

Female sexualization in magazines



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Over the past three decades, contemporary women's magazines have significantly increased their sexual content, offering frank advice about sex and relationships (Kim & Ward, 2004). The message it sends across is prizing sexually assertive women. Thus, it gives the readers instructions on aggressive ways to attract men and to be able to fulfill their own sexual desires (Durham, 1996). One particular magazine is *Cosmopolitan* magazine which is known for being racy, intended for the "fun, fearless female" (Streitmatter, 2004). Sexual agency and desire is highly promoted to young women. Likewise, the stereotypical male sexual role is described as being primarily sexual and out of control. In *Cosmopolitan*, much of women's sexual agency and aggressiveness happens within the context of a relationship (Durham, 1996). Walsh-Childers et al. (2002) commented that in some adult-focused magazines, sex is presented as a fun, casual and risk-free activity. A noticeable lack of emphasis on sexual health, contraceptives and STD prevention is observed (Kim & Ward, 2004).

Me'nard & Kleinplatz (2008) comment that in the magazines, although there is a strong emphasis for female readers to be sexually active and be in the service of men (Durham, 1996), they are cautioned not to be too overtly sexual. They are encouraged to dress and interact with men in a way that promotes sexual desirability but are discouraged from showing desire themselves (Durham 1996, 1998; Garner et al. 1998). These magazines, then, can be seen as part of a 'cultural apparatus that purports to assist women to be heterosexually attractive, to be coy, alluring, "sexy," and flirtatious, in order to "find true love" and to "catch a man," and then to maintain his interest' (Overall, 1999, p. 298). On the other hand, men's

sexuality is promoted to be aggressive, animalistic, insatiable, urgent and uncontrollable (Firminger 2006; Garner et al. 1998; Ward 2003).

The concept of “ great sex” is depicted in three women’s magazines, namely Cosmopolitan, Glamour and Self (Duran & Prusank, 1997) as only occurring in the context of an intimate, caring and long-term heterosexual relationship. These magazines teach sexual techniques such as sensual touching, sexual positions, forbidden games, etc. to enhance sexual and erotic intimacy in those relationships. Duran & Prusank (1997) also contend that great sex involves uncontrollable chemical or magical elements while it is ongoing.

Me’nard & Kleinplatz (2008) observe that in popular adult-focused magazines the subject of sexual techniques was predominant. In every issue, a wide variety of information about new and exciting sexual techniques or on improvements that can be made to old familiar ones in order to achieve “ great sex” is available. Readers are provided with information on how to kiss, touch, perform oral or manual sex and several orgasm-inducing sexual intercourse positions.

Sexualities of men and women have been compared in contemporary magazines. Discourses have emphasized that male sexuality is driven by a strong biological ‘ need’ for coital sex, and have identified this as the ‘ male sexual drive’ (Weeks, 1986; Hollway, 1989). As opposed to female sexuality, male sexuality is emphasized with sexual prowess and prime importance is given to the penis, erection and orgasm (Kilmartin, 1999; Tiefer, 1995). On the other hand, female sexuality has been characterized as passive, responsive to the needs of their male partners’ sexual needs and associated

with reproduction. Although their sexual needs come from the same biological drive, women are less easily aroused than men and are more emotional during sex (Jackson, 1984).

Farvid & Braun (2006) conclude that contemporary adult-focused magazines are 'obsessed with male sexuality'. It was a central focus in accounts of female sexuality which is mostly oriented toward the fulfillment of men's sexual pleasure. The magazines depicted men in contradictory positions - one, as the target of women's desires and the other, as a source of much stress, anxiety and even trauma for women (Farvid & Braun, 2006). This positions men as having much power over women because of the great emotions they elicit in a wide spectrum. When women's magazines invite male authorities to offer their insights and experiences to the women readers, it becomes a portal for women to understand men better. Men's perspectives help women by guiding them on how to behave, dress and engage in sexual practices in accordance to how men prefer. In a significant way, it guides women to understand their male partners better and learn ways to please them.

Mass media's dominant representation of women is that they exist for men's satisfaction of their sexual fantasies (Wood, 1994). Cleo and Cosmopolitan magazines encourage women to be as 'sexual' as they can be, making them available to satisfy men's sexual fantasies and desires. Although being able to provide sexual satisfaction for men may be a source of pleasure and power for women, it also reflects that women are reliant on men for their own self-image and power (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003). Thus, repeatedly

reading articles on how to give pleasure to men may promote women's insecure sexuality (Farvid & Braun, 2006).

The message of contemporary women's magazine is that society may condone men's inappropriate sexual behaviour. The stronger sexual drive of men have made them conclude that the penis is 'extrinsic to the self' (Kilmartin, 1999, p. 180) and can have a 'mind of its own' (Hollway, 1989). Shifting the responsibility of certain sexual indiscretions such as infidelity or cheating on their spouses/partners on the penis makes it an unfair and shallow justification. Potts (2001) commented that such distinction of the penis as the culprit constitutes a 'hegemonic masculine subjectivity' where 'men tend to distance themselves from the [sexual] behaviours of their bodies' and thus 'they may also exonerate themselves from responsibility in sexual matters' (p. 154), including inappropriate, risky, or even coercive sexual practices.

Sex is promoted as a way to keep a man interested in a woman enough to stay in a relationship. Farvid & Braun (2006) observe in Cleo and Cosmopolitan magazines that the ability of some women to provide great sex to men is essential in fulfilling not only men's sexual needs but women's relational needs as well. Cleo magazine advocates women to leave an impression where it counts... in bed. It contends that men love women who are not only good in bed but enjoy it too, and it leaves men craving for more. A memorable sexual performance of a woman is depicted as more important than her personality in terms of keeping a man interested.

