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To Hem in Identities: Analysing Gender and Sexuality Expression in Magazines

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Abstract

This paper aims to look at lifestyle magazines concerning the construction of gender roles in society. The study compares the employment of gender and sexuality and proposes how these constructs are channeled from childhood magazines to adult magazines with the strategies employed. In doing so, the study provides ample scope for a comprehensive and comparative study of the construction of gender roles. The paper also addresses gender as strategic and analysis its construct of masculine and feminine instead of labelling biological male, female. The focus is on how magazines rewrite culture and redefine sexuality and gender within the shackles of society, even in a modern age.

Keywords: Magazines, Sexuality, Identities, Gender, Culture

Gender is a fundamental part of the world in which women and men speak, act, dress and think has put into an investigation which is focused and raised from childhood as blue for boys and pink for girls. Gender behavior is more specified as feminine or masculine, and consequently, everything that we come across or analyze has significance on gender. However, even when we claim to have considerable awareness of gender equality, there is still a long way to attain equal opportunities and recognition for both men and women. The best means through which this inequality of gender-sensitive society is reflected are through magazines.

Magazines are the communication medium that provides ample insight and understanding to the changing society, which helps to tie gender consciousness along with the aspects of a patriarchal world. In the contemporary world, it is essential to analyse the relationship between media, gender and identity. Media and communication are essential components of contemporary life, and gender and sexuality are central in developing our identities. The abundance of imageries and messages about masculinity and femininity can shape one's thinking and behavior as it is an influential medium for information, education and entertainment to evaluate,

understand and interpret society. Lussier and Sherman state that "media becomes the central source of communication and information in society and plays a key role in deciding what develops into reality" (2014, 221). Through its representation, the media informs us a lot about the society we live in. It influences the way we understand, perceive and view the world.

In the contemporary scenario, people use media in abundance by watching movies, reading magazines, using the internet, and undoubtedly being submerged into popular culture. In such a culture, the role of media is immense. They mediate in constructing people's sense-making processes, experiences in their day to daily life. Magazines undoubtedly form part of this culture and contribute to shaping men and women consciousness; however, the details, images, and information presented raise debates over the contested portrayal of women and their impact on society. The persistence in establishing women as wives, mothers, housekeepers, sexobjects, beauty conscious seems to continue even in the contemporary period where people struggle to attain gender equality. The continuing representations in the magazine establish that magazines relate to women's sexuality rather than intellectual capacity; such contents frame women in ways that emphasize sexual readiness, subservience and weak. Society's discrimination against women is well illustrated in the unfair exhibitionism of women in media content. Despite the expanding roles of women, the portrayal of the woman body is stereotyped, from feature articles to advertisements an idealistic persona of perfection, and these stereotypes have shown little change over time.

Magazine, both men's and women's, often portray women in sensual poses, and misleads readers' perceptions and beliefs. Contemporary society emphasis more on bodily perfection with the photographic images and equates with unattainable beauty ideals. 'Ordinary' women are dissatisfied with the inability to cater to the necessity magazines put forth. Macdonald in exploring the representation of women's bodies in media content claims

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that women's bodies have "always been central to feminine identity and, when women decorate and adorn the body, they are participating in a system of meaning-creation, the same system employed in advertising and media forms". (1995, 192). This centrality of magazines surprisingly seems to continue even after decades of criticism. With the professional tip articles provided with celebrities' photoshoots, magazines shape women's opinions by representing specific choices as attractive and attainable. The image and need of ordinary women are foreshadowed and structured to the ideas as directed by the magazine and can influence women's real-life practices.

Media has evocative power and influence, which in turn inspire cultural reordering and revitalization. They become a compelling transmitter of cultural perceptions of femininity, masculinity and beauty ideals. While women are objectified for being bald or obese, and these traits are normalized for a man. The frenzied magazine media markets celebrate male fashion and objectify female features as a necessity. In 1963, in *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan criticized how media affirms inequality that women face and highlights the distorted representation of emancipated femininity. She questioned the distorted reality represented in media and the preoccupation of creating ideal women under cultural perceptions. She notes:

The image of a woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home. The magazine surely does not leave out sex; the only goal a woman is permitted is pursuing a man. It is crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but whereas the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit?(1963, 32).

The contemporary leading English magazines like FEMINA, YOU, and even the regional magazines portray women as unblemished, coy and figure conscious. An analysis of each magazine confirms women's coverage as frail and emotional beings and should continually be educated on beautifying their 'woman self'. Magazine instills these typecasting through article titles like, 'Lessons in love & loss: a grief psychotherapist on living with and learning from losing a loved one'(YOU, 26 February 2017). This article shows how a woman needs to be educated about love and assure her how she can find solace in the grief and a way out; "Do babies and business

mix?" (YOU, 26 February 2017) undoubtedly aims at working-class women and is the new trend in glossy pages. This type of article addresses the concern of working women and trains her regarding the ways in which she can take care of the family and children despite her busy schedule. The concern of balancing work life and family life is attributed to women and not men and becomes the curious concern of the modern patriarchal society. A woman in modern society is expected to work and protect and fulfill all her kids' needs. However, the role of her husband in taking care of the children is rarely addressed.

