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Capitalizing on stereotypes

Abstract

While walking through the isle of never ending glossy magazine covers, one can easily notice the differences between men's and women's magazines. It is not something that people notice right away, but it is something worth looking at. Obviously, the magazine industry creates the covers of its magazines, as well as the articles, to attract people to buy its magazines.

Through flashy covers and screaming tag lines men and women alike are overwhelmed with pressure to buy various magazines. Magazines almost stare at you from the stands at supermarket check out aisles. Words such as make-up, sex, beer, diet, and beautiful grab your attention, almost hypnotizing you with their glow. Women half naked on men's covers have breasts they flaunt, push up, or wear in under-wired and padded bras, or cosmetically enhance (Timson). These scantily clad women are wearing the Playmate of the Year bathing suit and advertising diets, beer, sex and gadgets to men everywhere. Women's magazines have similar appeal. The tag lines read of love, romance, sexual pleasures, and beauty. Beautifully dressed women fill the cover and almost show women that they to could look like the model on the cover. All they have to do is buy this magazine. These screaming tag lines and beautiful women are enticing men and women alike to pick up the magazine and read.

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Capitalizing on Stereotypes

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Capitalizing On Stereotypes

While walking through the aisle of never ending glossy magazine covers, one can easily notice the differences between men's and women's magazines. It is not something that people notice right away, but it is something worth looking at. Obviously, the magazine industry creates the covers of its magazines, as well as the articles, to attract people to buy its magazines.

Through flashy covers and screaming tag lines men and women alike are overwhelmed with pressure to buy various magazines. Magazines almost stare at you from the stands at supermarket check out aisles. Words such as make-up, sex, beer, diet, and beautiful grab your attention, almost hypnotizing you with their glow. Women half naked on men's covers have breasts they flaunt, push up, or wear in under-wired and padded bras, or cosmetically enhance (Timson). These scantily clad women are wearing the Playmate of the Year bathing suit and advertising diets, beer, sex and gadgets to men everywhere. Women's magazines have similar appeal. The tag lines read of love, romance, sexual pleasures, and beauty. Beautifully dressed women fill the cover and almost show women that they too could look like the model on the cover. All they have to do is buy this magazine. These screaming tag lines and beautiful women are enticing men and women alike to pick up the magazine and read.

Just looking at their covers is hardly enough to get a true gauge of the magazine publishers' mind. However, after analyzing several issues of *Cosmo* and *Maxim* magazine, I have found many differences between these women's and men's magazine in their portrayal of young men and women in the world today. *Maxim* focuses on sexual interests, sports, and beer, while *Cosmo* discusses relationship problems and issues, love,

heartache, and beauty dilemmas. Together these two magazines help to reiterate the differences that exist between men and women. Geared for eighteen to thirty year olds, *Maxim* and *Cosmo* capitalize on and exaggerate the idea that women are overly sensitive and feed on relationship help articles and men are simply sex-aholics. This paper will focus on the magazine covers, articles, and advertising tactics used in *Cosmo* and *Maxim* magazine. It will dive into the stereotypes that are created by the mainstream media and provide specific focus to the feature articles in each magazine.

These magazines current age groups, eighteen to thirty four year-olds, are creating and absorbing the current trends around them. In a quantitative study by Greyhound Communications it was found that eighteen to thirty- four -year-olds are the demographic most sought after by every kind of advertiser (Greenspan). By going into these individual's homes, the study found just how much the media is running this age groups lives. Through the use of the internet eighteen to thirty four year-olds are surfing magazine websites and other forms of entertainment readings. Often web-site surfers might read something they like and go back to the store to purchase the magazine and/or article. That is exactly what *Cosmo* and *Maxim* magazine publishers want from their readers. They want their tag lines and magazine covers to pull in readers in any way they can. Whether the reader first sees/reads about them online or if they visit the website it doesn't really matter at all. All that matters is that the magazine is picked up and bought one way or another.

