men's Health and Vanity Fair. The women's magazines included in the analysis were: Cosmopolitan, Redbook, Glamour, Jane and Shape. All the issues were either from November or December of 2006. The above magazines were chosen due to their popularity since Audit Bureau of Circulation data for 2006 reveals that the chosen magazines are one of the most popular publications in each category. Also the sample was chosen due to the ease of availability and since it is convenience sample, therefore generalizations from this study should not be drawn. Moreover most of the selected magazines are well established as women's and men's magazines and have a wide reach; thus it is argued that due to their sheer reach, these magazines might be influencing a large number of people in the ways that are beyond "obvious".

Results & Discussion

This part of the paper is divided into three sections: a) Findings in men's magazines b) Findings in women's magazines and c) The commonalities and the differences between the two.

Findings in men's magazines

Men's magazines that were chosen for the analysis were: Maxim, GQ, Men's Fitness, Men's Health and Vanity Fair. Of the five magazines used in the analysis, two are concerned with men's fitness and health. However these were still included in the sample because they play an important role in the way masculinity and male body image is furthered. In terms of race two out of the five magazines, Men's Fitness and Maxim had white women on the cover, Men's Health and Vanity Fair had white men and GQ featured an African American model. As is

indicated racial diversity was almost non-existent and only one out of five magazines portrayed person from other race. Rest of the models, both men and women were white.

Body image and gender roles, as suspected was portrayed in a stereotypical fashion. Men were shown as muscular, buff, and well built. Women however were shown as small, thin, big breasted, with toned torso and well-defined abs. All the women had long hair and conformed to the societal beauty ideals with shaved legs, tamed eyebrows, and lots of makeup. Also evident were masculine and feminine gaze through which the images of the models were captured. Women models seemed to be looking straight at the viewer where as men portrayed on the cover were not making eye contact and their gaze focused elsewhere. Women were shown as more inviting, less aggressive, and docile (on Men's Fitness) and with child like inquisitiveness (on Maxim). Men however were portrayed as in-command, confident, at ease, and almost haughty (in Vanity Fair). Images were in sync with the texts. Men's fitness carried a tag line saying "exercise+health+nutrition+sex+gear". One would assume the part that mentions exercise, health, and nutrition to be natural since it was men's fitness magazine. However the latter two are quite confusing and furthers the notion that former three are a prerequisite to sexual satisfaction. Gear also signifies masculinity and once again strengthens gender norms. Many textual messages were focused on workout, weight loss, nutrition, and exercise such as "new ways to lose your gut" or 'fast food extra: How to eat it and not get fat'. Men's Fitness magazine seemed to juxtapose sexuality with body image and masculinity as is evident in the following message "give her what she wants: Harder abs, bigger biceps, jacked chest". Both GQ and Men's Health carried messages about having "strong and attractive" bodies, once again signifying strength as a desirable characteristic in men. Two out of three men were shirtless and women (featured on the magazine covers) also wore skimpy clothes to expose and show cleavage.

Above paragraphs throw light on how body image was portrayed and carried the nuances of sexuality. Isolated sexual messages were also equally intriguing. Though Men's Health and Men's Fitness are portrayed primarily as the fitness magazines for men, both however carry explicit messages about sexual relationships and masculinity. "Her hottest sex spots", "2937 women expose themselves", "hello its sexy time", "foxy boxing", "bag a celeb", "give her what she wants": These are some examples of the way sexual rhetoric is conveyed through these popular texts. Not only do these magazines objectify women, but also stress that man has to please a woman, males are sexual beings and women are passive receivers, and further the stereotypical sexual portrayals. Texts also assume heterosexuality as normative and completely ignore and thus further marginalize homosexuals. By reinforcing the gender and sexual stereotypes these magazines render the "other", non-normative powerless and further marginalized. Most of the sexual portrayals in these magazines objectified women and treated them as decoration pieces, which is in agreement with Krassas et al.'s (2001) findings. While on the one hand magazines showed women as confident and poised, on the other hand the same magazine portray women as keen, available, inviting, sexually arousing, and waiting for men.