Another message that comes across is that while men can enjoy sex anytime they want, women need to work on sex in competing with other women their men have had sex with or with potential sex partners. This implies that although great sex can be a deterrent against infidelity, it also means that since men have strong sexual drives, that they are potential cheaters (Farvid & Braun, 2006). That is why women should gain expertise in the sexual pleasing of their men so that they will not find a need to 'stray'.

On the other hand, women are not characterized as having strong sex drives and if they cheat, it is pictured in more severe ways, within more elaborate and negative scenarios. Women's infidelity is more condemnable and less forgivable than men's infidelity. Blame is assigned to the woman and is not likely caused by sexual or relational shortcomings of the partner she cheated. Another gender difference in infidelity is that women are seen as victims of their male partner's cheating, but men are seen as seekers of revenge for being cheated on by a female partner (Farvid & Braun, 2006). Cheating is still considered always 'wrong' despite the seemingly loose morals propagated in the magazines and monogamous heterosexual relationships are promoted as central to the identity and well-being of women (Farvid & Braun, 2006).

Increased Sexualization in Popular Modern Music Genres

Heavy metal music, described as the overtly violent and sexually explicit segments of rock and roll music (Lynxwiler, 1988) earned the wrath of Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) and targeted a media campaign against it (Gore, 1987). The organization portrayed heavy metal music as

dangerous to young minds because it emphasized the use of drugs, encouraged adolescent sex, endorsed sexist/ pornographic values, instrumental in delivering occult messages and caused violent, lawless behavior (Markson, 1990). Such claims created much controversy that it received national attention when Congressional hearings were held to determine if indeed heavy metal albums and other forms of popular music must be evaluated for their influence in proliferation of “porn-rock” in the United States (Gray, 1989). The hearings did not produce great changes however, more and more organizations concerned with “child victims” such as conservative parental, religious and feminist groups pushed for the regulation of heavy metal music (Bayles, 1994). Still others began their own uprising against rap music (Binder, 1993).

Jones (1997) claims, that as a matter of definition, rap and hip-hop music are often used interchangeably. However, Powell (1991) defined hip-hop as the beat of the music and rap as the narrative representation, the talking over the beat. Hence, the use of explicit violence and sexual lyrics may be blamed down to rap. Powell (1991) described “commercial rap” as hip hop or dance rap. Hardcore rap, or gangster rap is the one that raises much controversy.

Researchers have suggested that hip hop and rap music, rooted in Black culture can be tools through which Black youth may negotiate their identities to develop an authentic Black identity (Clay, 2003). They see the music as reflective of their lives and to assert that music relates to empowerment, cultural connection and positive identity development (Sullivan, 2003; Berry, 1994). Critics of hip hop and rap, however, have argued that Black youth may be very susceptible to the influences of hip hop role models who

promise money, power and status to men who show disrespect for women (Squires, Kohn-Wood, Chavous & Carter, 2006). Mahiri and Conner's (2003) ethnographic study of African American middle school students manifested resistance in the negative images emanating from rap and hiphop. This study suggested the use of rap and hiphop images related to social and gender roles as a point of reference from which participants could verbally evaluate, compare and contrast their own beliefs and attitudes. Adolescents in the study of Squires, Kohn-Wood, Chavous & Carter (2006) believed that certain women can be "nasty" and may "choose" to be abused, and that abusive men may be products of their environment. Still, they showed dissatisfaction with the representations of Black men and women in hip hop. Their criticisms revolved around women's individual behavior and style and how outsiders might stereotype Black men as thugs for emulating hiphop fashion. Such perceptions of gender roles based on hiphop seemed to extend to the participants' evaluations of women's and men's responsibility and choices with regards to real world sexual aggression and violence (Squires, Kohn-Wood, Chavous & Carter, 2006)

The problematic aspects of rap music is usually focused on its most acrimonious strain which is gangsta rap. Narratives in such strain are extremely troubling in their glamorization of violence,, materialism, misogyny and sexual transgression (Mahiri & Conner, 2003). However, Dyson (1996) argued that the vulgarity expressed in gangsta rap are strongly linked to dominate cultural constructions of "the other" and market-driven strategies for rampant economic and human exploitation. Therefore, Dyson noted, the debate about gangsta rap should be situated in a much broader

critique of how these narratives essentially mirror ancient stereotypes of Black identity and sexual proclivity through the society's circulation of "brutal images of black men as sexual outlaws and black females as "ho's" (1996, p. 178)

Feminists argue that popular media contributes to coerciveness and sexual assault toward women as seen by the dominant presence of violence against women in all forms of media (Linz & Malamuth, 1993). Adolescents have been resorting to popular entertainment for information about sex, drugs, alcohol and violence (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999). Their preference for the more popular and accessible music videos has provided them with such information. Analysis of Music Television (MTV) has shown that men appeared nearly twice as often as women and engaged in significantly more aggressive, dominant behavior and women were shown as engaging in more implicitly sexual and subservient behavior. They were depicted to be frequent objects of explicit, implicit and aggressive advances by men (Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993). It is usual for women in these videos to be used as decorative objects, and only a few videos show men and women are treated equally (Vincent, Davis & Boruszkowski, 1987). One study of media and sexuality revealed that exposure to MTV among college females was the most powerful predictor of sexual permissiveness (Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1987). Likewise, in video games, a more sexist orientation and graphic violence against women is getting prevalent. Overall, content in various media such as television, video games, music videos communicates that women are to be objectified,

sexualized, dominated, assaulted and even killed (Bretthauer, Zimmerman & Banning, 2006).