Just buying the magazine is exactly what these publishers want from young adults everywhere! Magazines today reel you in with pictures of beautiful women and screaming tag lines in fact, magazine covers today are an enticing form of eye candy and

an avoidance of the real issues. As Steve Salerno states in his article, “Embarrassed by Women’s Magazines “The covers of women’s magazines exhibit a near total-avoidance of issues and ideas”(16). Magazine covers announce diet plans, beauty, celebrities, and relationship help. Men’s magazine covers are no different. Their covers show half naked women, beer, jokes, sports, and gadgets. These magazine covers offer no articles on issues in the world today. They talk about stereotypical society based values that the magazine publishers feel that eighteen to thirty four year-olds want.

If this is what eighteen to thirty-four- year-olds want, many retailers have a problem with it. In 2003 Wal-Mart announced it would no longer carry Dennis Publishing’s randy men’s titles *Maxim* and *Stuff* (Granastein and Brunelli). After much debate Wal-Mart also decided to install U-shaped blinders at it checkout stands to shield other “racy” magazines including *Cosmo*, *Redbook*, *Glamour*, and *Marie Claire*. Being that Wal-Mart controls 15 percent of all magazine sales the industry remained very quiet about Wal-Mart’s moves (Granatstein and Brunelli). Industry workers thought it best to do most of their workings behind the scenes. Today, some Magazines are covered at Wal-Mart stores, but others are simply left in the open. The covers, tag lines, and pictures did not change, so one has to wonder what made Wal-Mart change its mind. Nonetheless, the retail super giant did change its mind and is further allowing the magazine industry to control the stereotypes put out there by magazines such as *Maxim* and *Cosmo*.

These magazine covers are on every shelf. On men's magazine covers half naked women are placed in compromising poses, and on women's magazines those same women are placed in slightly more clothing and in a *slightly* less compromising, but still a

compromising position. Magazine covers attempt to attract men and women alike to buy the magazine and essentially read the text inside of the flashy cover, and they succeed. Screaming tag lines of *Cosmo* read, "Should I Stay or Should I go Now? Take our Ditch Hitch Test," "28 Romantic Rituals to Do With Your Man, and " The Big Bang: How to be a Show Off in Bed." *Cosmo* very blunt tag lines stress, and suggest, the woman's desire for stable relationships seemingly to the exclusion of other interests. *Maxim's* screaming tag lines can be found as "Nude Years Eve," Sex by Sundown: Cheap Tricks that Pay off Big," and as simple as "Girls, Girls, Girls." These outrageous tag lines suggest that *Maxim* stresses the male's need, and desire, for sexual conquest. Shown below are magazine covers from *Cosmo* and *Maxim* magazine to further illustrate this point.





As such, each of these magazines has established a distinct brand and clear identity (Loeb, 39). Although its identity is a bit on the blunt side, *Maxim's* identity is clear including, “Sex, sports, beer, gadgets, clothes, and fitness” (39). Quite the opposite *Cosmo's* identity includes romanticism, self help, relationship help, fashion, and news of the stars. Both magazines are quite different, but both give their readers the type of information they desire, making them two of the top read magazines in the country for eighteen to thirty-four -year -olds. As the covers are enticing with screaming tag lines, the actual articles are what make there two magazines everything that they are today.

As it is quite obvious, *Cosmo* is written for women, and *Maxim* is written for men. The articles in these two magazines look very different visually. *Maxim* uses small amounts of text broken up by pictures. It is very unusual to see one whole page of simply words in *Maxim*. In this magazine, there is usually one large picture on a page with one or two paragraphs of writing. The text on the page uses short sentences, easy to understand language, and a very large font. The words are short, simple, and most of all to the point as *Maxim* magazine doesn't want any of its male readers to dare and think too much. Former Editor-in-Chief, Mark Golin states clearly that *Maxim* magazine uses pretty girls but defends that magazines choices by stating, " But for the most part they weren't leaning forward; we weren't picking them for their breast size (TIME 75). A careful explanation by a former editor put *Maxim* magazine into perspective, or did it?

With bodily curves being pictured on every page, it is very hard to pay close attention to the text. Of course, every other sentence does include the words sex, woman, and naked so, after all, the text may seem appealing to its audience. *Maxim*, in turn, wants its male readers to be provided with short and mindless information that requires no straining thought processes. The simple, and clearly mindless articles are provided in various different forms and subjects. Some encourage sex in obscure places and large amounts of drinking. Other articles include advice on how to pick up "chicks," and then it gives further advice on how to dump the girl just picked up. William Powers of the National Journal suggests that, "[Most of these magazines] seem to be written for the 'slow' reading group of an average fourth grade class" (Wilson Quarterly 24). Just as suggested, these magazines are not intellectually stimulating and are not for the overly

intelligent man. After all, too much brain power may make men lose interest in the overly simplistic nature of the writing, or lack there of.