Findings in women's texts

Five women's magazines that were analyzed were: Redbook, Glamour, Cosmopolitan, Jane and Shape. All the magazines are women's magazines but are still very different (except for Cosmopolitan and Glamour) from each other and hence were thought to be a good mix for the analysis.

Except for Salma Hayek (on Redbook) all the women models were white, small, thin, tall, "pretty", and sported huge amount of makeup. These women furthered the "idealized" depictions of what a female beauty ought to be. By representing only a certain kind of beauty,

the magazines normalize the hegemonic representations. Most of the written text also concentrated on beauty and body image. “Not a size 4? So what! Miracle clothes for all bodies” on the cover page of Glamour only strengthens the notion that small is better and furthers the dominant ideals. It is very sad and alarming because most women in our culture are not size four. However by furthering this notion, magazines on one hand are driving women towards unhealthy eating practices and on the other hand are portraying small bodies as norms, which is definitely not true.

If one tries to analyze the portrayals from the perspective of cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1976), these magazines “cultivate” the hegemonic reality in the readers who then want to adopt the practices shown in the magazines. These depictions should be considered unethical and should be highly discouraged because these portrayals might be partly responsible for the prevalence of eating disorders in the society. Wolf (1990) in her famous work “The beauty myth” says that interestingly obsession with small female body started with the first wave of women’s liberation movement in 1940s. This thus could be a strategy by the patriarchal forces to dis-empower women by reducing her size (and thus personality). In order to achieve the “ideal beauty standards” so many women fall prey to the hegemonic notions of beauty and thus focus all their energies on achieving the “unachievable” when they could be contributing to the society in many other productive ways. “Yes! Sexy dress for every shape”, “how to look like a pro did your hair”, “get a body you’ll love by new year”, “the work out that gives Kristin Davis these abs”, “flawless skin fake it fast”, “get the best haircut of your life”, “bad skin day? What’s messing up your face” and many other lines constituted almost 50% of the total texts on the cover pages.

Another 50% of the texts largely focused on sexuality. It was almost surprising (and dismal to see) how rampant the sexual portrayals were. “Naughty sex: 8 hot new positions we’ve never published before”, “how to keep your guy totally turned on by you”, “4 facts men wish their girlfriends knew”, “sex so good your neighbors will complain”, “31 sexy moves he just cant resist”, “fight colds with sex”, “the private sex advise no one else will tell you”: All such textual messages when coupled with cleavage revealing and inviting poses of models on the cover pages reinforce the notion of women as sex objects, as decoration pieces, as submissive and waiting to be pleased (by men). Although these magazines portray women’s sexuality freely, at the same time they also seem to further the notion that the onus of “pleasing” men and there by keep him attached lies on women. These magazines not only portray women as secondary to men and objectify them but by recklessly depicting sex, magazines almost further the notion that casual sex is not that irresponsible and almost good. Out of so many messages about sexual intimacy just one focused on sexual health. This could lead to the belief that reckless sex does not have much serious consequences and could undermine the importance of education about STDs and unwanted pregnancies. Taylor (2003) suggests that many people turn to these magazines for “learning”. Therefore magazines could play an important part in educating people about safe sex practices rather than furthering the stereotypical and “idealized” depictions and implicitly furthering the message that “sex does not have any strings attached”.

Commonalities & Differences

The following table lists the number of sexual, body related, and gendered textual messages in both men and women’s magazines. A message was counted as sexual if it explicitly talked about sex or pleasing the partner. Body related messages were defined as any message that talked about altering (or “improving”) body such as through exercise, hairstyle change, skin care

or through changing wardrobe. Gendered messages were categorized as those that explicitly talked about stereotypical gender roles or furthered gendered ideals. There were overlaps between the gender portrayals, specifically that talked about women, and sexually explicit texts because most of the sexual messages hinted at women either in an explicit way or inherently. Finally the messages that did not fit in any category were termed other. There was overlap of themes in messages and therefore some messages were counted twice, or even thrice. For example “look sexy in your jeans: 3 simple moves to slim your bottom half” in Shape magazine was counted thrice for sexuality, genderization and for body related message. Therefore the total of each category of message (sexuality, gender and body image) did not account to the total number of messages on the covers.

