

Portrayal of modern women media essay



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Introduction

Women may often be at a loss as to their real role in society is. A working mother may play dual roles which are conflicting, that of being a nurturing home-maker to her family, ensuring that the husband and children are well-taken care of while the house is kept spic and span and running smoothly. At the same time, she is a career woman who is expected to be driven, ambitious, hard-worker and committed to the success of the company she works for. On top of that, women are also expected to look their best to the outside world and be alluring sexual beings in the bedroom.

Because of the many roles women play, they often seek advice from various sources. One source that they may find consistently reliable are women's magazines because these depict articles set in the modern times, and assumed to promote modern values. At a time when information is so much easier to acquire from various media sources including television, radio and the internet, concrete reading materials are still conveniently available and preferred by many readers (Stevens, Maclaran & Catteral, 2007).

It would be interesting to explore how contemporary magazines depict women and what priorities they should have in life. Although contemporary women's magazines such as Glamour and Cosmopolitan claim to empower modern women to be more assertive and independent in achieving gender equality, the message sent out from their content (emphasis on the importance of women's beauty and their success in relationships) seem to endorse traditional femininity ideologies, which put women in a role subservient to men in a patriarchal society. Since magazines may have a

great influence on how women think, it is crucial to understand the subliminal and overt messages such media format feeds them.

The research question that will be explored in this paper is:

“ How are women portrayed in contemporary women’s magazines and what messages are conveyed to them?”

The significance of finding answers to this question will provide enlightenment on how society views women, how women view themselves and how such views guide their value formation, attitude and behaviors.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is guided by the Sexual Script Theory by Gagnon & Simon (1973) and the Objectification Theory by Frederickson & Roberts (1997). Scripting theory is premised on the concept that individuals have subjective understandings that determine their choices and qualitative experiences. Sexual Script Theory, specifically focus on the subjective understanding of a person about his or her sexuality that determine his or her sexual actions and experiences related to sex. Scripts are cognitive devices used to guide people in their behaviors. Sometimes, such behaviors are “ self-fulfilling prophecies” to support the scripts upheld by the person. For example, if one’s sexual script is to be desirable in order to be liked as a person, then that individual will exert all efforts to look attractive and behave in a seductive manner. Similarly, and to more specifically illustrate the Sexual Scripting theory, the Objectification theory explains how females internalize an observer’s view to be the primary view of her physical self. This means that if a woman gets accustomed to being seen as an object of desire, she

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becomes socialized to treat herself as such and behaves accordingly (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). Vulnerable to judgment of society, women vigilantly monitor themselves with the knowledge that being positively viewed by others means more opportunities. Studies have shown that how a woman's body appears to others can determine her life experiences. Physical attractiveness seem to matter more to females than to males. Women deemed unattractive by their co workers are described more negatively and given less regard than comparatively unattractive men (Bar-Tar & Saxe, 1976; Cash, Gillen & Burns, 1977; Wallston & O'Leary, 1981). Physical attractiveness is more highly correlated with popularity, dating experience and marriage opportunities for women than for men (Berscheid, Dion, Walster & Walster, 1971; Margolin & White, 1987)

With regards to the research question at hand, Sexual Scripting Theory and Objectification Theory are appropriate to analyze how magazines portray women because it is assumed that the advertisements and articles of contemporary women's magazines seem to influence women with the idea that they need to use their sexual attractiveness to advance their state.

Literature Review

Women's magazines enjoy a wide readership for various reasons. Aside from escapism (Geraghty, 1997, 1998) from the daily grind, readers may be 'hooked' on them as they provide temporary solutions to social and personal conflicts (McMahon, 1990). Women find an array of interesting topics in women's magazines. Stevens, Maclaran & Catrall (2007) compare different kinds of women's magazines and find that in general, there are magazines that primarily offer fashion and fitness advice (e. g. Vogue, InStyle, Self,

Shape); magazines geared toward an older adult female audience (Woman's World, woman's Day, Good Housekeeping); teen-focused contemporary women's magazines (Seventeen, Teen, YM); and adult-focused contemporary women's magazines (Cosmopolitan, Glamour, Marie Claire, Cleo). In terms of content, contemporary women's magazines are known to uphold traditional femininity ideologies perpetuating one's looks as the measure to judge a woman's worth. These magazines likewise encourage women to subordinate their own interests so they can preserve their relationships with others (Ferguson, 1983; McCracken, 1993; McRobbie, 2000; Peirce, 1993; Sonnet & Whelehan, 1995). Duffy & Gotcher (1996) also found that 78% of magazine covers highlighted body appearance and over 60% advertised diets, exercise or cosmetic surgery. Aside from these topics, magazines also addressed issues about establishing and maintaining heterosexual dating relationships and somehow put across the message to young women that it should be a priority in their lives, overshadowing their education, careers or participation in social and community service, athletics or politics (Duffy & Gotcher, 1996; Evans et al, 1991). More liberated magazines offer explicit sexual advice to women to keep their men happy.

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). However, 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).

Cosmopolitan magazine 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).

