

MASS-MEDIA'S ROLE IN SELF-DEVELOPMENT. GENDER IDEOLOGIES AND DISCOURSE IN COSMOPOLITAN AND MEN'S HEALTH

MĂDĂLINA HODOROG¹

ABSTRACT. The present paper explores the role of media in shaping ideas about the self with focus on gender ideologies and discourses as manifested in such widely-read magazines as *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health*. The study adds a new dimension and focuses on the online editions of *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health*, from both United States and United Kingdom and makes comparisons between them. The purpose of the study is to find out how the ideological self of women and men is portrayed in magazines. The significance of this research is meaningful for media scholars, discourse analysts, consumers and psychologists at some degree, as it provides substantial insight into how media represents individuality in their content.

Key words: *identity, self-help, self-developmental products, subculture.*

1. Introduction

One of the key elements of media is that it provides ways in understanding the self by shaping ideas about identity and practices of the self. In order to achieve this purpose, media constructs a new self that must be shaped by applying several "techniques of the self" outlined in different types of magazines that address both the genre. Magazines suggest ways of perceiving the self and promote different lifestyles that are often contradictory (Blackman 2004).

On one hand, women magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *New Woman*, *Glamour*, *Marie Claire*, *Company* or *Elle* portray a non-traditional woman who freely expresses her sexual desires (Gauntlett 2002). In order to cover

¹ MA, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca, Romania, hodorog_madalina@yahoo.com

the topic, the magazines for women include numerous features about sexual positions and techniques, and even present men as sex objects. When coming to relationships, women magazines create the idea that happiness is linked with having a romantic relationship with a man. Contrary to the traditional belief that men should pick up a girl, women magazines motivate their readers to be the first to take action in the romance hunt (Gauntlett, *Media, Gender and Identity* 2002). Magazines have also the power to construct an ideology about feminism. McRobbie (1997) made a close analysis on *Jackie*, a teenagers' magazine, and found that articles tried to prepared girls for their future roles as mothers and wives.

On the other hand, men lifestyles magazines such as *Men's Health*, *FHM* (For Him Magazine), *Loaded* or *Maxim* portray a totally different type of men. Blackman (2004) argued that men's magazine presented articles related with what she called "practices of self-mastery". These practices encouraged men to understand women's bodies and discover new sexual techniques. Self-practices and self-understanding take another form in men's magazine.

Contrary to women's magazines where relationships are seen in the form that women must attract a man with sexual attraction techniques, men's magazine focus on relationships with a different angle. Magazines for men include articles relating their leisure time activities that fall under categories such as Do It Yourself, Technology, Lifestyle, Sexlife or Career advice. The subliminal messages of the articles is that women are impressed by an intelligent, powerful and individualistic men. Men's sexuality is seen as natural, biological and basic. However, the general discourse that characterizes women include words such as "emotional", "sensitive", "innocent" or "naïve."

Thus, media generates codes that establish "the self" in a specific setting. Magazines culture goes further in establishing "a new self" by describing ways of achieving it. Loving your body, be confident and transform your ideas about sex are key messages in self-help articles that do not longer portray traditional genres.

In this paper, we posit that men's and women's magazines create different ideologies of the self. In doing so, we analyze four well-known magazines: *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health* on both their American and British editions. We decided to analyze two version of the same magazine in order to find out how agenda setting is constructed in relation with the audience. Thus, by analyzing the articles of the four magazines we can make a clear distinction between men's and women's magazines, but also between American and British magazines.

The current research provides substantial insight into how “the self” is portrayed in the four magazines. Rather than focusing only on the sexual discourse of the magazines, we decided to add another dimension of how we understand the ideologies of the “self” as constructed in United States and United Kingdom.

2. Purpose

The aim of this study is to find out how the ideological self of women and men is portrayed in the online editions of *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health*, from both United States and United Kingdom. More explicitly, the general purpose of the research is to identify how media portrays the “self” in European vs. American magazines.

