

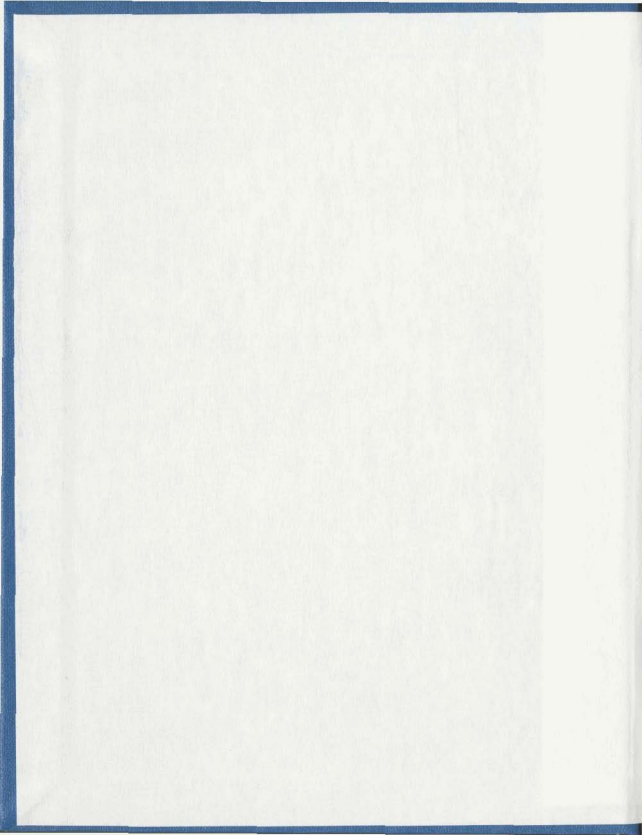
SEXING DESIRE:
THE CONSTRUCTION AND TREATMENT OF
FEMALE SEXUALITY IN POPULAR
WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

**TOTAL OF 10 PAGES ONLY
MAY BE XEROXED**

(Without Author's Permission)

DANIELLE FINNEY



Sexing Desire:
The Construction and Treatment of Female Sexuality
in Popular Women's Magazines

by
Danielle Finney

A thesis submitted to the
School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Women's Studies

Women's Studies Program
Memorial University of Newfoundland

August, 2001

St. John's

Newfoundland

Abstract

This thesis explores the social construction of female sexuality in popular women's magazines and draws attention to the commercial interests that are served by the simultaneous processes of creating sexual difference and "sexing desire." The teen magazines *Seventeen*, *Ym*, and *Teen*, and the young women's magazines *Cosmo*, *Glamour*, and *New Woman*, are used to track the cultivation of a specifically *feminine* form of desire, a form of desire which is differentiated from masculine desire, offered only to female bodies, and which bears no inherent relation to female bodies. It is shown that for the purposes of generating revenue, the cosmetic, fashion, diet, and magazine industries participate in the creation of feminine desire. In these magazines, feminine desire is established as the desire for male sexual desire and for committed, monogamous relationships while male desire is characterized as the desire for sexual gratification. This thesis also elucidates the ways that popular women's magazines often react to the differences that they themselves have helped to create. Numerous contradictions become visible through an examination of the advice given to readers on how to deal with or overcome the consequences of sexed desire. Ultimately, my analysis reveals that contradiction is a key feature of the women's magazines' treatment of female sexuality and suggests that contradiction may be an integral part of the magazines' success.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my greatest gratitude to Noreen Golfman for her guidance with this project. Without her encouragement and insight, I would not have been able to finish this thesis. I am also thankful for her sense of humour and that she periodically checked to make sure I still had mine. Elizabeth Yeoman and Linda Kealey also offered assistance, for which, I am grateful. As well, Elizabeth provided much needed support during difficult times. And thank you to Rosonna Tite for offering her shoulder and an endless supply of kleenex.

Special thanks to my parents, Paige Finney and Terry Lawson, for their love and patience. Thanks to my mother for the constant encouragement to “keep my *chins* up” and, most of all, for instilling in us the desire to question. I am also grateful to my sister, Lana Finney, for her incredible generosity, friendship, and for being silly when I needed to lighten up. I am deeply indebted to my brother, David Hornidge, and his partner, Ramona Kieser, who were always “there,” and who never let me question my ability. And I am grateful to my grandmother, Helen Finney, for always being proud of me.

I am also thankful for a number of friends who I have met here in Newfoundland and who have been a tremendous source of support over the years, some wittingly and some not. I would especially like to thank Dianne Grant and Derek Tittensor, my kindred spirits, for being such gentle people. Much gratitude to Doug Gorman, Victor Sparks, Ian Brockie, and the rest of the crowd at Bitters, my home here in St. John’s. And thank you to Shane Greene, Phil Rose, and Marilyn Rose for taking in a stray student from Saskatchewan.

I would also like to express my appreciation to the Women’s Studies Program and to Graduate Studies for the provision of financial assistance, without which, the completion of this degree would not have been possible.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgments	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Chapter I: Introduction	1
1.1 Summary of Project	1
1.2 What is Sexuality?	2
1.3 Why Study Sexuality?	2
1.4 Why Women's Magazines?	5
1.5 Women's Magazines in Context: Publishing for Profit	10
1.6 The Role of Advertising	11
1.7 The Pursuit of an Audience	13
1.8 Choosing the Magazines	16
1.9 Thesis Design	17
Chapter II: Creating Difference: Sexing Desire	20
2.1 Theoretical Framework	20
2.2 Women's Magazines: Entering a World of Sexual Difference	26
2.3 Decorating and Disciplining the Body: Woman as Sex Object	28
2.4 Love and Commitment: Man as Love Object	37
2.5 Summary	42
Chapter III: Teen Magazines: The Contradictions of a Protectionist Discourse	45
3.1 Introduction	45
3.2 Tensions and Contradictions within Phallogocentric Discourse	47
3.3 Summary	58
Chapter IV: Young Women's Magazines: The Contradictions of a Liberatory Discourse	60
4.1 Introduction	60
4.2 Tensions and Contradictions within Phallogocentric Discourse	62
4.3 Women's Sexual Liberation: Anchored by Phallogocentrism	67
4.4 Thinking about the Other Side of the Binary: Problematicizing Masculine Desire	78
4.5 Summary	83

Conclusions	86
Appendix	93
Bibliography	94

Chapter I

Introduction

1.1 Summary of Project

I remember very clearly the first time I heard the term “female sexuality.” I was 16 and having a conversation with my aunt in my grandmother’s driveway. “Female sexuality,” she explained with a mixture of sympathy and despair, “is *so* complicated.” That moment remained framed in my mind for years afterward. I was absolutely intrigued by her mysterious statement. I walked away from my aunt that day plagued with questions: “What is sexuality? What is *female* sexuality? And why is it so complicated?”

This thesis project is ultimately an investigation of those very questions. Through an analysis of popular women’s magazines, I trace the creation of a specifically *feminine* form of desire. That is, I explore the way that female bodies are offered different ways of desiring from male bodies within a heterosexual matrix, resulting in what I term the sexing of desire. Furthermore, I examine the way that the construction of female sexuality is not an entirely straightforward or linear process. Although *difference* is the over-riding structure of desire in popular women’s magazines, this is not to say that within these publications there do not exist contradictory meanings of female desire. Ultimately, I argue that female sexuality is not consistently represented in popular women’s magazines. Furthermore, I suggest the lack of consistency is directly related to the financial success of the magazine.

1.2 What is Sexuality?

As Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (1996) state, sexuality is a “slippery” term which is subject to competing definitions. However, they suggest that, in a broad sense, sexuality refers to erotic desire, practice and identity (2). As suggested, in this thesis I am interested in how female bodies are recruited into heterosexual forms of desire, practice, and identity, as well as how femininity and masculinity are coded into relations of desire.

1.3 Why Study Sexuality?

Importantly, the term “sexuality” is intended to move us beyond thinking in terms of material bodies and the supposedly *biological* impulses informing those bodies. Indeed, what is at the very heart of this project is the notion that sexuality is not *biologically* given; that we are not born with a ready-made sexual identity. According to Jeffrey Weeks (1986), “far from being the most natural element in social life, the most resistant to cultural moulding, [sexuality] is perhaps one of the most susceptible to organization” (24). Sexuality, then, as Marianna Valverde (1985) suggests, is not something we *have*; rather, the bulk of what we call “my sexuality” is created in social interaction (15). Of course, this is not to deny the involvement of our material bodies, but as Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe, and Rachel Thompson (1994) state, it is to suggest that sexuality and sexual encounters can be both bodily experiences as well as social relationships. Moreover, it is impossible to separate the two (22). As Weeks suggests, “biology conditions and limits what is possible. But it does not cause the

patterns of sexual life I prefer to see in biology a set of potentialities which are transformed and given meaning only in social relationships" (25).

If sexuality is created through social interaction, if it is constructed on a social level, then it is obviously important to examine the meanings of sexuality that exist in the social arena. For feminists, this is a vital project: "To work out strategies for feminist sexual politics, we need to understand more about how sexuality and sexual behaviour are formed, how sexual desire—apparently such an individual matter—is shaped by the social context" (McIntosh, 1992: 159).

In this project, I draw on poststructuralist feminist theory to explore the social construction of gendered desire. The term "poststructuralism," which is often used interchangeably with the term "postmodernism," refers to a diverse body of thought. As with any label, the blanket designation "poststructuralism" elides differences within the term. Judith Grant (1993) points out that many of the philosophers who are referred to as poststructuralists or poststructuralist feminists differ in important ways; however, she argues that what is common to these modes of thinking is a radical break with modern and enlightenment thought (130). According to Chris Weedon (1987), one of the defining features of poststructuralist thought is that it problematizes modernist notions of the subject. Poststructuralists reject the idea of a stable, coherent, essential subject and propose instead, a subject who is precarious, contradictory and socially constructed (32-33). Importantly, poststructuralists dismiss the notion that there is an essential or fixed quality to the subject and instead, emphasize the social constitution of the subject. Grant

points out that this reconceptualization of the subject is troublesome to many feminists because it calls into question the identity category "woman," a concept that is at the very heart of feminist theory (134). In challenging the notion that there is an essence to the subject, poststructuralism likewise challenges the notion that there is an essence to "woman." Consequently, it becomes difficult for feminists to talk about women as a collective because poststructuralism problematizes feminism's central category. This troubling of feminism's subject leads some feminists to reject poststructuralism on the grounds that the undermining of the category "woman" weakens the feminist project (Harstock, 1990). For many other feminists, however, this destabilization of the subject is precisely why poststructuralism is appealing. According to these feminists, the destabilization or the *denaturalization* of the category "woman" is crucial because they argue that it is the categories of sexual difference that are at the root of "women's" subordination (Flax, 1990). For these feminists, the terms of sexual difference, "man" and "woman" cannot be treated as natural categories, not as nouns, but, rather, must be viewed as processes, as verbs: "work that we do to construct and maintain a particular gender system" (Rakow, 1986: 12). As Moira Gatens (1991) urges, feminists need to "claim a history for the body," and for Gatens, this entails tracking the processes whereby bodies become marked as male and female and their capacities and desires differentiated.

One of the poststructuralist thinkers that has profoundly influenced many feminists is the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Although Foucault did not analyze gender relations, which, as Caroline Ramazanoglu (1993) asserts, makes his work

unwittingly masculinist (4), many feminists have nonetheless found Foucault's theorization of power and the body extremely useful. In the following thesis, I harness feminist theory that draws upon or is compatible with the work of Foucault, in order to claim a history for feminine desire. I make use of this particular strand of poststructuralist feminist theory to deconstruct meaning systems (discourses) that establish sexual difference and to theorize how women themselves actively participate in the practices that produce feminine embodiment. Moreover, poststructuralist feminist theory enriches my project by providing an understanding of how different meanings of gender and sexuality can exist at the same time, producing contradictions within women's magazines.