The promotion of sex as something to keep a man interested in a woman and make him stay in the relationship has been observed as a prevailing theme of some women's magazines. Farvid & Braun (2006) contend that the ability of a woman to perform great sex not only fulfills her man's sexual needs but also her own relational needs as well. Since a man is portrayed to

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want great sex and encounter it with a woman who enjoys it as much, then it would leave a lasting impression that makes the man crave for the woman more. The message conveyed from this, though, is that a memorable sexual performance of a woman is depicted as more important than her personality in terms of keeping a man interested. Farvid & Braun (2006) note another message that may be taken from magazine articles about sex. While men can enjoy sex anytime they want, women need to exert more effort in pleasing them as a way of besting other women that their men have had sex with before, or with potential sex partners. This implies that sex is used as a deterrent against infidelity. Indirectly, it also says 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).

Ideologies conveyed by contemporary women's magazines are considered manipulative in the sense that the messages projected regarding the nature of femininity points to legitimizing and naturalizing patriarchal domination (Gough-Yates, 2003). Being limited in scope, primarily about beauty, fashion and advise on getting a man, it communicates to its readers the idea that a man is the main route to a woman's happiness and that if women are 'good enough,' the right man will 'come along and sweep them off their feet- ideally into wedded bliss' (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 190). When women are regularly bombarded with this idea, eventually, they adopt such ideology in their lives even without consciously considering the implications such as finding their own fulfillment in their own strengths as women are not regarded as priorities in these magazines. They would develop tendencies to search for and depend on men as their source of happiness and fulfillment.

Another perspective is that women's magazines distribute a "cult of femininity" (Ferguson, 1983, p. 5), advocating ways to be more feminine and promoting a particular ideology catering to patriarchal norms. McCracken (1993) commented that women discover that their inadequacies are sustained by the fear of lacking beauty, fashion sense and self-confidence when they read glossy women's magazines.

Women's bodies have been used to sell several advertised products. Walsh-Childers (1996) observed that photos of women in advertising usually focused the reader's eye on women's body parts such as the breasts. Soley and Kurzbad (1986) also observed that more and more sexual content became manifest since the mid-1980's as female nudity and erotic content became commonplace in contemporary U. S. advertising. Ms. Magazine

published advertisements that increasingly portrayed women as sex objects in its first 15 years of publication. After it no longer ran such ads, Ms. Magazine upheld a position that explicitly embraced feminist orientation and spurned advertisements which were insulting to women. Ms. magazine “established itself as an institutional prototype for the appropriate conduct of advertising to women” (Ferguson et al., 1990, p. 41). Still, with this supposed precedent of championing for women in advertising, there persist ads depicting women as sex objects (Krassas, Blaukamp & Wesselink, 2001).

Krassas, Blaukamp & Wesselink (2001) conclude that women’s magazines communicate a paradoxical perspective of female sexuality in that women are encouraged to shed their traditional roles and become more independent while they are pressured to find and sexually satisfy a man. Women’s bodies are considered commodities and their independence allows them to use such commodities to their advantage and to maximize their market value (Goldman, Heath & Smith, 1991). Krassas, Blaukamp & Wesselink (2001) also note that Cosmopolitan magazine may be the first to recognize women as sexual, at the same time, they are primarily sexual objects whose desire is fulfilled by allowing themselves to be treated as commodities that are sexually available to men and designed to attract men.

Methods

The choice of studying Cosmopolitan magazine was determined by it being the top-selling women’s magazine in the world (World’s Longest-running and Most Popular Periodicals, 2009). Having 58 international editions and translated into 34 languages, the magazine is distributed in more than a

hundred countries. With this position comes the power to reach such a wide readership.

Data Gathering

The researcher will be reading and taking notes from 3 issues of Cosmopolitan Magazine, specifically the June, July and August 2010 issues which are the ones available to the researcher. Researcher will note down the titles as well as the content of each article as well as the advertisements promoted by the magazine.

White and Marsh (2006) contend that “ a good coding scheme has categories or levels that are exhaustive, that is, all relevant aspects of the construct are represented” (p. 32). For this study, categories or themes of articles in the magazines will serve as codes such as articles with sexual content, relationships or body issues. To determine the amount of the content per category or theme in each magazine issue, the percentage of content will be computed by counting all the titles (for cover page) and articles (including sidebars) written for the issue and getting the percentage of the content listed in each category against the total content of each issue for both cover page and inside articles.

Analysis & Discussion

According to White & Marsh (2006), after coding, data should be summarized so that they could be understood easily and are applicable to the hypotheses or research questions. Then, the researcher relates the data to other situations or studies so findings are put into perspective. In this case, the

data shall be related to information in the review of literature that is most relevant to it.