3. Definition of concepts

3.1. Women's Magazines: *Cosmopolitan* US/UK

Women's magazines play a crucial role in self-help industry because they generate ideas about genre, lifestyle and way of behavior. *The Cosmopolitan* magazine, as it was previously named was launched in 1886 as a family magazine by Schlicht and Field Publishers in United States. Nowadays, the brand has 64 editions published in 34 languages and distributed in more than 100 countries (Corporation 2009). *Cosmo* is a women's magazine that encourages women to openly express their sexuality. Articles such as *10 Weird Sexual Fetishes That May or May Not Blow Your Mind*, *14 Weird Reasons Why You're Having Painful Sex* or *How to Become a "Humpalicious" Sex Scene Writer* emphasize the idea.

Critics argue that by becoming a *Cosmo Girl*, readers adhere to magazine's sexual codes as women believe that being sexual self-fulfilled brings happiness (Tait 1996). According to a 2012 report of the Alliance for Audited Media, *Cosmopolitan* had a circulation of over 3.000.000 (Media 2012). The online version www.cosmopolitan.com contains articles about sex/love, diet/fitness, beauty/fashion, celebrity/news, food/cocktails and career/money.

In 1972, Hearst Corporation's British venture launched *Cosmopolitan UK*, having a huge success during the first years of publication (Gough-Yates 2003). Similar with the American edition, *Cosmo UK* covered articles

that outlined the sexual nature of women. According to a 2010 Audit Bureau of Circulations figures for the first half of the year, *Cosmopolitan UK* reported a circulation of 401.750, down 9% year of year. It was considered the biggest fall in women's lifestyle and fashion sector (Sweney 2012).

The online version www.cosmopolitan.co.uk contains articles under the categories: love & sex, fashion, hair & beauty, celebrities, body, horoscope, travel or competitions.

3.2. Men's Magazines: Men's Health US/UK

The *New Man* identity gave rise to magazines that covered aspects of health, fashion and fitness (Beynon 2002). *Men's Health* appeared in US in 1987 and is owned by Rodale Corporation. It is the world largest and best-selling magazine for men, with 40 editions in 47 countries. Its readership accounts more than 24 million men around the globe and consists of successful, professional men who want to improve their self and lives. In US, the magazine circulation numbers exceeds 1.8 million.

Men's Health managed to become a worldwide brand that consists of the *Men's Health* magazine, www.menshealth.com website, *Men's Health* Digital Editions, *Men's Health* International, *Men's Health* books and *Men's Health* Events (Rodale n.d.). The lifestyle magazine portrays an ideal man that is fit, good in bed, knowledgeable and considerate (Gauntlett, Media, Gender and Identity 2002). They include articles related to fitness, sex & women, health, nutrition, weight loss and style.

In UK, *Men's Health* magazines has a great success, being one of the first top 10 health and fitness magazines. During recent years, *Men's Health UK* became the top-selling title with an average circulation of 250.247 (Plunkett 2009). In 2008, the lifestyle magazine has achieved a record of 14 consecutive growths in sales (Rodale n.d.). Moreover, *Men's Health* also reported the biggest digital circulation in 2012 who sold a monthly average of 12.676 digital copies (Halliday 2013). Their online edition (www.menshealth.co.uk) contains articles under categories such as: health, fitness, muscle, sex, nutrition, style & grooming, weight loss or living.

3.3. Practices of the Self

Self-help articles are included in magazines in order to convey readers the idea of an appropriate "self". Advice articles on how to cook,

cope with a man, find a man, DIY articles or sex, relationships, beauty, fashion advice are included in the self-development category. Horoscope is another form of self-help as it encompasses all the aspects from the self-help industry.

Tait (1996) argued that self-help magazines could be seen as practical manuals used in changing personalities with the help of governmental imperatives. In order to approach the subject, women's magazines presented girls the idea that they have to change their "self", thus, creating an image of sexually responsible women. Shaping the self did not occur only with the use of an article, but also by self-interrogation practices (quizzes, questionnaires, surveys) or body transformation practices that were described in both men's and women's magazines (Tait 1996).