1.4 Why Women's Magazines?

With the intent of looking at social meanings of desire, I offer that popular women's magazines present themselves as an important field of study both because these texts reach so many women and because they speak so frequently *to* and *about* desire. Women's magazines comprise the largest single group of magazines, with over fifty monthly titles published in the United States in 1993 (McCracken, 1993: 13) and over eighty monthly titles published in Britain in 1995 (Braithwaite, 1995: 7). According to Janice Winship (1987), the leading women's magazines in Britain, such as *Woman* and *Woman's Own*, are as well known nationally as any other daily or Sunday newspaper (5). I think it is safe to say that magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *Good Housekeeping* are equally well known in North America. Indeed, these publications are ubiquitous.

Women's magazines garnish supermarket checkouts, fill entire sections of book and magazine stores, can be easily observed on the shelves of drug and convenience stores, and are a staple form of reading offered in doctor's offices and hair salons. From the shelves and tables on which they are displayed, numerous magazines compete for women's attention. The covers display brightly coloured images of flawless female beauty or perfectly prepared food. As Ellen McCracken argues, the news-stand offers the reader a series of windows to the future self. Whether a perfect face, dress, meal, or furniture arrangement, these symbols appear attainable if the consumer-reader purchases the appropriate magazine (13). Complementing these seductive visions are headlines that offer advice and information on a range of topics. Together the images and headlines attract the reader's attention with the promise of personal success and happiness.

Importantly, the sheer number of women who are drawn into the world of popular women's magazines is substantial. For example, in 1997, the year I began my research, the circulation rate of *Family Circle*, a magazine aimed at older, married women, was 4.7 million (readers per issue), while *Cosmopolitan*, a magazine aimed at younger, single, working women, had a circulation rate of 2.3 million, and the circulation rate of *Seventeen*, the most popular magazine in the teen sector, was over 2 million.¹ Moreover, these numbers do not include secondary or "pass-on" readership (that is, the circulation numbers do not reflect the numbers of women who borrow copies from friends), nor do

¹ Circulation numbers were obtained through direct phone interviews with magazine personnel at Hearst Magazines, New York, and Primedia Magazines, New York, in October of 1997.

they include the numbers of women who periodically flip through the pages of women's magazines while waiting in line at the supermarket, doctor's office, hair salon, and the like.

Broadly speaking, popular women's magazines can be divided into two thematic categories: "specialist" magazines, whose specific focus is reflected in their titles, such as *Brides*, *New Mother*, or *Parenthood*; and "general interest" magazines, such as *The Ladies Home Journal*, *Marie Claire*, or *Cosmopolitan*, which claim to offer women information and assistance on a number of topics. For example, *Glamour's* home page claims:

Glamour offers expert advice for young women on fashion, beauty, careers, love, relationships, and more. Glamour shows you how to get your body in shape. How to get the pros' best makeup tips and techniques. How to eliminate bad hair days forever. How to get ahead in your career. What the stars are wearing, how they are wearing it, and how YOU can get the look of the moment. In short, Glamour shows readers how to do just about everything better. Prettier. Smarter. Sexier.²

Within the general interest category, magazines are divided into three target audience groups: "service magazines," which are aimed at married women, thirty-five and older; "young women's magazines," which are geared towards women between the ages of fifteen and thirty-nine; and "teen magazines," which are aimed at teenage girls between twelve and nineteen.³ In comparison to teen and young women's magazines, service magazines do not typically include a lot of sex-related editorial material, nor are

² These statements were found on the Glamour, Conde Nast, website in June, 2001: www.condenet.com/mags/glam/.

³ Information obtained through a phone conversation with the Research Analyst at *Cosmopolitan*, Hearst Magazines, New York, in October of 1997.

narratives of sex appeal as common in the advertising. Rather, the content of service magazines revolves primarily around topics such as child-rearing and the up-keep of the household and home. On the other hand, within teen magazines, and especially young women's magazines, explicit and implicit appeals to sex and desire are common. Beginning with the glamorous, good-looking female models displayed on the cover of teen and young women's magazines, the reader is invited into a world of female attractiveness. Inside, advertisements and editorial material speak to the reader's desire to be desirable. Women's magazines also contain numerous articles promising advice, information, and instruction on the topics of sex and sexuality. The titles of these articles speak for themselves: "What Makes a Man Come Back for More" (*Marie Claire*, November, 1997), "Women and Cheating: the lust, the lies and the reasons why?" (*Glamour*, April, 1997), and "Real Life Erotic Encounters: readers share their steamiest moments" (*Cosmo*, November 1997).

For five decades now, women's magazines have been the object of much feminist writing and criticism (Friedan, 1963; Ferguson, 1983; Winship, 1987; McMahon, 1990; Pierce, 1990, 1993; Ballaster et al., 1991; Evans, Rutberg, Sather, and Turner, 1991; McRobbie, 1991; McCracken, 1993; Carpenter, 1998; Garner, Sterk, and Adams, 1998; Currie, 1999). In 1963, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan, argued that women's magazines contribute to what she refers to as "the problem with no name," by encouraging women to tie their identities to the heterosexual institutions of motherhood and marriage. Since then, many feminists have used content analyses to document the

themes in women's magazines, pointing out that women's magazines produce extremely narrow, "stereotypical" definitions of female identity. A summary of such research is best captured in the statements of Ellis Evans, Judith Rutberg, Carmela Sather, and Charli Turner (1991):

Although ostensibly governed by a theme of self-improvement, these publications seem to approach the topic largely through fashion dressing and physical beautification, with some modest attention to guidance articles about normative problems in the interpersonal domain—mostly male-female relationships. Articles and advertisements mutually reinforced an underlying value that the road to happiness is attracting males for successful heterosexual life by way of physical beautification. (110)

There have also been a number of studies that advance women's magazine analysis beyond what is referred to as the redundant findings of media content analyses (van Zoonen, 1994: 68). Angela McRobbie (1991) and McCracken (1993) both employ materialist semiotics to correlate the content and textual strategies of teen and women's magazines with the capitalist interests behind the material. In their investigations, Winship (1987) and Ros Ballaster, Margaret Beetham, Elizabeth Frazer, and Sandra Hebron (1991) extend the previous research by considering the pleasure that is involved in reading women's magazines, and, hence, the pleasure that is involved in the reproduction of femininity. Such research is important in its implications of the possibility of female agency, shifting the weight of responsibility in the production of meaning to the reader herself. And Dawn Currie (1999) in her recent important study provides even greater insight into reader resistance and conformity through an intertextual analysis of teen magazine reading and school culture. As helpful as all this

research is, to date there have not been any full analyses which have directly traced the creation of masculine and feminine desire in women's magazines.

1.5 Women's Magazines in Context: Publishing for Profit

Central to my analysis is the understanding that women's magazines are not merely *social* texts but *commercial* texts, because they are produced in the service of capitalist production (Currie, 1999: 57). While the dominant tone of these publications is ostensibly one of help, support, reassurance, and while the editors continuously express concern for the reader's success and happiness—taking on what Marjorie Ferguson (1983) refers to as the “surrogate sister role” (9)—it is ultimately because of her spending power that she is addressed at all by this attractive form of commercial culture (McCracken, 1993: 10). As commercial texts, women's magazines are primarily motivated by the wish to construct the reader as a consumer. It is, therefore, essential that the researcher consider the meanings of gender and desire embedded in these publications in terms of their functional relations to consumer capitalism. Such an analysis requires a thorough consideration of the prevalence and influence of advertising in women's magazines, as well as a consideration of editors' desire to include editorial material that will, in effect, sell the magazine to readers.

1.6 The Role of Advertising

Women's magazines are composed of two different forms of content: purchased advertising and editorial material. Purchased advertising is, obviously, space in the magazines purchased by companies who wish to advertise their products. Advertising typically employs visual images with minimal use of scripts. Editorial material, on the other hand, is provided by magazine editors and writers and normally includes much more scripting. Editorial content generally follows four different styles: *a feature article*, which can be an informative/instructional article, including articles based around "survey" results and reader polls, or a personal narrative; *an advice column*, which is presented as question and answer correspondence between readers and columnists—but as Kathryn McMahon (1990) points out, this type of correspondence is often composed entirely by magazine writers (391); the magazine equivalent of a psychic, *a quiz*, which claims to offer the reader insight into herself or her relationships with others; and those pieces that I refer to as *sound-bite pages*, because they are normally only one page and consist of fragmented tid-bits of information. Teen magazines rely more heavily on the advice column and the sound-bite page while the feature article is more characteristic of young women's magazines. The premise of editorial material is to offer the reader advice and information. Not surprisingly, the editorial material is often presented as if it were objective and impartial (McCracken, 1993: 56). Both purchased advertising and editorial material carry meanings of gender and desire and, hence, both are relevant to my analysis.

Today, advertising is the major source of revenue for the women's magazine

industry. While readers play an obviously fundamental role in the making or breaking of a magazine, these publications do not gain any profit from the cover price and, therefore, as Winship (1987) succinctly states, "it is the wooing of advertisers which is so pivotal in the competitive search for revenue" (38). The interests of the popular women's magazine and the industries for whom they advertise are thus bound together. In order to attract advertisers, editors must create a climate that will position readers favourably toward the sale of the products advertised within. Three of the primary industries that advertise in teen and young women's magazines are the cosmetic, fashion, and diet industries. It follows that the fashion, beauty, health, and fitness editorial content is included to supplement the advertising of these industries. Often claiming to present the reader only with advice and information, the beauty and fashion editorials assume a form of covert advertising. According to McCracken (1993), covert advertising, what she cleverly refers to as "advertorials" (54), can take specific forms, such as the recommendation of brand-name products in an editorial piece or, more generally, the thematic correlating of editorial content to advertising (138). For example, in the *Teen* piece titled "Bare It! The best swimsuit for your body" (*Teen*, May, 1998), the reader is treated to eight pages of swimsuit photos, complete with brand-names and the prices of the suits. The *Glamour* article, "Psst! Are you wearing too much makeup—or too little?" does not mention any specific brand names, but the piece suggests to the reader that others will scrutinize her makeup and, therefore, so should she. These editorial pieces are designed to keep the reader's attention focused on the products which are advertised within the article itself or

on the following pages. McCracken (1993) points out that the purchased and covert advertising together account for up to 95% of the content of some popular women's magazines (4), resulting in a harmonious, integrated whole, and making the presence of advertising formidable (139).

Ultimately, advertisers and the industries whom they represent have a lot of power in directing the content of women's magazines and, therefore, in determining the definitions of femininity produced in these publications. In Chapter One of this thesis, I document the gendered meanings of desire that operate in the advertising and supplemental editorials of teen and young women's magazines. This chapter establishes a theoretical foundation for further exploration of the specific characteristics of the popular magazine genre.

1.7 The Pursuit of an Audience

While advertising is the primary source of revenue for women's magazines and, hence, the emphasis on female beauty is prominent, the audience plays an obviously central role in the survival of both the magazine and the industries that advertise within. Naturally, magazines must present editorial material that readers will find interesting and relevant and editors must step outside the narrow parameters set by the advertisers, in order to keep up with the interests of a large number of women (McCracken, 1993: 152). Indeed, young women's magazines typically include articles on work, leisure, current events, and health. For example, *Cosmopolitan's* audience is young, works in the paid

labour force, and is financially independent; hence, the magazine regularly runs articles under the heading called "Life & Work." Similarly, *Glamour* often publishes articles aimed at women who attend university. In the December (1997) issue, *Glamour* ran an article profiling outstanding female students across the country. While the topics of beauty, fashion, and boys dominate the editorial material of teen magazines more than in young women's magazines, there remains a certain degree of thematic diversity. For example, *Seventeen* runs a regular column, titled "School Zone," which profiles different North American high schools and their student life. Teen magazines also periodically publish articles that mirror those printed in young women's magazines, such as *YM's* interesting piece "We were Sexually Harassed on our School Bus" (April, 1998).