This overly simplistic writing seems to be geared to what the male population wants when Felix Dennis, one of the brains behind *Maxim* magazine, was asked if he was in touch with his readers. He responded by stating, " Am I in touch with my readership? I've got 300 million in the bank; I travel everywhere by limousine, Concorde, and Gulfstream. I live for three months out of the year on a private island in David Bowie's ex-residence. Do you think I'm in touch with my readership? Yes (Fortune 68). With *Maxim* magazine being the highest circulated men's title in America, reaching 1.7 million readers, *Maxim* magazine is surely giving the male population the simplicity they want.

The words are only the beginning, because the pictures are what make *Maxim* magazine what it is. Almost every picture in this magazine involves either semi-nude women or cartoon images or semi-nude women. The cartoon images are usually images of big-breasted women, burley men, or big-breasted women and burley men having sex in obscure places. It casts sex and women as a casual leisure activity. Below are pictures from *Maxim* magazine that show various pictures of women that can be seen in issue of *Maxim*.



Pictures of women are all over the magazine. Many times pictures are even used as space filler. In one instance a female in simply a bra and underwear was placed on a

page. Did she present a point in one article or another? No. Did she happen to advertise something? No. She was simply a model and/or reader that was placed on the page as a space filler.

Another such picture in *Maxim* magazine shows a model in her bra and underwear with her pinkie in her mouth. The model resembles Barbie, as all around her are various "sexy" outfits that can be cut out and pasted on the model. The text of this article simply reads, "How to get your girlfriend to dress hotter" (56). The article goes as far as providing instructions on how to suggest thigh-high stockings, stating, "Spin an elaborate fantasy about meeting her for a drink. She's wearing a skirt, and you put your hand on her knee[...]" (56). The end is quit obvious in this suggestion. Another suggestion given is the overdone but always worn miniskirt. It states, "When she wears a skirt of any length, give her legs an obvious approving look. Then ask if she owns any shorter ones, noting that her legs look fantastic and you would love to see more of them. Sometimes the truth works" (56).

With the suggestions made in this picture/article, one would assume that it was pretty easy to dress and change someone from head to toe. But, obviously, sometimes the truth is not what men today want to hear. If only it were as simple as dressing the Barbie doll in this book, but sadly enough for men dressing women (or even telling them how) is not an easy task that should be taken on lightly.

Another great focal point of this magazine is its use of cartoon images, one of which is a "Where's Waldo" of couples having sex. The couples having sex are on airplanes, in the backyard, in the neighbors yard, and even in the department store

dressing room. The text adds to simply find as many couples having sex as possible and then compare it to your best friends results, and hopefully he didn't find more!

Cosmo magazine proves quite the opposite. *Cosmo* magazine also uses pictures, but these pictures do not take up more page space than the written part of the article. In *Cosmo*, the pictures used are rarely sexual images. Pictures in this magazine usually involve men and women in romantic poses. One would never find any near naked women in little to no clothing taking up space in this magazine. Although one must admit that as stated in the *Wilson Quarterly*, “seduction isn’t accomplished through baking the right cake, sculpting your nails, or making sure your hemline isn’t crooked” (24). Today seduction is about making your man feel special and giving him what he wants. To readers of *Cosmo* it’s about romantic images and romantic evenings, and that is just the kind of ideas and images that *Cosmo* wants to give its readers. Below is a picture of a romantic pose that is commonly seen in *Cosmo* Magazine.



Another such picture in *Cosmo* includes a man and woman, seemingly in a relationship, walking side by side along a Caribbean beach. The waves are splashing and the sun is setting in the distance thus creating a romantic atmosphere. The couple is looking in the distance while standing side-by-side and holding hands. Their clothes are

wet, sticking to their body, but their eyes do not suggest sex, but rather a romantic and loving relationship (*Cosmon*,182).