3.4. Gender Discourse

The differences between men and women can be considered the main focus of the self-help industry as it covers topics from how to be a woman or how to be a perfect man. The levels of approaching these topics differ depending under what category the article is being placed. However, the idea of "masculinity" and "femininity" is clearly shaped in mass media. Masculinity refers to being a real, powerful, emotional and knowledgeable men, while femininity refers to individualistic and career-oriented women.

4. Literature Review

The literature points out towards several researchers that investigated the effect of magazines in society. Both *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health* had been the subjects of a variety of analysis in order to identify their effects on society.

Machin and Thornborrow (2003) examined how *Cosmopolitan* saw women's sexuality and work practices. By applying discourse analysis on the articles, they found out that women were oriented towards socialization than towards focusing on their intellectual skills. Women were characterized as being alone and must take advantage of other people through manipulation and sexual techniques. They argued the *Cosmo* identified these skills as being part of a game to play. The authors also argued that despite the fact that the magazine has been translated in 44 languages, they all copied the style of the US magazine.

Cosmopolitan's focus to sex articles was also analyzed by Winship (Winship 1987) who found that *Cosmo* articles could be rather contradictory as articles both encouraged women to love their body and to get slim, both to accept men as they are or manipulate them, while romance, marriage or relationships can be good or bad.

The power of masculinity is described by Stibbe (2004) as being the most used tool in *Men's Health* magazine. By analyzing the discourse portrayed in the magazine, he argued that the articles promote a hegemonic masculinity that can be dangerous for men. In doing so, the editors of *Men's Health* "tell readers what they want to hear at a time when hegemonic masculinity is being challenged by messages that red meat is harmful, excess alcohol is dangerous, convenience food is unhealthy, sexism is unacceptable, and animals have rights. And the reassuring advice, ostensibly backed up by the authority of science, comes from the mouth of a trusted buddy" (p. 49).

However, there are no specific studies that focus on comparing the major themes between *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health* and the discourse of "the self" is not clearly defined. Moreover, studies do not compare the American versions of the magazines with the British ones.

5. Research Questions

The following research questions have been put forward:

1. How do media construct "the self" in American and European magazines?
2. What are the major self-help themes in *Cosmopolitan* (women's magazine) and *Men's Health* (men's magazine) editions?
3. How is the ideological self constructed for women and men?

Hypothesis 1: *Cosmopolitan US* magazine contains more sexual articles than *Cosmopolitan UK* magazine.

Hypothesis 2: *Men's Health US* magazine contains more body-related articles than *Men's Health UK* magazine.

Hypothesis 3: *Cosmopolitan US* and *Men's Health US* focus more on the physical image of an individual than *Cosmopolitan UK* and *Men's Health UK*.

Hypothesis 4: *Cosmopolitan US* and *Men's Health US* use more self-help words related to body aspects of an individual than *Cosmopolitan UK* and *Men's Health UK*.

6. Methodology

In order to reach the aim of the paper, we analyzed between April 21st, 2013 and May 4th 2013 four well-known magazines from United States and United Kingdom: *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health*. In order to create a better analysis of the case, we decided to use a qualitative research method by using a grid analysis consisting of 27 categories. We chose to analyze a selected corpus of texts from two main sections from each of the four online magazines: *Top* and *Lates* articles. The analysis was conducted by using a Natural Language Processing and Semantic Classification software called Tropes. The program can identify the major themes from the articles by making a qualitative and linguistic analysis.

7. Findings

There were 354 articles analyzed out of which 122 were *Cosmopolitan US* magazine articles, 84 were *Men's Health US* magazine articles, 85 were *Cosmopolitan UK* magazine articles and 63 were *Men's Health UK* magazine articles. The current study has shown that *Cosmopolitan US* magazine portrays a woman that is sexually available and is not afraid in recognizing her sexual beliefs. By using news articles (77.8%) and commercials (9.8%), the magazine addresses themes such as sex, celebrities and relationships. In order to do this, the self-help words that were mostly used were related to body, sex and food.