Although mitigated by the desire to construct women primarily as consumers in the service of the industries which advertise in these texts, women's magazines have also incorporated a number of basic feminist principles (Ballaster et al., 1991: 155). Kalia Doner (1993) argues that in recent years:

Almost all of the publications have hammered home the conviction that: it's never the woman's fault if she is beaten by her spouse; the police and judicial system are prejudiced against women in rape cases; the lack of women at the top levels of business is an outrage; equal pay for equal work is mandatory; no man has a right to make uninvited sexually motivated comments or to physically harass a woman; men should participate equally in running the home; women deserve and should demand sexual gratification. (38)

Moreover, Doner notes that *Glamour* has won journalism awards, including a prestigious Emma award, given out by the National Women's Political Caucus to those magazines that have best focussed on women's issues (40).

While the desire to address women as consumers of the products advertised within magazines necessitates a relentless emphasis on heterosexual appeal through self-beautification, the pursuit of an audience requires going outside of these parameters; often, as other scholars have noted, resulting in conflicting constructions of femininity. For example, Ballaster et al. (1991) note that young women's magazines like *Cosmo* construct women as independent salary-earners with free sexual existences yet the magazines also prioritize the heterosexual relationship as the determining force in their lives (6). Similarly, McCracken points out that *Glamour's* feminist articles often clash with the anti-feminism of their advertising. She notes that in one issue the "Education" column reports on the growth of Women's Studies Programs on college campuses and urges women who do not live near colleges to form their own study groups on women's issues. Adjacent to this piece are pictures of women in highly provocative modeling underwear in an ad for Frederick's of Hollywood with the headline "Be outrageously sexy" (152). Similarly obvious contradictions can be found in teen magazines. *Teen* (April, 1998) printed an interview with the teenaged television star of *Dawson's Creek*, Michelle Williams, in which the young woman complains that what she "hated most about high school was that the girls just didn't seem to understand that there was life past clothes, makeup, and boys" (67). Ironically, these complaints appear in a publication that is primarily concerned with fashion, beauty, and boys. And, of course, there is the notorious contradiction between editorials that encourage readers to "stop being self-critical" about their looks and covert advertising that, only pages later, encourages self-

scrutiny and demands self-modification, "Shape Up: the Better-Body Workout" (*YM*, May, 1998).

In Chapters Two and Three of this thesis, I highlight the conflicting meanings of gender and sexuality arising in teen and young women's magazines as a result of the contradictory process of magazine publication. As we shall see, editors frequently react to the conflicts and problems that stem from the construction of sexual difference, producing numerous contradictions—some more subtle than others.

1.8 Choosing the Magazines

My thesis concentrates on American magazines because these dominate the women's magazine market in North America and, hence, are an obvious source for my study. The specific magazines analyzed in this project are the best publications from the distinct categories of teen and young women's magazines; they have the highest circulation rates and reach the largest number of women. Because I am concerned with understanding the meanings encoded in women's magazines, rather than with reiterating themes that have been well explored, I chose to keep my sample fairly small to allow for an in-depth analysis, identifying three magazines in each category. As McCracken (1993) points out, because of publishers' reluctance to deviate from techniques that have brought financial success, there is little variation in the mainstream women's magazine industry

(47). The three most popular magazines from the two categories of teen and young women's magazines are as follows:

Teen Magazines

Seventeen

YM (Young and Modern)

Teen

Young Women's Magazines

Cosmopolitan

Glamour

New Woman

Although this sample might appear to be modest, when one considers their multi-million dollar circulation rates and the enormous influence they wield in popular culture, these sources assume both weight and power.⁴

1.9 Thesis Design

In Chapter Two, I establish a definition of the sexing of desire. I begin with a discussion of poststructuralist feminist theory and read the content of women's magazines through such a frame. Although much research has already been done on these kinds of publications, to date, no comprehensive analysis of desire exists in this context, especially one based on poststructuralist feminist theory. In this chapter, I trace the sexing of desire through an analysis of the advertising, the beauty-related editorial content, as well as the general "relationship" editorial content. Through a discussion of the beauty-related content of women's magazines, I demonstrate the sexing of the female body through the practices of femininity. Because, as we shall see, the rituals of femininity are practices

⁴ A list of the circulation rates and specific issues included in my sample are found in Appendix I.

devoted primarily to the transformation of the female body into the desirable body, male bodies are inevitably positioned as desiring bodies. In effect, through women's efforts to sculpt the self as object of male desire, a one-way relation of sexual desire is produced: men desire and women are desired. Within women's magazines, sexual desire becomes coded primarily as a male prerogative, despite many appearances to the contrary. Female desire, on the other hand, is encouraged along a different path. I argue that the high priority given to heterosexual relationships in women's magazines points to a particularly feminine form of desire. Within these publications, the feminine ambition to secure male approval is not limited to sexual desirability. Primacy is given to committed, monogamous relationships, reinforcing the notion that female worth is contingent on a woman's ability to secure male affection. Because male desire is, in the first instance, coded as sexual, the desire to secure serious, heterosexual relationships constitutes a specifically feminine form of desire.

In Chapters Three and Four, I turn to a discussion of the specific sex-related editorial content: the editorial content that deals explicitly and self-consciously with the topics of sex and sexuality. In these chapters, I highlight the contradictory meanings of female sexuality that arise as editors try to deal with and offer advice for the problems and/or inequalities that arise from sexual difference; in so doing, I demonstrate that women's magazines do not reproduce the sexing of desire consistently or unproblematically. In Chapter Three, I look at the sex-related editorial material of the teen magazines *Seventeen*, *YM*, and *Teen*. I begin by elucidating the conflict that arises

from a heterosexuality based on difference: that is, I discuss the conflict that editors must confront when girls try to get emotional commitment from boys who are often more interested in sex. In this chapter, I highlight the contradictory meanings of sexuality that emerge as the editors of teen magazines are left in the paradoxical position of trying to help girls manage the consequences of sexual difference in heterosexual adolescent relations, without challenging the categories of sexual difference that are facilitated elsewhere in the magazine. In Chapter Four, I explore the sex-related editorial material of the young women's magazines *Cosmo*, *Glamour*, and *New Woman*. As in teen magazines, the editors of young women's magazines must deal with the difficulties that arise from sexual difference and, hence, contradictory meanings are produced. I also point out that in many articles, the editors of young women's magazines express the idea that women deserve the same sexual rights and privileges as men. Ultimately, this idea effects further contradiction as it stands in opposition to the very premise of sexual difference, which is maintained elsewhere in young women's magazines. Finally, I note that there are brief instances in young women's magazines where editors and columnists either criticize or, at the very least, problematize, masculine modes of sexuality, producing more contradictory constructions of sexuality.

Chapter II

Creating Difference: Sexing Desire

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Thinking about Sexual Difference

This thesis is informed by the main tenets of poststructuralist feminist thought. I therefore begin with the premise that there is no inherent character to female sexuality but, rather, that gender and sexuality are socially constructed. As stated in the Introduction, by poststructuralist feminist thought I am suggesting work following from Foucault. As Lois McNay (1993) argues, Foucault appeals to many feminists because his theory of the body is formulated around a notion of discursive practice rather than around a material distinction (25). For feminists, the conceptualization of the body as a discursive articulation is useful because it politicizes the body; it points to a body that is socially constructed and the target of power relations. In short, the displacement of the material body by the discursive body allows for an analysis of the category of sex as a function of power relations, rather than as an issue of materiality.⁵

⁵ It should be noted, however, that Foucault's treatment of material bodies as irrelevant is also troublesome to the feminist project. M.E. Bailey (1993) points out that "appeals to the distinct biology of the female sex allow for the more immediate realisation of some feminist projects which are defined already, to a greater and lesser extent, as 'biological issues,' such as women's health care, rape, abortion, maternity. Obviously, there is some utility in employing the category of 'sex'" (101). But Bailey holds that the existence of biological femaleness does not mean that feminists must entirely submit to essentialism and reject Foucault's theory. Rather, she calls for the deconstruction of the term "sex" with the simultaneous use of "strategic essentialism," which would entail the deployment of "a fictional essence" or "partial identity" within very specific institutional settings where the terms of the debate are already circumscribed (116, 119).

Foucault (1972) examines how historically and institutionally specific bodies of knowledge, what he refers to as “discourses,” are established as truth while other bodies of knowledge are disenfranchised. According to Foucault, power operates through discourse and hence, the most powerful discourses are those that establish themselves as “truth.” Foucault abandons the idea that there exists an independent reality outside of human interpretation which discourse merely names and, instead, insists that conceptual and inanimate objects, as well as living *subjects* are inseparable from their discursive articulation. Foucault (1972) argues that discourses are not simply superficial, external interpretive systems, rather, they are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (49). Sara Mills (1997), who has written extensively on the different uses of the term, states that following Foucault, discourse is deemed to structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity (15).⁶ Importantly, discourse defines both ways of knowing and ways of being. Paraphrasing Foucault, Chris Weedon (1987) offers that discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning, they constitute the “nature” of the body, the unconscious and conscious mind, and the emotional life of the subjects that they seek to define. She adds that neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside of their discursive articulation (108). According to Foucault (1977), power, as it operates through discourse, is productive: “a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one

⁶ This structuring of reality and identity is achieved through the process of “interpellation,” a term which comes from another key figure of poststructuralist thought, Louis Althusser (1977). The subject is inserted into discourse, actively or passively, and takes up the subject position offered (Silverman, 1983: 219).

dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them" (1978: 136). Foucault (1978) maintained that power operates through discourse, constitutively and regulating the body's forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures (155).

Many feminists have extended Foucault's arguments to theorize gender and sexuality. Following from Foucault, it is argued that subjects take up and are defined by a discourse of sexual difference and, hence, are *sexed*. Subjects are interpellated by a discourse which requires that they take up and identify with one of the subject positions offered: male or female. Kaja Silverman (1984) notes that, "while human bodies exist prior to discourse, it is only through discourse that they arrive at the condition of being 'male' or 'female'—discourse functions first to territorialize and then to map meanings onto bodies" (324). And McNay (1993) argues that the categories of maleness and femaleness are heterosexual categories (19) and, hence, this territorializing of bodies is, in the first instance, a territorializing of bodies by a discourse of "compulsive heterosexuality" (Rich, 1978: 135). Following Judith Butler (1991), heterosexual union can be defined as the original or authentic form of human intimacy and eroticism; thus bodies are divided based on their relation to heterosexual sex (20). Bodies are colonized at once by mutually sustaining discourses of heterosexism and sexual difference—together constituting *phallogentric* discourse—producing the categories "male" and "female" and establishing heterosexual desire.

Phallogentric discourse thus operates via the imposition of an oppositional binary on human bodies. Yet the imposition of that binary is not limited to the surface of

bodies—that is, it is not limited to the naming of genital configuration. Rather, a range of human capacities and desires is divided and framed in an oppositional binary relation to the extent that masculinity and femininity become embodied experiences. Certain possibilities are produced in one term and repressed or diminished in the other, giving rise to what are referred to as masculine and feminine traits (Scott, 1988: 37). More than simply being different, in such a meaning system, masculinity and femininity appear as each other's natural opposite. As McNay (1993) asserts, in a binary discourse on sex, men and women exhaust all possibilities and relate to each other as complementary opposites (19)—hence the term “opposite sex.” Moreover, the repression and expression of human characteristics along the lines of gender are far from egalitarian. Not only are they asymmetric, with men being offered more possibilities and subject positions, but they are also hierarchized (Flax, 1990: 45; Scott, 1988: 37). The terms masculinity and femininity encode a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority, and it is on the feminine body that inferiority is inscribed (Bartky, 1988: 71). In a phallogocentric economy, femininity is the embodiment of all that is considered inferior, lesser, weaker, thereby making masculinity appear superior, better, stronger. As Susan Brownmiller (1984) persuasively suggests:

Femininity pleases men because it makes them appear more masculine by contrast; and, in truth, conferring an extra portion of unearned gender distinction on men, an unchallenged space in which to breathe freely and feel stronger, wiser and more competent, is femininity's special gift. (16)

The central paradox of femininity is that to become successfully feminine, the fruit of that labour, is to accept containment. According to Brownmiller, femininity is a tradition of

imposed limitations: "The ultimate achievement of femininity is to become limited and restricted... the competitive edge it promises (to become successfully feminine) is to accept restriction" (15).