	Men’s magazines (Maxim, GQ, Men’s Fitness, Men’s Health and Vanity Fair)	Women’s Magazines (Redbook, Glamour, Cosmopolitan, Jane and Shape)
Total Messages	47	42
Sexual Messages	7	15
Gendered Messages	15	13
Body Image Messages	17	15
Others	8	3

As the above table demonstrates, women’s magazines carried twice as many sexual messages as men’s magazines. That strengthens the notion that female body is objectified, commodified, and is used as a site for pleasure and procreation by patriarchal societal forces. Interestingly gendered and body image messages were almost equal in both the categories. This displays that gender biases, gender roles and stereotypes are deeply embedded in the society and are practiced irrespective of the biological sex. Body image messages reinforced the findings that

current research has been unearthing; more and more men are becoming conscious of their body and resorting to cosmetic surgeries, skin care products, dietary supplements, joining fitness centers and have started to show the signs of body image dissatisfaction and anorexia (Pope et al., 2001). The media thus can be said to play an instrumental role in popularizing and solidifying the hegemonic idealizations of body, sexuality, and gender.

As the above sections on men and women's magazines note, both categories of publications (men's and women's) place a lot of emphasis on two areas: Sexuality and body image. All the ten cover pages that were analyzed in the study talked about either achieving a "thin" body (in case of women) or a "muscular" and fit body (in case of men). This not only furthers the body dissatisfaction among people but also reinforces the stereotype that buff-ness in men and petite, small, and thin in women is desirable. Other half of the magazines focused on sexual rhetoric as to how to please the men (in case of women's magazines) and women in case of men's texts. Interestingly both men and women's magazines portrayed women as inviting, skimpily dressed, sex object. What was truly dismal was absence of racial and sexual diversity in the sample. Two out of ten pieces did picture African American and Hispanic model but mostly white was shown as normal. Portrayal of heterosexuality as normative was also common to both men and women's magazines and this is a matter of further concern since this leads to further marginalization of the minority.

Conclusion

This study tried to analyze the portrayals on the cover pages of ten men's and women's popular magazines. Some commonalities and differences were discovered and the argument that magazines portray stereotypical notions of gender, body image and sexuality was substantiated. Both men's and women's magazines talked about gender in stereotypical ways. Patriarchal

practices were visible in these texts either explicitly (by showing men “in command” or implicitly (through furthering the thin body image). Power differentials, hegemonic practices and dominant ideologies could also be seen in terms of sexual portrayals (heterosexuality over homosexuality), biological sex (men over women), body image, and racial depictions. People of “other” races were almost absent in the magazines and only two magazines out of the entire sample size had pictures of people who were not white. Such depiction expose grim reality and makes one question about the hidden racism in the American society furthered through hegemonic discourse. It could be argued that stereotypical media portrayals of men and women and corresponding enactment of gender roles in the society is a cyclical process. Media constitutes societal reality and society in turn produces media images. Since societal structures existed before media advancements took place, thus one could argue that media is only reflecting the societal reality. However, that reality is antiquated as is evident by advancement and changes in the culture. By depicting the “past” realities, and hegemonic and dominant ideologies, about gender, race, sexuality and body, stereotypic media images are indirectly impeding advancement and changes.

It is acknowledged that this study lacked the diversity and the numbers to make more confident claims. Most of the studies that have looked into the issues similar to those explored here adopted content analysis methodology (Malkin, Wornian, & Chrisler, 1999; Krassas et al, 2001, 2003). This study tried to carry out the postmodern critique on the issue and can be treated as a pilot or as a pie out of the entire cake and future scholars can build upon the findings presented here. Due to the constraint of time and resources uptaking of the more thorough, in-depth research was not possible. Still the study gives a good glimpse into the conflicts of

modernity and postmodernity, of marginalization and othering of the minority, and furthering of the stereotypes about race, sexuality, gender and body image.

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