On the other side, *Men's Health US* magazine portrays an idea that men should pay more attention to their physical bodies as the magazine includes more articles that focus on health, food and fitness. In order to transmit the message, journalists use self-help words that are related to body, food and health, three categories that emphasize the previously mentioned idea.

We believe that both *Cosmopolitan US* and *Men's Health US* magazines create a similar image about women and men: that they should all accept their individuality, be independent and sexy. However, the methods through which men and women achieve the specified goals differ. In this sense, *Cosmopolitan US* focuses on accepting sexuality as the primary norm and portray an image of a woman that cannot be individualistic if she is not accepting her body. In the body-accepting process *Cosmopolitan US* does not encourage women to do sports in order to keep fit, but pay attention to their diet. Moreover, the magazine shapes the idea that as long as a woman knows many aspects about her intimate life, she will succeed in feeling independent and accept her body.

The traditional ideologies about women being emotional and sensitive are not emphasized in the magazine, but feelings are not completely excluded from Cosmo girls ideal. Feelings are mentioned in the magazine in the sense that women should not neglect their emotional side, but accept it. Moreover, self-help words related to family are closely connected to feelings, showing that a woman must understand herself both intrinsically and externally, with a major focus on the second part.

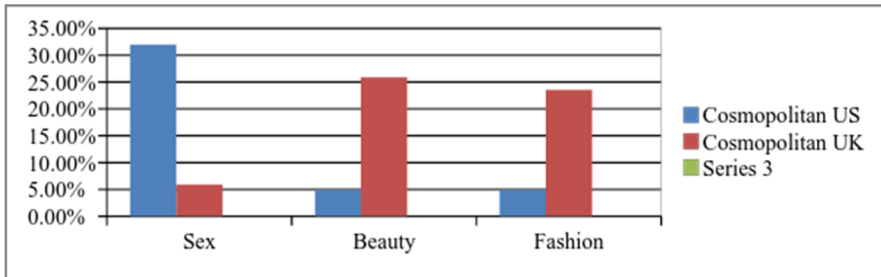


Figure 1: Cosmopolitan US/UK Major Themes

Men's Health US portrays the same objective but with more focus on health, fitness and food. The magazine shows that a man who pays attention to his body (keep fit, healthy and looks great) has more chances in having a girlfriend. Contrary to *Cosmopolitan US*, the men's magazine advice men to do sports in order to keep fit.

Another difference than can be depicted between *Men's Health US* and *Cosmopolitan US* magazines is that *Men's Health* focuses more on personality aspects such as happiness, relationships or emotional states of mind. It can be concluded that despite the fact that magazines addressed to male audience do not focus on feelings, it focuses on personality-changing aspects, which is a major theme in self-help movement.

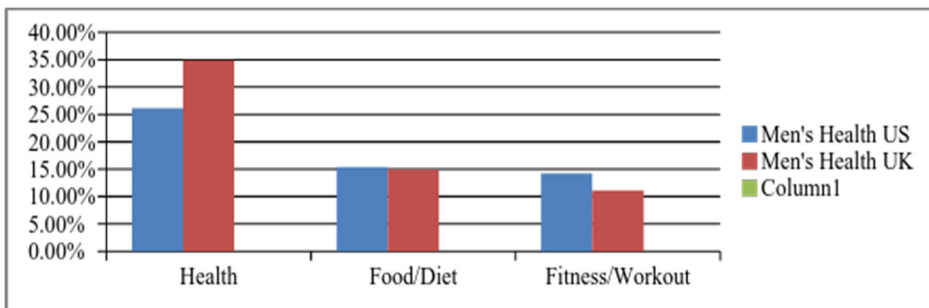


Figure 2: Men's Health US/UK Major Themes

Cosmopolitan US takes however, another approach and do not directly advice women on how to change their personalities, but include messages of change in its sex articles and focus solely on this type of changing.