Although I am speaking about the effect discourse has on the body, that is not to say that subjects are passive. At the same time that individuals may involuntarily be subjected to a particular regulatory and constitutive discourse, subjects also actively take up or refuse interpellation by that discourse through self-representation. Dorothy Smith (1990) argues that women are not merely passive products of socialization but active subjects who create themselves. According to Smith, discourse is also something one *does*, not only something to which one is subjected (161). As suggested earlier, discourses are more than external meaning systems; discourses are also *practices*, and hence to take up femininity is to take up the practices of femininity, to take up the "technologies" of femininity (Bartky, 1988: 71).⁷ But in creating herself as feminine, Smith argues, the female subject participates actively in a dialectic: "people's actual activities as participants give power to the relations that 'overpower' them. Women's work and activities are an integral part of the overall organization of these relations" (161). As women take up the practices of femininity, they give consent to phallogocentric inscriptions of inferiority on their bodies, and hence it is through their own labour that female bodies exercise power over themselves. Female bodies become what Foucault

⁷ Teresa De Lauretis (1987) proposes that gender should be thought of as the product of various social technologies, such as media, institutionalized discourses, epistemologies and critical practices, as well as the practices of everyday life (2).

famously calls “docile bodies”: bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation and improvement; bodies who become centripetally focused on self-modification (Bordo, 1989: 14). Sandra Bartky (1988) argues that although the disciplinary practices of femininity appear to be either natural or performed voluntarily, they must be understood as aspects of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination (75).

While discourses of gender must be taken up and practiced, phallogentric discourse is very successful in presenting itself as natural, true, inevitable. As Silverman (1984) states, sexual difference is maintained by all the discourses which presently constitute the symbolic order in the West (325). It is the ubiquity of discourses of sexual difference which makes gender appear as fact rather than as something that is practiced. However, no matter how stable discourses of sexual difference appear, discourse is neither seamless nor monolithic. According to Jana Sawicki (1991), Foucault conceived of discourse as being ambiguous and plurivocal, a site of conflict and contestation (1). Discourses do not exist in a vacuum but are in constant conflict with other discourses, producing conflicting and contradictory meanings (Weedon, 1987: 33). On the one hand, this refers to contradictory discourses of femininity *within* phallogentric discourse. As Mary McIntosh (1992) argues, phallogentric discourse does not operate as a homogeneous social whole, but, rather, it produces internal contradictions and tensions (167). Within a wider discourse of sexual difference, meanings of femininity can be incongruous, paradoxical, or contradictory. On the other hand, discourses of femininity

can be contradicted by discourses of female embodiment, which call into question or challenge phallogentric meanings of the body. According to Sawicki, “[Foucault] would have rejected the view that the power of phallogentric discourse is total” (1). Although phallogentric discourses dominate, poststructuralist feminists insist that they are not entirely sovereign. Meanings of female sexuality may arise that disrupt or transcend the binary of masculinity and femininity—meanings that are excluded, repressed or denigrated, in phallogentric discourse—and therefore stand in tension with discourses of feminine sexuality. Moreover, through dialogue, feminist discourse can challenge the stability of phallogentric discourse by insisting on the politicality of the body: that the body has no inherent meaning but that sex is a social, political category, not an issue of materiality.

2.2 *Women's Magazines: Entering a World of Sexual Difference*

Since their inception as far back as 1693, women's magazines have claimed to offer entertainment, information and instruction on those issues which are thought to be of importance to women (White, 1970: 24). In so doing, these journals promote the view that women require separate consideration and distinctive treatment (Ferguson, 1983: 1). Unlike much contemporary feminist thought, which defines “woman” as a social category, women's magazines treat sex as a natural, inevitable category. Within these publications, there is never a need to justify or explain their sex-based address; it is merely taken for granted that men and women are different and, hence, that all women

can be addressed by women's magazines. Subsequently, because sex is taken as the fundamental underpinning of a woman's identity, all differences *between* women are effectively neutralized. Implicit in their all-inclusive address is the assumption that women form a homogeneous group and that sex transcends all other (socially contrived) differences, such as race and class. As Ballaster et al. (1991) point out, within mainstream women's magazines, "race is understood merely as an aesthetic category, to be taken on a par with the divisions between women of dry and greasy hair, large and small breasts" (14).⁴

The maintenance of sexual difference is crucial for the survival of popular women's magazines, for, without the category of sex, these magazines would have no way to define and circumscribe their audience. Moreover, the privileging of heterosexuality is also pivotal to the survival of popular women's magazines. As Ballaster et al. assert, the construction of "woman" is primarily achieved through the repetitive invocation of her supposedly "natural" opposite, man, with whom she is assumed to be having heterosexual relations (Ballaster, 1991: 9). Not surprisingly, lesbianism receives little attention in women's magazines and is thereby marginalized as

⁴ Of course, as Ballaster et al. argue, women's magazines *do* pay attention to race and class. Although their address is to "women," which suggests inclusivity, the intended audience of most mainstream women's magazines is white and middle-class. Content is skewed to appeal to this audience because it is a relatively large and profitable population. Ballaster et al. insist that the superficial inclusivity marginalizes women of colour and working-class women (9).

a legitimate choice for women (Ballaster, et al., 1191: 9; Macdonald, 1995: 176; Winship, 1987: 117).⁹

Women's magazines depend for their survival on sexual difference and the privileging of heterosexuality. As such, they present themselves as an important site for feminist analysis. As stated earlier, although there exists a wealth of important and insightful literature on these cultural artefacts, to date, no analysis of women's magazines has fully traced the construction of feminine desire. In the following section, I build upon the existing literature and demonstrate the sexing of desire in the teen magazines, *Seventeen*, *YM. Teen*, as well as in the young women's magazines, *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, and *New Woman*.

2.3 *Decorating and Disciplining the Body: Woman as Sex Object*

As already stated, it is only female bodies, not male bodies, which are invited into the world of beauty and fashion magazines and to partake in the rituals and practices offered within.¹⁰ Femeness is thus a requirement for entrance into the world of women's

⁹ Many women's magazines acknowledge lesbianism as *normal* but the discussion is often addressed to straight women (Winship, 1987: 117). For example, the only two articles in my sample that refer to lesbian relations were "My Gay Sister" (*New Woman*, March, 1997) and "I Found Out My Mother Was Gay" (*Teen*, April, 1998). Both pieces encourage acceptance of homosexuality yet, as the titles suggest, lesbianism is something that *other* women practice, not the writer and, by implication, not the reader either. Within women's magazines, "woman" is automatically inscribed as a heterosexual category.

¹⁰ It should be noted that the general interest men's magazine industry is finally proving financially viable for publishers. Previously, *GQ* (*Gentlemen's Quarterly*) was the only non-specialist, non-pornographic men's magazine that appeared on the magazine rack amidst the myriad of general interest women's magazines. Today, a number of general interest magazines aimed at men are published, such as *Maxim*, *Stuff*, *Gear*, *Men's Health*, *Men's Journal*, and *Men's Fitness*. Nonetheless, in comparison to women's magazines, these publications are far less popular and ubiquitous. Moreover, at present, their content does

magazines. Within that world, a continuous project is underway, a project dedicated to the correct ornamentation and modification of the female body (Currie, 1999: 120). There are numerous products to be purchased, a variety of exercises to be performed, an array of clothing to be donned, and a wealth of information to be consumed on how to use, apply, wear and carry out all of the aforementioned rituals. These are the rituals of femininity, the results of which do not inhere naturally in female bodies, but, rather, they must be *achieved*.

Because it is only female bodies that partake in these practices and rituals, the end result is the appearance of difference. As Brownmiller (1984) asserts, femaleness is never enough, femininity always demands more: "it must constantly reassure its audience by a willing demonstration of difference, even when one does not exist in nature, or it must seize and embrace a rhapsodic symphony upon the notes" (15). Body hair, for example, is one of the major saboteurs of the feminine project and hence its removal is imperative to the sculpting of the feminine body. With femininity as their business, it is not surprising that American women's magazines insist on hair removal: "Get rid of your 'stache" (*Teen*, February, 1998), and provide advice and information about products that will assist in this obligatory task: "Leg Lasers that will change your life: imagine not having to shave or wax for six months!" (*Cosmo*, July, 1997), or "The SoftLight System takes hair removal to the twenty-first century by applying laser physics to an age-old problem"

not revolve primarily around fashion and beauty as does women's magazine content. Although we can assume that advertisers would like to target the male body as object in need of improvement, to date, the world of fashion and beauty remains primarily inhabited by female bodies.

(*New Woman*, March, 1997). With the editorial material establishing the *necessity* of hair removal, purchased advertising follows up on the announcement of numerous creams, lotions, razors, and other products to help obliterate body hair. Interestingly, although both female and male bodies produce body hair naturally, its removal from female bodies is mandatory. Body hair thus comes to be seen as unfeminine, even manly.

Breasts, on the other hand, are one of the few attributes that are specifically female. As such, they are an asset to the feminine project and must be emphasized and drawn attention to at every opportunity. Indeed, breasts are ubiquitous in the photo layouts in women's magazines, as much fashion is designed to emphasize and enhance them. The demonstration of a feminine body through the enunciation of breasts, is, again, part of an obligatory project: "Figure Fixers: fall's skintight looks make this strategic cleavage-shaping gear a must" (*Cosmo*, October, 1997). Whether implicit or explicit, the message is that the willing demonstration of breasts will get a girl or woman attention: "Hot Look: tiny halters that will make a big impression" (*Teen*, May, 1998). And because breasts are the quintessential mark of femaleness, bigger is better. Within young women's magazines, advertisements for bra-inserts claim to give the appearance of larger breasts. For example, *Accents* promise "a fuller, larger bustline instantly" (*New Woman*, March, 1997) and *Curves* promise "curves without surgery" (*Cosmo*, November, 1997). Relaxation and visualization tapes are also advertised, promising the reader "fuller, firmer breasts in 60 days" (*Cosmo*, November, 1997).

These rituals and practices are performed in order to distinguish the female body from the male body. Where difference does not exist, it is fabricated, and where difference does exist, it is enunciated. The female body is transformed into the feminine body. Femininity is thus a craft, an artifice, a labour (Bartky, 1988: 64; Ferguson, 1983: 1). Moreover, it is a labour that must never stagnate because the natural body always threatens to disrupt the artifice of femininity (Bartky, 1988: 65). For every body hair not removed, every eyelid not painted, every curve not emphasized and flaunted, the body runs the risk of looking unfeminine or androgynous. Through the technologies of femininity, sexual difference is fabricated. The female body is transformed into the feminine body and the illusion of difference is achieved.