Interesting poll sections like "Taylor swift love story: is her private life public property?" pathetically point to the male chauvinistic world where a woman's body is something to look at. Nevertheless, surprisingly and unfortunately, each woman is asked to do all her life is to look at other ideal women and learn. Most of the words used in these magazines have connotations of passivity or weakness. Contents of these magazines undermine women's accomplishments, objectify them, and promote society's stereotypical beliefs about women as the "weaker sex". With its stories of 'other women'; Magazine media makes them frail and subjective to the social system.

In magazines stories like "A young woman from Bhopal will have to live with the humiliation of her fake porn video doing the rounds online for at least 90 days, with experts underscoring the need for fresh regulations that are victim-friendly"; instructions like "How to pep up your sex life post-pregnancy" (FEMINA, 21 November, 2016), "How to rebuild your relationship after a breakup" (FEMINA, 22 March, 2016), "5 things we wish men knew about vaginas" (FEMINA, 22 March, 2016) highlight the media's patriarchal attitudes and beliefs toward women in society. It additionally reinforces societal beliefs that women's life goals should be to pursue and satisfy men. "The new colour trend that you should start wearing now" (FEMINA, 11 January 2017), "Deepika Padukone and Sridevi inspire us to think pink" (FEMINA, 22 February 2017) shows that a woman is even taught to think and train in what she should wear and what to think and how to appeal.

In the digital age, magazines, apart from the print's glossy texture, concentrate on the visual appeal and offer a visual treat for the readers. A visual analysis of the

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online magazines of both men and women shows the immense difference in how they are categorized and settled on screen. Online women's magazines are more clustered, bombarded with love, relations, family, and parenting images. Whereas, in men's online magazine, the page is packed with energy, organised, and caters to the section for smart phones, travelling, and stories on people in business, and leaves more interest on current affairs which seem to be submerged in women's magazine. Look good, live well, get smart, entertainment, grooming, GQ gears, videos van Heusen, GQ fashion nights, science is the categories for search in a Men's magazine whereas home, fashion relationships, beauty, wellness, celebs, pageants, life, Astro, photos, videos, blogs becomes the categories for women's magazine. Even when the best chef's stories are about men, sections for cooking and tips cater only to women's magazines, likewise with baby care and anything related to household. These magazines do not consider men as a family person or who is concerned about household things. There are specific sections in both men and women magazines that indulge in travelling and education where the concept is to build the gender disparity and consciousness to benefit the social system. For example, travel articles in men's magazines are presented as 'travel goals', and in women's magazines, it becomes "A romantic getaway to Udaipur". These kinds of articles undoubtedly become a channel for maintaining the power of masculinity and femininity's submissive nature.

Propagating these systems through the magazine is similar in the children's magazines as well. The fairy tales' weak, coy, submissive and protector-seeking princesses point at the girl and the saviour, warrior prince at boys. These stories play a significant role in programming femininity and masculinity in the early stages of life. The primary concern of most childhood and women's magazine is to analyse 'what your girl child does behind you'. These articles and exaggerated stories control an individual's self and constantly remind her to be submissive and act as the system demands. How a female character is represented and remembered in history and focused in stories affirms proliferating these ideas. For instance, in the stories of Rani of Jhansi and Cleopatra, beauty and seduction are emphasized more and not bravery, power, and leadership. Magazine headlines encourage readers to define women in a traditional family setting as a wife or a mother and promote the conformist ideology of femininity. It further frames marriage and motherhood as life goals, and women's remarkable

accomplishments often go unnoticed. This type of reporting demoralizes the position of women, particularly in business or work life, and confirms the focus on stereotypical roles and rarely on their career attributes and achievements. These articles further affirm that bias towards women is maintained through the stories and the making of specific information in a magazine.

Men and women understand and recognize their sense of self and often rely upon popular culture to define their roles and develop their identities. The exclusion of specific issues, limited articles on women's successful careers, and the emphasis on specific aspects of magazine media content can impact how women perceive reality. Stereotypical perceptions of women in our culture and society and issues regarding masculinity and femininity are often constructed by media. With the power to shape women's socialization and advocate an 'ideal look' through sexualised visual images, these magazines define the boundaries of a woman. Society asserts the power of media in providing information for a complete man and guiding women to rectify her incompleteness. The hegemony in society is constructed within gender roles, and even though people have reached higher awareness of gender equality in the modern world, these data remind us of the long way to be explored for equality proposed.

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