Magazines from United Kingdom portray a different approach to self ideology. *Cosmopolitan UK* does not focus on sexuality as its sister from America, but on beauty (25.8%) and fashion (23.2%) articles. Not only this, but the self-help words that are mostly used refer to body (22%) and clothing (16.3%). It is important to mention here that the study found few articles that are related to sex, and therefore, it can be concluded that sexuality is not linked with body aspects as in *Cosmo US*.

Cosmopolitan UK remained to the traditional ideas that women should only pay attention to their external aspects of the self and includes more articles about body, fashion and beauty. Commercials are abundant in the magazine and they all contain articles about the mentioned topics. *Cosmopolitan UK* creates an ideology similar with *Men's Health UK* magazine that focuses on fitness/workout (34.9%), food/diet (14.2%) and health (11.1%), which is also similar with the US online edition.

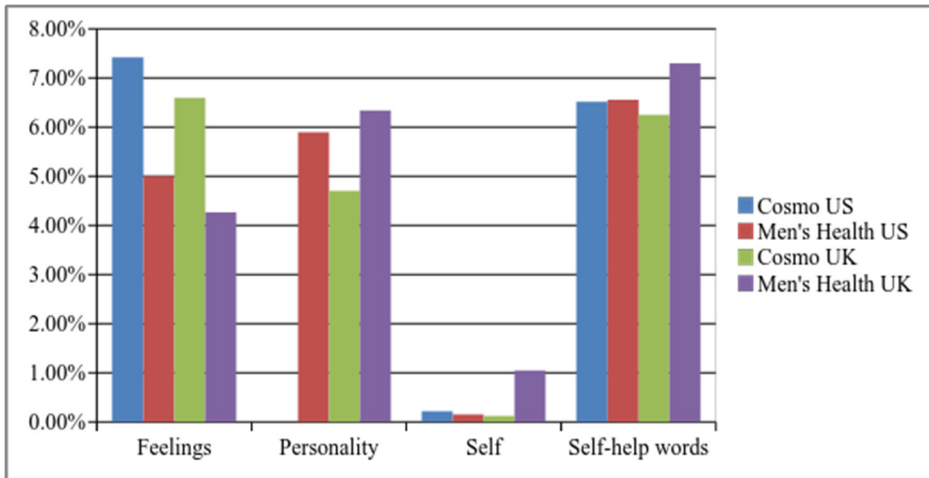


Figure 3: Individuality portrayed in all four magazines

The current study found not only how each magazine constructs gender discourses, but it also revealed connotations between the four magazines. From a general perspective, it can be seen that in United States, magazines focus on creating new attitudes towards self identity. Contrary

to traditional magazines that present advice on how to understand women/men, the US magazines contain few articles about the opposite sex and instead, focus on personal development. The self-development idea is a profound one because it implies deep changes in one's personality. Changing aspects of people's personality has not been an easy task not even for psychologist and counselors. However, both magazines achieved their purpose in transmitting their messages to their audiences as it can be seen from audience studies that show that *Cosmopolitan* magazine has a readership of 16 million women aged between 18 and 49 (Media Mark Research 1999), while *Men's Health* audience are 85% men and 71% are between the ages of 18 and 44 (Alexander 2003).

European magazines do not yet portray such major changes and one implied reason could be its historical background. As self-help movement has its roots in the American society, Americans are more opened to personality changes than in Europe where people can be considered to be more skeptic towards the movement. In the first part of the thesis, it was mentioned that in Europe there are small numbers of self-help books that are sold each year. Moreover, TV shows that address self-fulfilling topics are also few in numbers and topics (health and weight) showing that Europeans take a second thought when coming to personality changes. *Men's Health UK* magazine, however, is taking a step forward and tries to address more self-help topics, although the numbers are still small in comparison with US magazines.

When referring to self-help words, the study found that that *Men's Health US/UK* magazines use many self-help words in comparison with the women's magazines. Therefore, *Cosmopolitan* magazines refer often to feelings, but lack in addressing topics regarding personalities, while *Men's Health* address topics related to personality and even use more self-help words than women's magazines.