Sexual difference is created on and through female bodies, for it is female bodies which are responsible for purchasing, creating, and donning the marks of difference. But female bodies are not forced to take up and practice the discourse of femininity. As Bartky (1988) succinctly states, no one is marched off for electrolysis at gun point (75). Indeed, women actively participate in the rituals of femininity. However, the fact that their participation is active does not mean that it is not coerced. Bartky argues that compliance is achieved by suggesting to women that their bodies are inadequate examples of the female form:

The strategy of much beauty-related advertising is to suggest to women that their bodies are deficient; but even without such more or less explicit teaching, the media images of perfect female beauty that bombard us daily leave no doubt in the minds of most women that they fail to measure up. The technologies of femininity are taken up and practiced by women against the background of a pervasive sense of bodily deficiency: this accounts for what is often their compulsive or even ritualistic behaviour. (71)

Indeed, the advertising and appearance-related editorials do not explicitly inform women that they are inadequate, unattractive, or overweight. In her analysis of women's magazines, McCracken (1993) demonstrates how insecurity is evoked through the presentation of desirable images of female attractiveness. She writes:

The apparently straightforward and positive ideals of fashion and beauty here are often subtly intertwined with their opposites—the non-fashionable and the non-beautiful. The attractive presentation frequently disguises the negativity close at hand: within this discursive structure, to be beautiful, one must fear being non-beautiful; to be in fashion, one must fear being out of fashion; to be self-confident, one must first feel insecure. This oppositional strategy helps to ensure the continued purchase of commodities; one product or several will never completely alleviate insecurities and the fear of being non-beautiful. One must always return for more goods and services. (136)

The pleasurable codes of female attractiveness work to elicit desire by first evoking insecurity. A sense of inadequacy is instilled through the continuous presentation of images of female beauty. Women are made to feel that they do not measure up, and, therefore, they require the magazine's help and the products advertised within in order to compensate for their deficiency. Consider the following editorial pieces: "Big Butt be Gone: the fastest way that works" (*Cosmo*, November, 1997); "Sweatin' with Eric Nies: your biggest body problems worked out" (*YM*, April, 1998); "Everyone's got something to hide: ways to cope with stretch marks, varicose veins, and other beauty bummers" (*New Woman*, April, 1997); "Who needs Plastic surgery: 30 solutions that are better and safer" (*Glamour*, October, 1997). Although the tones of the headlines are ostensibly positive, promising the reader quick and effective *solutions*, the underlying message is that the reader requires a solution because her body is a *problem*. For a fee, the magazine

offers itself and a host of other products to remedy the *problems*, for we can be sure that there is more than one problem and that they will require continuous attention.

Advertisers can thus engage women in the continuous project of bodily modification and ornamentation by first implying that their bodies are deficient, creating insecurity, and then promising help for those “problem” areas, creating a temporary sense of pleasure.

Women’s participation in the rituals of femininity appears to be performed voluntarily because there is no visible force or authority exacting their compliance (Bartky, 1988: 75). However, the amount of control women have in their participation in these rituals is limited in a number of ways. First, these rituals are choreographed by advertisers and the billion dollar industries for whom they speak. Within women’s magazines, the question of how a woman should look is not open to much interpretation. The practices of femininity offered are highly regimented and stylized, allowing for little deviation from the very specific standards of beauty set by the fashion, cosmetic, and diet industries. Moreover, consent is coerced in the sense that it is achieved through continuous intimation that the reader does not measure up as she is.

The rituals of femininity are beauty rituals and, hence, they are practices devoted to the end of making the female body aesthetically pleasing. More specifically, they are practices devoted to the presentation of the female body as sexually desirable to men. Bartky (1988) insists that a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness

of most women, who stand perpetually before his gaze (72).¹¹ Within young women's magazines, there are direct appeals to the tastes of an omni-present male surveyor, epitomized by the article: "Men on Swimsuits: Is your thong wrong? Is your itty too bitsy? Does your tank turn him on?" (*Cosmo*, July, 1998). McCracken (1993) notes that while the editors of teen magazines wish to project an image of wholesomeness to appease parents and to comply with dominant social mores, the primary goal of these publications is to encourage the consumption of beauty and fashion goods; therefore, narratives of sex appeal, whether blatant or muted, remain a key structure of the magazine (147). Although the word "sexy" appears with far more ease and regularity in *YM*, it does not require a great intellectual leap to discern the point of the beauty and fashion practices advertised in *Teen* and *Seventeen*, as well. For example, one of *Teen*'s beauty columns promises how to get "luscious lips and a kissable smile" (February, 1998) and *Seventeen* ran a photo layout of girls in lingerie, titled "Sweet Things: sheer, lacy, lingerie makes you feel so pretty" (April, 1998).

Although it is often remarked that women get "dressed up for each other," the myth being that women are more concerned with how other women will receive their beauty efforts than they are with men's assessments, this notion is misleading. Women do pay close attention to other women's appearance and value each other's judgements but

¹¹ Bartky appropriates the term "panoptical" from Foucault. In *Discipline and Punish* (1979), Foucault discusses the design of the panopticon prison: a circular structure with a guard tower at the center; because of this design, the inmate is constantly visible. Foucault argued that the effect is to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201).

this is largely because they are in *competition* with each other—in competition for the desired object: a man. Women are often the best judges of each other's looks because they themselves have had to become acutely aware of male tastes and interests. Other women's reactions act as a sort of beauty-litmus test and hence, other women's assessments are extremely important. Consider the advertisement for a hair removal treatment that appears in the October (1997) issue of *Glamour*. The caption of the two-page ad reads, "There is no flattery like another woman's scrutiny;" and the accompanying photo is of a woman whispering to another—both women glare back at the reader with a look of complete dismay. The smaller print reads, "Sharpen your claws and let the catfights begin.... Really, it's just one more reason for them to despise you" (89). This marketing strategy is informed by an acute awareness of female competition. The reaction of other women, particularly, a jealous reaction, is indicative of whether or not men will find a woman attractive. Without question, male desire is the ultimate goal.

The organizing principle of the craft of femininity promoted in the beauty-related content of women's magazines is the transformation of the female body into the desirable body. Within a heterosexual matrix, it is only female bodies that partake in these rituals and, thus, the effect is the creation of a one-way relation of desire: men desire and women are the objects of that desire. Although in feminist terms, this would signal an inherent inequality, advertisers often pitch sex appeal as a source of power for women, or as a testament to their independence and liberation. Shelley Budgeon (1994) argues that "advertisers encourage, even dare, women to define themselves in sexual terms, as

though to do so a woman can think of herself as freely determined” (66). The appeal to freedom is captured well in an ad that ran in *YM* (Prom Issue, 1998) for a prom dress. The photo is of a very sexy dress on a very sexily posed girl. The text reads: “tart. you want to. so wear it.” Budgeon adds:

Although advertisers tell women that they are free to construct their own appearances through their personal power of self-determination, the range of choices presented is remarkably narrow, and empowerment is restricted to the level of sexual attractiveness. When young women learn what “femininity” means through this type of advertising and through their participation in the consumption and use of these commodities, they are learning that self-empowerment is contingent upon self-objectification and dependence upon the approving gaze of others. (66)

Although it is often packaged as liberation, a successful feminine persona requires that a woman sacrifice her status as a subject of desire. Simone De Beauvoir (1968) asserts that to realize her femininity, the female actor must work toward the end of becoming “object and prey,” and in so doing, she renounces her claim to the position of subject (642). The feminine ambition is thus to accept limitation and restriction. In her important work on anorexia nervosa, Susan Bordo (1993) persuasively argues that the “slender body”—the contemporary ideal of female attractiveness—is both a symbol and manifestation of feminine containment. Whether demonstrated through sleek, minimalist lines or firmly developed muscles, the slender body is the tightly managed body: a body whose drives and impulses must be managed, a surface from which any traces of excess and abundance must be erased (107). Desire and indulgence are therefore disruptive and troublesome to the disciplinary project of femininity. Rather than cater to her own desires—rather than be an *agent* of desire—the feminine “subject” is to engage in continuous self-

surveillance, becoming “centripetally focused” on self-discipline and modification (Bordo, 1989: 14), working toward the end of becoming the *object* of male desire.

The practices of femininity ultimately position women as objects of male sexual desire but not as subjects of sexual desire themselves. In taking up the discourse of femininity presented in women’s magazines, in working to present the *female* body as an object of desire, bodies are framed in a one-way relation of sexual desire: men desire and women are desired. The impetus for taking up these beauty practices is to elicit his desire and, in this sense, her desire is transformed into his. She desires his desire and it is for this reason that she engages in the practices of self-beautification. In the same gesture, female desire is doubly hijacked: it is transformed into male desire and harnessed by consumer capitalism.

2.4 Love and Commitment: Man as Love Object

As I argued in the previous section, women are encouraged to take up the practices of femininity to the end of becoming desirable to men. This concern for attracting men reflects the fact that women’s identity, as prescribed by phallogocentric discourse, is largely, if not exclusively, tied up with heterosexual relationships. While a man is offered numerous constructions of his identity outside of heterosexual

relationships, a woman's identity is almost always harnessed to heterosexual expression.

As Ann Snitow (1983) argues:

When women try to picture excitement, society offers them one vision, romance. When women try to imagine companionship, society offers them one vision, male, sexual companionship. When women try to fantasize about sex, society offers them taboos on most of its imaginable expressions except those that deal directly with arousing and satisfying men.... One of our culture's most intense myths, the ideal of the individual who is brave and complete in isolation, is for men only. (252)

Translated in phallogocentric terms, achieving full subject status—independence and sovereignty—is coded as failure for the female subject. As Dale Spender (1980) notes, the term “bachelor” connotes independence and freedom while the term “spinster” suggests rejection and loneliness (154).

Not surprisingly, heterosexual relationships are highly prioritized in women's magazines (Ferguson, 1983; Ballaster et al., 1991; Evans, et al., 1991; Currie, 1999). Indeed, the pursuit, achievement, and maintenance of committed, monogamous relationships with men are the subjects of many columns and articles in these publications. In teen magazines, one of the most common topics in the advice column is boys. More specifically, girls want to know *how to get boyfriends*. Often, the girl in question is interested in a particular boy and would like the columnist to provide a strategy for acquiring the desired object. Another common theme is the plight of a girl who desperately wants a boyfriend but is having trouble eliciting any male interest. The anguish caused by such a dilemma is illustrated in the April (1998) issue of *Teen* in which a girl pleads, “I’ve never had a boyfriend! I’m not ugly or stupid either! Why can’t I get a guy?” (42). Girls also want advice on how to deal with parents who try to inhibit

their love lives, and feature articles heighten the sense that life without boyfriends would be miserable, such as the *Seventeen* (February 1998) piece, "No Dating Allowed: three girls without guys, thanks to their religions." Although the article encourages a tolerance for alternative lifestyles, the point is that a boy-less life would be torturous for the average girl, i.e., the reader. Girls also consult columnists in order to determine whether or not they are experiencing love or a lesser, and therefore, inferior, degree of attachment. Editors also offer quizzes and articles to help girls with their evaluation: "Is it a Fling or the Real Thing" (*Seventeen*, April, 1998); "How do You Say Love?" (*Teen*, February, 1998); "The Truth about Love at First Sight" (*Teen*, May, 1998); and, in the *YM* Special Issue titled "Find the Real You," readers can take numerous quizzes to assess the seriousness of their relationships, such as "Does You + Him = Love?", "Will You be a Permanent Pair?", "Was He Born to be Yours?", and "Are You Really in Love?" (Spring, 1998).

In young women's magazines, an emphasis remains clearly on relationships with men, but each magazine approaches the issue differently, according to its target audience. Within the world of *Cosmo*, the emphasis is on the *pursuit* of heterosexual relationships, taking on an air of urgency: "Urgent! A Dater's To-Do List to Get the Man you Want" (July, 1998); "Make Him Commit 100%: 25 ways to get a man into a rock solid relationship" (October, 1997); "Attention, Daters! *Cosmo's* Guide to the New 90s Men: do you know which ones to snap up and which ones to pass up?" (November, 1997). *Glamour*, on the other hand, focuses primarily on how to *improve* a current relationship,

rather than on how to achieve a relationship or to secure commitment in the first place: "Love that Lasts: make it stronger day by day" (October, 1997), and in keeping with its reputation for incorporating feminist principles (Davidowitz, 1999; Doner, 1993), *Glamour* also offers women advice on how to achieve equality in their heterosexual relationships: "Love and Partnership: How to get both" (November, 1997). Reflecting its older married audience, *New Woman* frequently references divorce, and how to prevent it. This magazine also suggests ways of improving and maintaining current relationships: "Build a better Marriage" (April, 1997); "How to Save Your Relationship when He has a Career Crisis" (March, 1997); "How Myths about Men can Hurt Your Relationship" (October, 1997).