Another picture includes a man and woman also walking along a tropical beach, but in this picture the woman is sitting on top of the man's shoulders while picking fruit from a tree. The man is romantically looking at the woman and the setting again suggest a romantic and loving relationship (*Cosmo*,184).

The text of *Cosmo* articles is usually longer paragraphs and longer sentences. The words used are often more elaborate and require slightly more thinking and reading ability than the reading of *Maxim*. *Cosmo* magazine often has feature articles of real news events or upcoming events that are much longer than one page in length. It is also a regular occurrence in *Cosmo* to have more words than pictures. Pictures are not a focal point in articles as they are in *Maxim*.

The differences in the appearance of *Maxim* and *Cosmo* magazine feature articles is just the beginning. What these articles are written about, and the advertisements inside the magazine continue to exaggerate the differences between men and women.

Advertisements in these two magazines help generate the stereotypes they attempt to fulfill. *Cosmo* is filled with beauty products of every kind almost telling women to look carefully in the mirror and prepare heavily for the man in her life. Clothing ads of women next to gorgeous men fill the pages between beauty ads. Ads for Crest, Pantene Pro-V, Head and Shoulders, and Clairol are only a few. Women then lust to look like the woman in the ad hoping that they too can get a man that looks like that.

Maxim pages are filled with near naked models advertising various alcoholic beverages. These pages trick the male reader to thinking that he is capable of getting a

woman like that simply by drinking that brand of alcohol. *Maxim* magazine advertises anything as long as half naked big-breasted women are used to sell the product.

Advertisements include Absolute Vodka, Bud, Bud Light, Miller, Miller Lite (well I think the point is made).

The real question is why do *Maxim* and *Cosmo* write their articles, use these types of advertisements, and produce pictures in this way? The answer is simple; they write and produce the pictures that will sell magazines. *Maxim* "dumbs down," in a sense, to its male readers because society has made out young men to be sexually stimulated and easily bored creatures. *Maxim* fuels this stereotype by creating overly simple articles and pages filled with big-breasted beautiful models. Charles Pappas of Advertising Age magazine states an opinion in an interview with a man known as "MR. Ford."

We talk to guys in a language they understand. [...] The tone of old guard, the GQ, the Playboys, is snooty. They speak down to their audience. All they really do is deliver an exclusive band of readers to an exclusive band of advertisers.

And (*Maxim*) has to be informative in a very entertaining way (71).

To most of the world all men are not simplistic creatures and dumbing down to men simply fuels the stereotype that society has created.

Cosmo is equally as guilty as their relationship-help articles prey on the societal assumption of overly sensitive females out to make every date their life partner. Pages are filled with men and women in romantic poses gesturing heartfelt love toward their partner. These so-called help articles and pictures of "loving" couples only reinforce society's view of women as over sensitive females who are out seeking relationship

therapy around every corner. This magazine is providing strength to the ever-growing stereotypes existent among men and women today.

Maxim and *Cosmo* authors write their articles based upon what they feel their readers want. In a July 2000 issue of *Maxim* a very *interesting* article was written titled, "The Sex Olympics." This article turns the idea of sex in to a competitive game. *Maxim* makes sex a leisure activity. In this game the different places that one has sex equals a different number of points. Men are competing against one another to be the "top dog" in their own group of friends. "Tired of your buddies bragging about their sex lives? Ready to prove who's really top dog?"(Connolly 99). This author knows that men want to be able to top their friends when it comes to sex. Society instills in men that they must compete with each other, and the man who has the best sex story is by all means the sex God.

This article never mentions the idea of a man with a girlfriend or wife. The article simply says, "[.] grab the most adventurous girl you know [.]" (98). What if the man's girlfriend is not the most adventurous girl he knows? *Maxim* uses society's idea that men don't care about relationships when it comes to sex. It is implying that men will take sex any way they can get it. Married, single, it doesn't really matter. All that matters in this game is getting sex one way or another.

This article goes as far to list the rules that must be followed by every couple. One such rule was, "The prize [for winning] can be crazy (all losing team females are forfeited to the winning-team male for a year) or practical (losers pay winning couples bail)" (98). This rule plays upon the idea that men enjoy sex with many women, no matter who they are. To score the highest points in this game means, "You're Hercules,

Casanova, and the spy from Stratego combined. You could probably make love to the Mona Lisa at high noon without getting caught" (102). Here they have listed most men's dream. Most men dream of being called Casanova and Hercules; after all, what man in their group of friends could top that?