Moreover, contrary to the common belief that men want only sex, the *Men's Health* magazine did not present the traditional idea as there are few (3.2%) self-help words related to sex and self-help words that are related to women occupy the latest positions (2.25%). *Cosmopolitan* magazine, on the other side, contains far more self-help words regarding sex (13.9%) than *Men's Health*.

We propose that magazines hold a powerful position in shaping the search for "the inner self" depending on gender discourses. However, when coming to address topics about the opposite gender, journalists do not portray the ideals of men and women that are encountered in the

magazines. More explicitly, *Cosmopolitan* does not present the idea that women must love a powerful, handsome and muscular men, while *Men's Health* does not characterize women as being independent and sexy.

It is visible that the ideals presented in magazines do not match. Frederick, Fessler and Haselton (2005) conducted a survey on how body ideals are shaped by media. They found that men's magazines overestimate the degree of masculinity that is attractive to women, while women's magazines overestimate the degree of thinness that is attractive to men. Stibbe (2004) analysis is of great interest here as he found that men's magazine focus on traditional masculinity that encouraged men to gain power over women. In men's magazines, women are still portrayed as being emotional and problematic. Thus, media representations are influential to people who agree to be the audience that journalists shape: either powerless and emotional or self-sufficient and independent (Booth 1961).

It is essential to mention that there were only two magazines that were analyzed in the study: *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health*, two companies that address to two different gender categories. In this sense, the study also revealed how companies create their content depending on the audience they address. The statement becomes clear when analyzing the themes that are mentioned in each country. Adorno's and Fiske's debate about who shapes media content is controversial here as the two companies can either shape new ideologies by using their own content (Adorno) or present content that audience want to read about (Fiske). From our point of view, *Cosmopolitan US* and *Men's Health US* follow Adorno's theory as both US magazines promote new identities about self-formation. This is not the case in United Kingdom, where traditional aspects of gender still remain. Therefore, we strongly believe that UK male-audience and female-audience magazines follow Fiske's theory.

8. Conclusions

The objective of this study was to identify how media portrayed the idea regarding the "self" by analyzing the online editions of *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health* from both United States and United Kingdom. During two weeks (April 21-May 4 2013), there were 354 articles analyzed with the use of codes that would present how ideologies about women and men could be shaped by the media. By using codes, we could clearly show a major difference between United States and United Kingdom magazines, especially in relation with the major themes presented.

The current research provides substantial insight into how media represents individuality in their content. The current research is important for media scholars, discourse analysts and consumers because it creates a general perspective about how two gender-targeted magazines shapes individuality differently, depending on the country. We believe that the research may improve the academic body of knowledge and may lead to changes in media practices and methods. Journalists are the main targeted audience to the present research as it is essential to understand the differences of how the self is constructed in magazines.

Understanding major discrepancies in how media shapes individuality is also essential to consumers that do not have to take for granted gender ideologies presented in their favourite media. It is essential that consumers know the truth and take action consciously.

To a small extent, we believe that psychologist and researchers working in a domain may also find useful information about how society form self discrepancies and better understand the role that media plays in the process. Self-help movement often focus on providing advice on how to change aspects of personality, but lacks in understanding the causes of it. In this sense, the present investigation may shed a light.

As every study has its limitations, the current study is of no exception, although the research has reached its proposed aim. The first major limitation found in the study was the Natural Language Processing and Semantic Classification software called Tropes that provided only a specific number of codes and themes. Another limitation of the study was that data collection was conducted on a short period of time (two weeks) and for a better understanding of the concept of self, a longer period should be taken into consideration.

We suggest that future studies should also include analytical discourses on several articles in order to underline aspects such as intonation, use of words, lexical and grammatical items. When reading the articles from *Cosmopolitan US* magazine, for instance, we could identify several ironical intonations that had the purpose of making fun on aspects of self or society. We believe that further investigation should be taken in this sense.

In conclusion, the current thesis achieved its purpose in showing how different media shapes ideas about “the self” and has also a powerful influence in constructing it. Self-help movement would not exist without media’s essential role in the process and media organizations should pay more attention in how they handle the situation.

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