As Ballaster et al. (1991) point out, singleness is consistently defined as a problem in women's magazines (137), despite pretenses to the contrary. For example, both *YM* and *Seventeen* ran pieces that laud the virtues of single life, "75 Reasons Why Life Without a Boyfriend Rules" (*Seventeen*, February, 1998) and "101 Cool Reasons to Stay Single" (*YM*, April, 1998); however, because these articles exist amidst numerous other advice columns and articles that insist on heterosexual coupling, the endorsement of singleness seems nothing more than a superficial attempt to comfort girls who cannot get a boyfriend. Moreover, the two lists are extremely ambiguous, considering that many of the reasons parlay the single state into heterosexual appeal to future boyfriends: "you will have lots of time for the guy counsellors at camp this summer" (*Seventeen*, February,

1998: 45) or “knowing that guys will crush on you ‘cause you’re unattached” (*YM*, April, 1998: 63).

According to women’s magazines, the female ambition is to secure, improve, and maintain serious and exclusive relationships with male partners. This achievement constitutes a specifically feminine form of desire: a desire that is romantic and commitment-driven rather than sexually driven like masculine desire. Consider, for example, the *Glamour* article, “18 Signs he’d be Great to Sleep with” (October, 1997). Here, none of the “signs” listed are explicitly related to sexual pleasure. Rather, they have more to do with whether or not he would make a good partner. For example, “He sends you beautiful roses,” “He’s not afraid to tell you that he misses you,” and “He’d be great to live with” (344). The meaning of feminine desire and its opposition to masculine desire is shored up in the *Teen* article, “Guy Conquests: Goin’ for the guy that everyone wants” (February, 1998). Although the term “conquest” typically refers to sexual conquest—specifically, male sexual conquest—here, the girl’s desire is not for a sexual encounter but, rather, for a boyfriend. Although conquest typically refers to a man successfully convincing a woman to submit to his sexual advances, here it refers to a girl successfully convincing a boy to submit to a relationship. The desire for love and commitment is thus established as the feminine insignia.

2.5 Summary

The practices of femininity advertised in women's magazines are intended to transform the female body into the *heterosexually* desirable body. Although advertisers often pitch sex appeal as a demonstration of a woman's freedom and independence, the continuous sexualization of the female body frames that body as an object of desire first and foremost, and not as a subject of desire. Because only female bodies are prompted to engage in the practices of self-sexualization, women's sexual subjectivity is weighted in terms of desirability rather than the ability to desire. Conversely, male sexual subjectivity is weighted in terms of expressing desire rather than in being desired. Sexual desire is established as a male prerogative. Female desire is encouraged along a different path. In popular women's magazines, men are desired not necessarily for their ability to give sexual gratification but for their ability to provide love and emotional commitment. Female desire is coded as romantic.

The construction of female sexuality as object of sexual desire and as subject of romantic desire is directly related to the fiscal requirements of both popular women's magazines and the industries for whom they advertise. The cosmetic, fashion, and diet industries, three of the primary sources of revenue for women's magazines, depend for their survival on the perpetuation of standards of female beauty and sexual attractiveness. If women were suddenly and miraculously to stop caring about being physically attractive to men, huge corporations and industries would swiftly fall. These industries are devoted to an emphasis on female sexual desirability because in this way, they can engage women

in the continuous consumption of products. And, of course, in an environment which encourages the sale of beauty products, it makes perfect sense to *remind* women continuously for whom they should aspire to look desirable. The emphasis on men and heterosexual relationships in the editorial material is thus a logical complement to the advertising. For the purpose of securing male attention and companionship, women can be continuously engaged in the project of self-sexualization—a project that requires both labour and money.

However, the publication of women's magazines is a contradictory process, as editors must be mindful of advertisers' interests in specific constructions of femininity, as well as the audience's appetite for diversity. While the reproduction of phallogentric constructions of female sexuality is imperative to the survival of the magazines, editors also wish to appeal to an audience of women who demand more than the overly-simplistic representation of their identity and sexuality in this way. Through an analysis of specific sex-related editorial material, I now explore the contradictory constructions of female sexuality that are embedded in women's magazines. Although many feminist scholars have discussed the treatment of female sexuality in the editorial content of women's magazines,¹² no analysis has focused comprehensively on the magazines' potential for producing conflicting meanings of sexuality. In the next two chapters, I elucidate the complex production of these contradictions, as editors try to manage

¹² (Ballaster et al., 1991; Carpenter, 1998; Currie, 1999; Evans, Rutberg, Sather, and Turner, 1991; Garner, Sterk, and Adams, 1998; McCracken, 1993; McMahon, 1990; McRobbie, 1991; Winship, 1987).

multiple meanings of sexuality. As we shall see, editors are caught in the contradictory process of both maintaining and reacting to the phallocentric constructions of female sexuality that are crucial to their magazine's survival.

Chapter III
Teen Magazines:
The Contradictions of a Protectionist Discourse

3.1 Introduction

Today, the topic of sex is a key feature of the editorial content in popular women's magazines. During the first half of the twentieth century, the topic of sex was cloaked in the more acceptable discussion of marriage and courtship advice, or was relegated to romantic fiction (White, 1970: 86-87). With the arrival of the tumultuous 1960s and the relaxing of social mores regarding sexual activity and expression, sex began to make its way out of the bedroom, so to speak, and landed squarely on the covers of women's magazines. Led by *Cosmopolitan's* then editor Helen Gurley Brown, women's magazines began talking openly about sex (Winship, 1987: 106). As a quick glance at the magazine rack will demonstrate, the topic of sex proves to be one of the most valuable commodities for the women's magazine industry today.

Contemporary teen publications mimic their adult counterparts in terms of content themes (fashion, beauty, boys and relationships), but the editors of teen magazines speak less candidly and less frequently about sex than the editors of adult magazines. Unlike young women's magazines, which are free to exploit the topic of sex fully, the editors of mainstream teen magazines seem compelled to minimize or conceal their discussion of sex, in order to project an image of wholesomeness to reassure parents of their readers (McCracken, 1993: 147). Although these magazines do not speak as freely about sex as

their adult counterparts, the subject of sex is nonetheless an important feature of the teen magazine formula. As Ana Garner, Helen M. Sterk, and Shawn Adams (1998) argue, for teenage girls these magazines are one of the most accessible, inexpensive, and readily available sources of information about sexuality (60). In this chapter, I investigate the meanings of sexuality that are embedded in the editorial material of three highly popular teen magazines, *Seventeen*, *YM*, and *Teen*. I begin by elucidating the conflict that arises from a heterosexuality based on difference; that is, the conflict that arises as girls try to get emotional commitment from boys who are often more interested in sex than in establishing a long-term monogamous relationship. Rather than challenge the gender arrangements that create this conflict of interests, the editors of these teen magazines emphasize female protection over female pleasure and a discourse of female desire is undermined. Teen magazines thus produce a protectionist discourse: a discourse which accepts current gender arrangements and defines sex primarily as a source of danger and victimization for girls; simultaneously abnegating positive meanings of female desire.¹³ Ultimately, the encouragement that girls “say no” (to boy’s advances) conflicts with the encouragement that girls present their bodies as objects for male *visual* gratification. As we shall see, contradictory constructions of sexuality are produced as teen magazines react to the very difference they themselves have helped to create.

¹³ The definition of the term “protectionist discourse” comes from Michelle Fine (1988) who, instead, uses the term “discourse of victimization” (31-30).

3.2 Tensions and Contradictions within Phallogentric Discourse

Garner et al. (1998) argue that in teen magazines, male sexuality is frequently portrayed as “inherently animalistic and self-centered” (67). They also state that in the “health and relationship” material, girls are encouraged to mould the self into a sex object by being better informed about male and female physiology and psychology, by attracting guys through physical beautification and by developing sex and relationship skills (66). Although I found the encouragement of active self-objectification of the female body in the beauty-related advertising and editorial content, the health and relationship material in these magazines did not reproduce phallogentric meanings straightforwardly. As McCracken (1993) has noted, while beauty-related advertising and editorial material encourages girls to become sex objects, the health and relationship editorials often encourage girls to abstain from sex (140). In the magazines I sampled, as Garner et al. assert, male sexuality is treated as inevitably and primarily interested in sex, and, therefore, male sexuality is treated as predatory and self-serving. But, as I argued in the previous chapter, the magazines also depict and cultivate a feminine desire to secure stable commitment which, inevitably, stands in conflict with the masculine drive for sex. A common topic in teen magazine advice columns is that of a girl who is “used” by a boy for sex while she tries to secure or maintain a relationship with him. For example, in one of *YM*’s advice columns, a girl explains that her boyfriend began ignoring her after they had sex for the first time. The respondent concedes that he probably just used her for sex and adds that she should “be more selective about future boyfriends” (April, 1998: 55).

Similarly, in *Teen* (April, 1998), a girl explains: "I lost my virginity to my now ex-boyfriend. I thought sex would make our relationship stronger, but the next week he dumped me for another girl" (44). In an advice column in *Seventeen* (April, 1998), a girl relays that a male friend of hers has been encouraging her to have sex with him. She states that she would "fool around" with him, however, only if the boy wants a relationship as well as physical intimacy. The response from the columnist is that the guy in question is only after one thing, "and it isn't a meaningful relationship" (64). These scenarios underscore the too familiar narrative of the "double standard," apparently still in operation in a so-called post-feminist age.

Male sexuality is constructed as animalistic and self-centred, and it is precisely for this reason that girls—who, in contrast, are constructed as being interested in emotional intimacy—are explicitly encouraged *not* to acquiesce to boys' sexual advances. For example, the *Teen* article "Virginity 2000" (February, 1998) begins with the suggestion that one of the ways to deal with "raging male hormones" is to "Tell him straight out—before he gets to the hot and bothered begging stage... No way. No how. It's your body, your mind, your choice" (68). Similarly, in the *YM* prom issue, the following situation is proposed: "Your date wants to do the nasty. All night, he's been dropping horny hints that the real after-prom action will be in his car's backseat" and they then suggest "cool comebacks," such as "If you think prom date equals put-out, check again" or "I'm just not ready. It's like asking Michael Jordan to score before he's even stepped onto the court" (Prom, 1998: 45).

It is interesting to note that in contrast to what is suggested by Garner et al. (1998), teen magazines do not consistently depict girls as *willing* sex objects for male consumption. Rather, teen magazines also encourage a protective, defensive female sexuality—one that stands in conflict with the demands of a predatory male sexuality. In this way, teen magazines produce conflicting messages about sexuality. On the one hand, girls are encouraged to present their bodies in a way that is sexually appealing to boys so that they might attract boys for potential relationships. Inevitably, the continuous presentation of the female body as sex object cultivates a pleasure-driven masculine sexuality. On the other hand, boys who express a desire for sexual contact with girls are deemed to be "dangerous" (Carpenter, 1998: 163) and, therefore, girls must protect themselves and their interest in securing commitment by abstaining from sexual intimacy, particularly from intercourse. The result is the production of conflicting constructions of adolescent sexuality. For example, in the *Teen* article "Valentine's Gifts He'll Love" (February, 1998), the reader is presented with a list of possible gifts to give a boy whom she is interested in dating. One of the suggestions is to "give him a photo of you sunbathing last summer" (38). Ironically, this blatant appeal to male desire appears in the same issue as the piece "Virginity 2000," which suggests ways for girls to ward off male advances so that they might not be used for sex. Male desire is pleasurable and desirable at the same time that it is dangerous and threatening. Logically, then, female sexual objectification is pleasurable and desirable at the same time that it is harmful and undesirable. The correct management of these conflicting constructions forces girls into a

difficult and precarious position: she is to be at once sexually appealing and sexually unavailable, eliciting his desire and arresting it with the next breath.

