



A Monthly Subscription to Gendered Sexuality

A Content Analysis of Sex Advice from Lifestyle Magazines

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Introduction

The media has become a large part of our everyday lives. Lifestyle magazines, such as *Cosmo* and *Men's Health*, dictate to the readers a social construction of what is considered a normal sexual script for women and men. Using a qualitative content analysis, this study analyzes the differences in sex advice that is given to men and women within these magazines in order to understand how media reinforces gendered sexual scripts and influences perceptions of normality within relationships.

Methods

This study examined seven issues of *Men's Health* (May, April 2014, November, September, July/August, June, and May 2013) were collected as well as seven issues of *Cosmo* (May, January 2014, May, April, March, February 2013, and December 2012). These magazines were scanned for themes found in previous research of lifestyle magazines (Farvid & Braun, 2006). Themes include:

- **Messages about sexuality** contained information about what forms of attraction are acceptable.
- **Messages of expertise** included advice and information implying that one gender knew more than the other.
- **Messages of sexual satisfaction and responsibility** conveyed which gender achieved sexual satisfaction naturally and who was in charge of creating "great sex" for both participants.
- **Messages about relationship status** implied whether advice was geared towards readers in a relationship or readers that were single.
- **Advice** In previous research done by Menard & Kleinplatz (2008), advice from lifestyle magazines was sorted into categories such as mechanical, variety, and relationship factors. *Mechanical tips* suggested specific moves and positions. *Variety* suggested having sex in novel situations, and *relationship tips* told the reader that improving the relationship would improve the sex.

Heteronormative

"Nearly one in seven straight women admit to being attracted to other women ... Your play? Frame fantasy sharing as an intimacy builder, not a source of inspiration so she knows that it's her hot thoughts, not the prospect of a third party that thrill you." (Men's Health, May 2013, p. 155)

"For me, picturing a guy I'm dating going at it with his male bud is not a turn on." (Cosmopolitan, December 2012, p. 58)

- In both groups of magazines, the reader was assumed to be heterosexual
- Minimal mention of same sex attraction
- Same sex attraction was only conveyed positively if it was between two females

Sexual Expertise

"Researchers in Australia tracked young women's sex lives for a year and found that as they gained experience, they also gained body confidence and felt more entitled to pleasure. Makes it easier on you, right?" (Men's Health, November 2013, p. 122)

"It is a truth universally acknowledged that men are sex-crazed animals." (Cosmopolitan, May 2013, p. 168)

- In both men and women's magazines, men were portrayed as natural "sexperts"
- Women were depicted as requiring more advice regarding how to have sex

Sexual Satisfaction & Responsibility

"Do women expect men to abide by the 'she comes first' rule every time?" (Men's Health, September 2014, p. 48)

"No matter how good a guy is in bed, don't make the common mistake of expecting him to 'give' you an orgasm. You're more likely to get your knocks if you take things into your own hands (sometimes literally) and realize that it might take a little multitasking to get you there." (Cosmopolitan, May 2013, p. 166)

- Both groups of magazines assumed men will orgasm during sex, while women's orgasms were portrayed as inconvenient
- In *Men's Health*, men were given the responsibility of making a woman feel comfortable enough to have sex
- In *Cosmo*, women were expected to bring themselves and their partners to orgasm



Relationship Status

"The woman I've been dating for 3 months got upset when she found out we weren't exclusive. We never had that talk. Was I wrong?" (Men's Health, September 2013, p. 64)

"My boyfriend says he's too stressed during the week for sex. Isn't sex supposed to be a stress reliever?" (Cosmopolitan, April 2013, p. 150)

- *Cosmo* assumed the reader was in a relationship
- *Men's Health* assumed the reader was either single or not fully committed to the relationship he was in

Advice

"Gently suck on his upper lip, then his lower one, then go in for the deep-kiss kill. A little tongue teasing at first will make your longer smooches more intense." (Cosmopolitan, February 2013, p. 137)

"Some women worry about not looking their best when wet. Ease her mind by touching her as you whisper how sexy she looks." (Men's Health, November 2013, p. 103).

- Mechanical tips were found in every issue of *Cosmo*, but no issues of *Men's Health*
- Tips emphasizing variety were found in both sets of magazines
- Most tips from *Men's Health* were relational



Conclusion

This study examined sex advice found in *Men's Health* and *Cosmo* in order to determine the gendered sexual scripts advertised to men and women. Both magazines promoted heteronormativity by focusing only on heterosexual relationships. Men were depicted as being experts in terms of sex with sexual satisfaction occurring naturally and undoubtedly while women were given the message that sex achieving sexual satisfaction would be less instinctive and more difficult in comparison to men. These messages were conveyed by giving women numerous amounts of advice about how to bring satisfaction to themselves and their partners in a variety of ways. Comparing the articles between lifestyle magazines for men and women has shown that the media reinforces a socially constructed norm of what is considered normal in terms of sexuality.

Sources

Menard, A. D., & Kleinplatz, P. J. (2008). Twenty-one moves guaranteed to make his thighs go up in flames: Depictions of "Great sex" in popular magazines. *Sexuality & Culture*, 12, 1-20. doi: 10.1007/s12119-007-9013-7

Farvid, P., & Braun, V. (2006). 'Most of us guys are raring to go anytime, anyplace, anywhere': Male and female sexuality in *Cleo* and *Cosmo*. *Sex Roles*, 55, 295-310. doi: 10.1007/s11199-006-9084-1

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