Cosmo uses many of the same strategies that *Maxim* does, but it plays on society's view of women. In the October 2003 issue of *Cosmo*, there is an article titled, "Secret Ways to Bond with Your Boyfriend." This article discusses ways to better the relationship between a couple. Each of the seven tips is entitled, "love secrets" and each entail romantic bonding of some kind. One "love secret," encourages the art of mini feuds and states, "Say he's 15 minutes late for your date...again. The best way to handle it is to tell him how you feel without losing your temper or accusing him of not caring about your feelings" (Scott 154-5). A second "love secret" encourages "state of the union talks or check in conversations. It states, "Keeping the topic of where the relationship stands on the table is not only a low-anxiety way to check in regularly, but it's actually a key to a successful coupledness" (154-5). The article truly is a bit like counseling as it continues to add various ideas on how to keep things positive such as, "smiling and having a sense of humor " (154-4).

The basis of the article is that couples should use pre-marriage counseling, and a relationship counselor's techniques, in order to better their relationship, "Scrap the idea that advice from a shrink is a last- ditch effort to avoid splitting up, [sic] it's also a crucial way to boost your union and prevent big problems" (152). *Cosmo* is using society's idea that women need constant relationship help, and their only concern is their relationship. It plays on the idea that women are over sensitive and need help learning to deal with

emotional and mental problems. It plays on the idea that women cannot control their emotions and need professional help in order to get everything under control. After all, every man women date has to be treated like he is *the one*. *Cosmo* gives many ideas to women to help them in their relationship including, "Don't think in terms of having one Big Talk. Instead, have frequent chilled-out chats about your relationship status that keep you rolling on the same track" (154).

Cosmo gives a total of seven relationship-building suggestions to women. Do women need these suggestions in order to keep a relationship healthy? Can't women do this on their own? What about the women who don't read *Cosmo*? Women who don't read *Cosmo* survive in relationships without help from the *Cosmo* staff writers and relationship counselors. *Cosmo* just exaggerates and capitalizes on the idea that women need help in order to make a relationship last. In fact, not all women need relationship help in order to continue couple hood. Many women manage to get by without the *Cosmo* bible.

Another such article in *Cosmo* offers that same sort of lay out thus still exaggerating the stereotypes of women today. The article is entitled, "Ease Him Into the Couple Zone" (Kaplan). This article discusses how to make your man feel at ease when he is leaving his "single status" behind to be your 24/7 sweetie. It says, "You and your new man have gone from casual dating to bona fide coupledness [...]" (202). The article discusses five hurdles that all men and couples must overcome in order to have the relationship be a success. The first hurdle is introduced as having your man begin to speak in terms of "we" instead of "I". It gives the reader tips on how to ease anxiety and bring this into his normal ways of speaking and being casually. Another hurdle that is

mentioned states that he may see your toothbrush in his bathroom. It goes on to state that introducing female belongings to his own turf can be very stressful. Further advice is given on how to gently reassure your man that it is just a toothbrush.

This article reiterates the idea that women need relationship help, and that they simply can't manage to run a relationship on their own. It is pushing the stereotype further into the minds of people everywhere that women are relationship help seekers. When someone picks up an issue of *Cosmo* it is filled with relationship help and advice that it is just sure that every woman cannot live without. Sure enough, not every *Cosmo* or woman in America is seeking out relationship help and advice in everything they read.

Through the use of different layouts, advertisements, and topics of articles, *Maxim* and *Cosmo* exaggerate the differences and stereotypes of men and women. They do this to make money. Many argue that people who read these magazines do not take them seriously, but there are those who take them very seriously. Many even say that *Maxim* hurts the image of men in America.

Keith Blanchard, Editor-in-Chief of *Maxim* magazine, explains his feelings on the magazine and what it is meant to do stating,

Maxim is very casual. That casualness and the eagerness with which we speak to our readers have been construed as lowbrow or dumbing down. But the truth is that most successful guys you know tell the same kind of jokes as the least successful guys. One of the secrets of *Maxim's* success is that men are very much like one another across all social levels. “[...] All the clichés we know about men's interests are clichés 'cause they're true. Guys love cars and action movies and hate talking about relationships” (Blanchard).