Although the encouragement to sexualize the female body and the simultaneous admonishment to deny male advances are, in one sense, contradictory, they do share a common thread. In neither case is the girl interpellated as a subject or agent of sexual desire and, therefore, difference is maintained: male bodies desire and female bodies are desired. Of course, with heterosexuality structured this way—with women seeking commitment and men seeking sexual gratification—it makes sense to “protect” girls by encouraging them to abstain from sexual intimacy. However, effectively, this robs girls of a discourse of desire for if they are always framed into a position where they must try to exchange sex (appeal) for commitment, their own desires will be counter-productive in those negotiations (Thompson, 1984: 367). Girls are thus pressured to silence their desire, to dissociate from the bodies in which they inescapably live, and to discipline their own desires and impulses as a means to stay physically, socially, and emotionally safe (Tolman, 1994: 338-339). Not only is this not fair to girls but, as many critics of school-based sex education have argued, the continuous positioning of girls as potential victims of male sexuality only reproduces female vulnerability because girls remain constructed as *objects* of male desire but never as *subjects* of their own desire (Fine, 1988; Thompson, 1990; Tolman, 1994). As Michelle Fine (1988) argues, by denying girls a discourse of their own desires, a position of female sexual subjectivity is undermined (30). Girls, then, are framed into a position of receptivity, because they can only react to

male desire but not be an agent of their own. Male sexuality is therefore deemed to be threatening because girls have none of their own with which to meet boys as equal negotiators.

Laura Carpenter (1998) states that by 1994 *Seventeen's* acknowledgement of girls experiencing and *acting on* desire had increased. But of the nine teen magazines I surveyed, I found that a discussion of female desire was either entirely absent or was relegated to extremely modest behaviours. Indeed, as editors focus on a predatory, dangerous male sexuality, thus emphasizing female defensiveness, female desire is almost entirely obliterated from the pages of teen magazines. For example, in *Seventeen's* "Sex and Body" column (February, 1998), a girl inquires about the meaning behind her boyfriends's actions. She states that while they were slow dancing, he put one of his legs between hers and rubbed her crotch. She adds, "It didn't make me uncomfortable but I want to know what his body language meant?" The columnist replies that the boy's actions were intended to be a turn-on and she goes on to refer to his behaviour in an accusatory manner: "Your guy, evidently not satisfied with dancing with both of your bodies pressed together, took it a step further." Then she adds, "You mention that his wandering leg didn't feel *uncomfortable*... of course, as with any move a guy makes on you, if it *had* felt weird or unpleasant, you should have exercised your right to stop him" (72). While the possibility of the girl desiring or enjoying the movement is not denied, neither is it acknowledged as a possibility. In fact, the columnist seems intent on ignoring the possibility of the girl's sexual response altogether and, instead, focuses on the boy's

actions. By insinuating that the boy's behaviour was overly ambitious and then by closing with the encouragement that the girl should have stopped any unwanted advance, had it occurred, the columnist has effectively skirted the issue of female desire altogether and reinforced a position of sexual objectification, not sexual subjectivity.

In those cases where female desire is acknowledged, it is in reference to mild and innocuous acts. In my sample of magazines from 1998, I observed only one example in *Seventeen* that dealt explicitly with female desire, in the "Sex and Body" column (May, 1998) in which a girl states that she wants to "enjoy kissing more." The columnist complies with her request and gives her tips on smooching (102). Similarly, in *YM's* column, "Ask Anything" (April, 1998), a girl inquires as to whether or not it is "normal" that she enjoys looking at a picture of a naked man that she and her friends came across. The columnist writes back: "Geez, I sure hope so, because if you're a pervert, that means I'm a pervert, my best friend is a pervert, and my sainted Aunt Roberta is a pervert" (52). Although in one sense it is clear that female desire is being acknowledged, limiting discussions of female desire to kissing and looking at a naked picture seems rather perfunctory, not to mention infantilising.

While it is true that girls are sometimes presented as participants in sexual acts with boys, there remains an undeniable silence around the issue of an *active*, pleasure-oriented female sexuality. In the *Teen* article "Virginity 2000" (February, 1998), one girl insists that she does not regret having sex with her boyfriend because she *loves* him. Although it is possible that the girl in question enjoys having sex with her boyfriend, teen

magazine editors seem reluctant to state this possibility directly and, so, once again, they omit a discussion of female desire. In *YM*'s advice column "Say Anything" (April, 1998), a girl inquires whether or not she is still a virgin after having engaged in "serious body bonding." The columnist replies that girls often want to know if they are still virgins after: "your boyfriend touches you down there (yes); you *masturbate* (yes); your guy comes on your underwear (yes); you get your period for the first time (yes); you've had cybersex (yes!)" (52—my emphasis). As with the previous example, we might assume that the girl enjoyed fooling around with her male partner but this activity is not explicitly stated or even intimated. What is interesting about this exchange, however, is the reference to masturbation—an act pursued solely for sexual gratification. Interestingly, out of the nine magazines surveyed, it is mentioned only this one time.

While the possibility that sex may be pleasurable and desirable for girls remains unexplored, as McCracken (1993) has argued, the notion that sex has negative consequences for girls is driven home in teen magazines (145). Fine (1988) argues that within sex education curricula, discussions of sex and desire are often tagged with reminders of consequences, thereby instilling a sense of fear and undermining pleasure narratives for girls (33). As stated previously, a common topic in the advice column is that of boys using girls for sex. And for the 17-year-old girl mentioned above who stated that she does not regret having sex with her boyfriend because she loves him, the reason this story appears in an article which extolls the virtues of abstinence, "Virginity 2000" (*Teen*, February, 1998), is that she goes on to explain that her father eventually found out

about her sexual activity and that their relationship “hasn’t been the same since... because he was really hurt” (70). To reinforce further the notion that sex represents a danger for girls, both *Seventeen* and *Teen* ran articles dealing with pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). In “Virginity 2000,” the author admonishes girls to “know the risks” and goes on to provide numerous statistics and facts about STDs, as well as to paint a very bleak picture of raising an unplanned child. *Seventeen*’s article “Baby Talk: the voices of teen pregnancy” (April, 1998) relays five narratives of teens who became pregnant and explains what they decided to do about their pregnancy. At the beginning, the writer states that although the girls made different choices, “they each paid a high emotional price for getting pregnant” (173). Another issue of *Seventeen* (February, 1998) presents an interview with a young actress, Kirsten Dunst, regarding her role as a pregnant 15-year-old in a television movie. Throughout the interview, both Dunst and the interviewer deliberate about the challenges and difficulties that accompany teenage pregnancy (82).

Ironically, despite this apparent concern that girls’ futures remain free from pregnancy and STDs, the magazines do little to offer their teenage readers any forthright discussion of birth control. My own research supported Garner et al.’s (1998) findings that even mere reference to birth control in teen magazines was sparse. The subject is barely mentioned in *Seventeen*’s fictional column “Ben’s Life” (May, 1998), in which the author remarks about a young, sexually active couple who are “safe” (66). In *Teen*’s article “Virginity 2000” (February, 1998), although a discussion of birth control is

missing from the article's text, the author offers a number of hotlines that could potentially provide birth control information, such as Planned Parenthood (69). And in *YM*, the columnist of "Ask Anything" (April, 1998) urges readers that if they are having sex they should use a latex condom (52).

Rather than provide girls with pleasure narratives and birth control information so that they might make self-interested decisions as sexual *subjects*, the magazines reproduce what Deborah Tolman (1994) refers to as the "dire consequences" approach (340). Spoken about in isolation from a discussion of positive sexual experiences, girls are warned that if they have sexual intercourse, their hearts will be broken, their father's hearts will be broken, and they will become pregnant or contract a sexually transmitted disease. Defined this way, sexual intimacy appears more like a Pandora's box than a potentially pleasurable experience. Accordingly, the only legitimate "choice" offered is abstinence. For example, according to the young actress mentioned above, fifteen is "too young to be having sex," and she insists that she "wouldn't be that stupid to get pregnant" (*Seventeen*, February, 1998: 82). Conversely, the writer of "Virginity 2000" (*Teen*, February, 1998) asserts that choosing abstinence is about "values" and "strength of your convictions" (70). In both articles, disapproval of sexual activity is clearly expressed, but, more to the point, implicit in the above statements is the association of sexual activity with lack of intelligence, lack of values, and weakness of character. Effectively, a dichotomy between good and bad female sexuality is produced: girls who abstain are offered praise while girls who are sexually active are subject to denigration. Again,

female desire is undermined, “poisoned,” as the list of reasons for girls not to have sex is topped with the fear of social disapproval or ostracization (Tolman, 1994: 330; Vance, 1984: 4).

Despite superficial reference to female desire and pleasure, the editors of teen magazines consistently reproduce phallogentric meanings of sexuality through the reliance on a protectionist discourse. Although editors do little to validate or encourage the exploration of female sexual desire in advice columns and feature articles, it is important to note that *YM* does offer space for the cultivation of heterosexual female desire through the admiration of the male form. A common feature of teen magazines is the celebrity profile of attractive young men, complete with photo layouts, for the admiration of female readers. In contrast to the images in *Seventeen* and *Teen*, the male celebrities who appear in *YM* are often shirtless and displayed in sexually suggestive poses, inviting the reader to observe and enjoy the bodies of the young men. *YM* also displays male bodies in a number of other pieces. In the April issue (1998), the “Eric Nies Workout” features a shirtless, muscular young man going through a number of different exercises. The introductory picture of this “buff babe” displays him shirtless, with his thumbs hooked in the waistband of his sweat pants. This pose results in his pants being slightly pulled down so that the reader can see the flesh just below his waistline and just above his pubic area (68). In that same issue, readers are invited to “Vote for the 8th Annual Young and Modern Man,” and the ten *beauty contestants* are featured shirtless or with shirts unbuttoned and opened to provide a clear view of the men’s chests and/or

arms. In the special "Find the Real You" spring issue (1998), *YM* took yet another opportunity to display shirtless guys under the pretense, "Find Out What his Belly Button says About Him" (74). Here, a few of shirtless young men offer their belly buttons for interpretation. Of course, the photographs are head-to-toe shots and their belly buttons are not really what is being showcased. Throughout all three issues of *YM*, shirtless men are offered as objects of desire; that they are shirtless is more explicitly an appeal to female sexual desire than the fully clad boys in *Seventeen* or *Teen*. These images are noteworthy because they constitute a transgressive moment in teen magazines. Throughout the advertising and editorial material, girls are encouraged to sexualize themselves for an implied male spectator and, at the same time, to deny male sexual advances; in both cases, a discourse of female desire is suppressed. In *YM*, phallogentric meanings are temporarily inverted as the reader is offered the position of desiring subject and males are positioned as objects of desire. Ultimately, however, the appeal to female desire in these photo layouts stands in tension with editors' encouragement for girls to abstain. For if editors suggest that desire and sex are troublesome and dangerous, it is simply contradictory to elicit and cultivate desire elsewhere in the magazine. In short, this practice resembles the placement of an advertisement for decadent desserts next to an article about the dangers of obesity (although I am sure that this very contradiction or a similar one can indeed be found in women's magazines).

3.3 Summary

In the sex-related editorial content of teen magazines, columnists and editors react to a dilemma which inheres in a heterosexuality based on difference. With male desire constructed as pleasure-driven and female desire constructed as commitment-driven, the writers of teen magazines must engage in the contradictory task of protecting girls from a male sexuality to which, in other parts of the magazine, female readers have been encouraged to pander. Effectively, conflicting directives are given. In the beauty-related content, girls are encouraged to present their bodies in a way that is sexually appealing to males so that they might attract potential boyfriends, but in the sex-related editorial material, girls are advised to deny male advances so that they might not be "used" for sex. Ultimately, a paradox arises: the inscription of the female body as sex object proves to be both useful and troublesome toward the same end—the securing of a heterosexual relationship. Girls, then, must manage highly conflicting constructions of their sexuality as they try to successfully navigate the troublesome terrain of a heterosexuality based on difference.