Results

The dominance of the category of sexual content in the cover pages of the magazines obviously used sex as a selling point. These titles were made to catch the attention of potential buyers who include women in need of advice to boost their sex lives as well as men who may be curious as to what the articles reveal. Titles such as “ 75 Sex Tips From Guys: Sizzling, Sinful and Surprising Things They’re Craving Now” (June 2010 issue); “ 99 New Sex Facts: Every Forbidden, Fascinating Detail You Want To Know.. and only Cosmo will tell you” (July 2010 issue) and Naughty, Naughty Sex Poll: It’s Official: We Got 2, 000 Men to Reveal, “ Do this not That” in bed” (August 2010) practically scream for attention as it is given the boldest print. Also, words such as “ Sex, Sexy and Hot” jump out of the page as they are highlighted in the cover that eyes will automatically be drawn to the bright and bold titles. Other categories of content fought for attention with catchy titles such as “ Look So Sexy” (June 2010), “ The Sexy Secrets to Making Smart Decisions” (July 2010) and “ Together Forever? How to Still Flirt With Him” (August 2010). Even with these titles, a hint of sex is still present.

The thick issues of the magazine are filled with crisp, glossy pages, rich with various content. However, the volume of sexual content promised in the inside pages may disappoint readers, as the percentages do not hold in the articles printed within the issues. The articles spread into more than one page, so in terms of quality, the anticipated richness of sexual content was justified. The articles were graphic in language and mostly instructional such

as giving actual directions on how to achieve better orgasms or identifying highly sensitive body spots that provide the most pleasure. It would not be difficult to imagine what the authors were referring to because the articles were replete with real-life examples. Readers would learn that the recommended sexual techniques would be very pleasurable, and may want to try it out themselves. Mostly, the articles taught readers how to please men in bed. This is consistent with the contentions of Farvid & Braun that women should learn to be great in bed in order to keep their men fulfilled and content with just having them.

The content category on Fashion and Beauty dominated the inside pages of the magazines. It showcased the latest trends and products, as worn and used by popular celebrities. Clearly, the magazine has become a marketing tool for the fashion and beauty products, luring women readers to buy them for themselves so they will also be considered “ hot”, “ cool”, “ trendy” or “ hip” - supposedly descriptions of women who are fashionable and sophisticated. Aside from being viewed as a marketing tool, the magazine’s emphasis on women being fashionable and beautiful sells an ideology that that is how women should be in order to feel fulfilled as a person and to be able to attract men. The advertisers of the magazine prey on women’s insecurities and their intense need to be accepted, admired and loved. Using very attractive models does not only create more insecurity about readers’ looks but also a more passionate desire to achieve the model’s look by purchasing the cosmetics she used to look that attractive.

Discussion and Conclusion

The theories and scholarly observations in the literature review seem to be consistent with what is actually published in women's magazines. Sexual scripting of women being objects of desire as well as sex objects playing the stereotype of existing for the pleasure of men reverberate in the magazines even if these took pride in empowering women to be “ fun, fearless females”. However, it admits that women have sexual needs themselves that they should not be ashamed to fulfill.

The Objectification theory is validated by the advertisements and articles of women wanting to look good for their men so that they will not be replaced by younger, sexier and more beautiful women. The 3 magazine issues reviewed do not totally reflect Durham's (1996, 1998) and Garner et al.'s (1998) comment that women are encouraged to dress and interact with men that promotes their sexual desirability but are discouraged from showing desire themselves. Women being overtly sexual towards men is actually supported in the issues studied. This is because the authors have done thorough research on what men really want in sex, and one finding is that they are aroused by women making sexual advances towards them. The articles in the magazine merely report what men want to inform women on what to do to please them. It is apparent that male ego is supposed to be massaged and nurtured by women, living in a patriarchal society. Both Sexual scripting and Objectification theories are thus proven in this case.

The portrayal of women in the magazines (article pictures and advertisements) reflects women as “ eye-candy” or a prize to be won by the most deserving man. The photographs show mostly Caucasian women

gazing into the camera, and giving the image that they are communicating with the readers with their eyes or smile to buy whatever product, idea or ideology they are selling. The use of very attractive models instills in readers an ideal of beauty to emulate. Such beauty is enhanced by cosmetics and fashionable clothes and shoes.

Although known for covering much ground on sex, it was initially surprising that the percentage of titles of sex-related articles was not as high as expected. However, upon further scrutiny, the articles were replete with detail and length. The magazine was also found by this study to cover topics about men, relationships and self-improvement. Readers who may be constrained in seeking information about these topics elsewhere may find comfort in the fact that Cosmopolitan provides honest advice in the viewpoint of experts of the topics. For instance, many topics on men were discussed by men themselves!

Cosmopolitan has its own formula for success. Being known for a magazine that unashamedly promotes sex for unmarried women, it titillates the curiosity of most women, even those who pride themselves of upholding the strictest of morals. Cosmopolitan cover pages use the most popular and attractive woman whom the world adores for the moment. Add to this celebrity cover girl, catchy titles of articles, mostly racy and intriguing, and the magazine sells well. Being sold is the first step in spreading the ideologies constructed in the magazine and conveying it to its readers. Being the best-selling women's magazine in the world, it is presumed that Cosmopolitan magazine has already been successful in imbedding to its millions of readers the ideologies it wants to convey.