There you have it. *Maxim* writes the ways that it does because that is what the American male wants to see. They enjoy, " [...] sex, sports, beer, and gadgets" (Avins). Half naked women fill the pages because that is what the male mind wants to see. Men enjoy relaxing in front of this magazine and not thinking. They simply fill their eyes with candy, while their minds stay blank.

Maxim is not a gentlemen's magazine, it is simply a magazine filled with images that please men. As men hate to talk about relationships, *Maxim* rarely includes articles on this idea. The only relationship help this magazine gives is "How to Break up with a Girl and Make Her Think It Is Her Idea or How To Get Her to Strip" (Avis).

According to a recent poll, 52 percent of *Maxim* readers said that they would rather have sex with Alyssa Milano in a tub of beans over getting a check for 100, 000 dollars (Sinderbrand). The same poll stated that 75 percent of men would rather kill themselves with a steak knife than watch the T.V. show "Touched by An Angel." What does all this mean? It is simple. *Maxim* writes what its readers want. They play on society's idea, which they helped to create, that men hate relationships, hate sappy sitcoms, and enjoy sex of all kinds.

Cosmo uses the stereotypes of women to its own advantage as well. *Cosmo* feeds on the idea that women like talking about relationships, and they devour information on how to attract and keep a man. These things have been the feeding ground for *Cosmo* Editor-in-Chief Kate White. White explains her magazine stating,

(In *Cosmo* articles) We would address the notion that a woman might feel self conscious in the situation (certain sexual situations), and we would discuss doing it in a way that makes her feel more comfortable. We'd talk

about dimming the lights a little and putting on some romantic music that's going to put you in the mood. (White)

Again it is the basic idea the women enjoy and need help in relationship situations.

Cosmo exaggerates the idea the women need this help. Some women read this magazine for a fun way to relax, and others view it as a self-help manual in the rules of dating men. Anyway you look at it, women read this magazine. They buy the exaggerated versions of the stereotypes of women. They buy into society's idea that women need relationship help. To some *Cosmo* is a bible and to others it is a tired manual of never ending crap. But, to most, it is simply a magazine that many unknowingly take as the truth and buy into the stereotypes that it is cleverly helping to create.

Quite simply, *Cosmo* states what it means to be a woman and *Maxim* what it means to be a man. But why should such a need arise? Why should a magazine dictate what it means to be a man or a woman? Many argue that the process of character formation has shifted from family to peers (Cox). And where do young adults get their information? From the media!

As the world is changing rapidly many young adults are finding the media closer to their own reality. The highly internalized values from family life become unable to deal with the accelerated pace of change and stereotypes (Cox). With in that accelerated version of change young adults look to *Cosmo* and *Maxim*. These two magazines give the confused male and female a sense of security and attempt to become a guidebook to the world of sexuality for both sexes. These two magazines don't just play upon the stereotypes; they tell how to live them.

Cosmo and *Maxim* magazine, in their race to make money, help generate and fuel society's stereotypes of men and women. They do this through their flashy magazine covers, advertisements, and feature articles. Young men and women buy into these stereotypes thus buying the magazines and further reiterating society's views of men and women.

In this way men are unfairly targeted as sex hungry dogs and women as over zealous relationship help seekers. As we all know, all men are not sex machines and all women are only interested in relationships. But, as society continues to fuel these stereotypes they will continue to exist and live on through the feature articles of *Cosmo* and *Maxim* magazine.

Cosmo and *Maxim* magazine capitalize on the use of society's stereotypes of men and women, and exaggerate them to sell magazines. Many men and women everywhere read these magazines and buy in to the ideas that these magazines give them. Although some men and women read these magazines for fun, a vast number of individuals do not. They read them as a truth.

I urge men and women everywhere to take these magazines for what they are, fun and casual. All men are not simple-minded sex -alcoholics, and all women are not over-sensitive relationship-help seekers. Honestly, if you and your significant other broke up would you pick up *Cosmo* to find out how to cope or read *Maxim* for any kind of information? I think not!

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