Although the imperatives to be sexy but not to have sex are conflicting, they are not entirely contradictory. In both cases, female desire is simply not part of the equation and, hence, phallogentric constructions of sexuality are maintained: male bodies desire and female bodies are desired. *YM*, however, does offer the reader a chance to transgress this construction of her sexuality via the visual sexualization of the male body. Undoubtedly, the overtly sexual images of male bodies within *YM* constitute an inversion

of phallogentric constructions of female sexuality elsewhere in the magazine. This amounts to further contradiction, as girls are simultaneously encouraged to desire male bodies and to fear the consequences of desire.

Although the advertising found in women's magazines touts the sexualization of the female body as proof of a new era of female sexual liberation, as is evidenced by the editorial material of teen magazines, the old double standard of sexual behaviour has not been displaced. Female desire is continuously undermined by the "need" to protect girls from a pleasure-driven male sexuality. Through a reading of these teen magazines, it appears that the overt sexualization of the female body does little to disrupt the double standard. In fact, it might be argued that the sexualization of the female body exacerbates the double standard because female objectification is now legitimized.

Chapter IV
Young Women's Magazines:
The Contradictions of a Liberatory Discourse

4.1 Introduction

In contrast to the teen magazines *Seventeen*, *YM*, and *Teen*, the young women's magazines, *Cosmo*, *Glamour*, and *New Woman*, are not governed by a protectionist discourse. The editors of young women's magazines are not constrained by any inclination to protect their readers from sex but, rather, it is assumed that adult women have by now gained a legitimate right to sex. Consequently, there is much more discussion of sex in adult women's magazines. Moreover, the expectation that women have a claim to sex opens female and male sexuality to a number of competing constructions that are largely excluded from teen magazines. As in teen magazines, the editors of young women's magazines are compelled to deal with the problems that arise from a heterosexuality based on difference. At the same time, many sex and relationship articles encourage women to take pleasure in sexual difference. Contradictions thus emerge between phallogentric constructions of sexuality, as young women's magazines simultaneously perpetuate and react to, but do not question, sexual difference. While on the one hand, young women's magazines often reproduce sexual difference, on the other hand, a liberatory discourse is introduced in young women's magazines which, to some extent, challenges the supposed inevitability of sexual difference through the insistence on women's right to erotic equality with men. A liberatory discourse deems that each

individual has a unique, innate sexuality which can be *and deserves to be* liberated from inhibition (Valverde, 1985: 16; Winship, 1987: 112) and in young women's magazines, editors suggest that women in particular have been subject to repression. Editors thus encourage women to shed their inhibitions, *explore their own desires*, and take up a position of erotic equality with men. In this way, a liberatory discourse can offer a challenge to the alleged naturalness of sexual difference (man as subject of desire and woman as object of desire) by the inclusion of a discourse of female desire. However, because young women's magazines do not acknowledge the continued social construction of gendered desire, as we shall see, the encouragement that women pursue their own pleasures is often compromised by the simultaneous privileging of male desire. The liberatory discourse is necessarily contradictory because a discourse of female desire stands in conflict with phallocentric constructions, which remain largely untouched and which designate sexual desire as a male prerogative.

Whereas the editorial content of teen magazines consistently draws on a protectionist discourse in the sex-related material, in young women's magazines conflict and contradiction are multiplied and exacerbated as multiple meanings of sexuality converge on the female body.

4.2 Tensions and Contradictions within Phallogentric Discourse

Teen magazines emphasize a defensive female sexuality, on the grounds that sex is harmful to girls. Young women's magazines, on the other hand, define sex as a normal and healthy part of a woman's life. Therefore, information about birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, and even abortion, is prominent. Here we also recognize a discernible frivolousness about sex, such as in *Glamour's* playful article "Sayonara Sex: Why it's so Hot" (November, 1997). And sometimes, women can even momentarily take enjoyment from turning the tables on men. For example, one of *Cosmo's* monthly survey questions reads: "Should a relationship end over bad sex?" (November, 1997). Although I will discuss this point in more detail in the following section, it is important to state at the outset that in young women's magazines sex is considered a woman's right, too.

Because it is accepted that women have a legitimate claim to sexual pleasure, it follows that it is harder for men to "use" women for sex. Therefore, in young women's magazines, *typical* male sexuality is let off the hook—it is no longer defined as dangerous and threatening. Of course, that is not to say that male sexuality is *never* treated as threatening, for the theme of sexual violence does appear quite regularly in young women's magazines, as in "The New Date Rape Drug" (*Glamour*, November, 1997) or "He was Popular, Rich and a Rapist: His Victim Talks" (*Cosmo*, November, 1997). In contrast to feminist discourse, which defines the problem of male sexual violence against women as a function of gender arrangements—arrangements which frame men and women in the roles of predator and prey—women's magazines assume that the problem of

sexual violence lies with individual rapists. Whereas most feminists deem sexual violence to be a social problem, these articles promote the view that it is an individual one. With male sexual violence defined as an individual pathology, the articles relay narratives of rapists who are brought to justice, while the construction of gender, in which the magazines participate, remains unimpeached.

Although in young women's magazines sex is considered a woman's right, too, and male sexuality is no longer defined as dangerous and threatening, difference remains a key feature of the construction of sexuality and, therefore, conflict is evident. Male sexuality continues to be defined as compulsive and pleasure-oriented and, therefore, is problematic for women because women want to secure *monogamous* relationships. But it is in the representation of adult male sexuality that we notice an important difference. In adult women's magazines, this quality of male sexuality is deemed to be ridiculous and pathetic rather than dangerous and threatening. Indeed, in these publications, the power of male sexuality is deflated. For example, in the *New Woman* article "Why They go to Strip Clubs" (October, 1997), the male author tries to abate disapproval of this activity by associating it with the innocence of youth: "the single, solitary goal of each and every straight boy is to see a naked woman" (111). Furthermore, to impress the point that stripping is not about powerful, intimidating men and helpless, victimized women, the author informs the reader that he has often seen strippers talking casually with their customers: "And [the men] weren't saying 'Nice tits' or 'What a nice ass.' They were just bullshitting, about the weather, the music coming out of the speakers, the classes that the

women were enrolled in" (113). And finally, the male author belittles male sexuality; recalling being in a lap-dancing room with other men, he states: "It's a true testament to male sexuality that we could be positioned like fools and still be excited. I guess even clowns get hard-ons" (185). Male sexuality is thus determined to be not only harmless but ridiculous. In the *New Woman* article, "Why They Catcall Us" (October, 1997), the male writer provides a number of reasons for this particularly male behaviour, many of which render the behaviour innocuous, humorous, and even worthy of pity. In reference to a hypothetical catcaller, he states:

He's feeling good because he's just given himself and everyone around him the impression that he's a wild man in bed. That fact is, he has no control over his dick and never had. 'When men are young, it goes up when they don't want it to,' Dr. Pittman explained. 'When they're old, it *doesn't* go up when they want it to. They are completely dependent on that which is unpredictable. That can be scary. (155)

In the pages of *Cosmo*, where sexual antagonism abounds, male authors explain why men are fearful of and resistant to monogamy. In the article "Why Men Want to See Other Women" (October, 1997), the male author informs the reader that no matter how great his girlfriends are, he always has the urge to see other women. With an air of self-mockery, he writes: "I'm sure this problem with commitment will turn out to be a brain chemistry thing. Someday, researchers will find that men like me, guys with a compulsive need to keep their options open, are a half a quart low on some vital noggin fluid." He also defends masculine sexuality by likening men to children: "men are like 5-year olds at Disneyland: Every ride looks good and God forbid we miss one before the park closes for the night" (58). And in the *Cosmo* article "Why He Goes Psycho Before

He Gets Serious" (July, 1998), the reader is encouraged to sympathize with men: "We're afraid we'll fail at monogamy. That we don't have what it takes to keep it zippered. It's a big challenge and a long hard road... and he wonders, *Can I pull this off?*" (38). In the end, the male writers insist that the compulsive character of masculine sexuality will either wane or will be successfully contained in marriage. Within young women's magazines, marriage is held out as the solution to the sexual conflict inherent in a heterosexuality based on difference.

Although pathetic and ridiculous in its compulsiveness, ironically, women are prompted to encourage male sexuality, as in the beauty-related material, and to take pleasure from its excessiveness. For example, in the *New Woman* article on catcalling, the writer closes with the rhetorical question: "... would you really want to live in a world where a beautiful woman walking past 15 guys got no reaction at all?" (190). The implicit threat is that if male sexuality were not as compulsive or excessive, women would lose out on the validation their attention provides. It is not uncommon, therefore, to find articles that invite the reader to indulge in male desire. In the *New Woman* article "What Turns Them On" (October, 1997), the reader is taken through a day in the life of the male author, and is privy to all the things he finds arousing about various women. He begins by insisting that although women may think men only notice their bodies, in fact, this is just not so. He explains, "This story is for those women who don't realize how much men notice, how deeply stirred we can be by just the right ribbon in the hair, a gather of lace, big eyes, say, rather than big breasts" (168). At the outset, the text addresses itself to the

reader's desire to be desired and informs her that she does not have to be a supermodel to elicit men's desire. She is thus invited to read on and discover the subtle things that men find attractive, as the author provides an hour-by-hour report of what he notices about women and how he found those *feminine* qualities arousing. Similarly, in *Cosmo's* article, "What Makes a Woman Bedable" (November, 1997), the reader is informed: "There's attractive. There's beautiful. There's even traffic-stopping stunning. But doable's a whole different deal. Find out what really makes men's testosterone levels soar" (218). Again, the reader is advised that she need not despair if her appearance does not meet with cultural beauty standards because beauty is not the only thing that makes men want to have sex with women. Paradoxically, male desire is deemed to be ridiculous because it is excessive and indiscriminate, but, on the other hand, women are also encouraged to take pleasure in these qualities and seek personal validation through male desire.

Moreover, because male sexuality is treated as weak, pathetic, and helplessly compulsive, the role of sexual object is ironically transformed into a position of power for women. For example, in the *New Woman* article on men and strip clubs, the writer explains, "The women, hips thrusting, backs arched, were just chatting with these guys, who were slipping them dollar bill after dollar bill" (112). Indeed, women can take advantage of the "power" of being sexually objectified. And in the *Glamour* article, "You? A Flirt? You Bet! Here's How" (October, 1997), the reader is encouraged to take advantage of the current construction of gender relations and use it for her own good. As one reader attests, flirting can be used to boost a woman's confidence: "Once I realized I

could melt a tycoon's heart at 60 paces, I knew I could do anything!" (301). And her sexual objectification can be used to get ahead in business: "power flirting harnesses sexual energy to forge better business relationships or disarm adversaries" (334). In some sense, in a phallogentric discourse, the ability to say "yes" or "no" does become a source of power for women. Yet this is a rather limited and fruitless source of power. In making her position as object a source of power, she must remain an object and suppress her own desire, never to become a subject. The sex object is put in a continuous position of defensiveness, in which she, like the teenage girl, must guard and protect her sexuality as a commodity rather than explore and indulge in her own desire and pleasure (Valverde, 1985: 40-41).

Ultimately, young women's magazines give contradictory directives, based on contradictory meanings of sexuality. Just as in the beautification content, the reader is prompted to pander to male sexuality and to encourage a behaviour that will ultimately cause her problems when she tries to secure commitment. Moreover, she is also encouraged to take pleasure in a behaviour that is defined as ridiculous and pathetic. Female sexual objectification is thus both desirable and undesirable.

4.3 Women's Sexual Liberation: Anchored by Phallogentrism

At the same time that young women's magazines reproduce phallogentric constructions of male and female sexuality, a liberatory discourse encourages women to become sexual subjects. Editors imply that women's sexuality is repressed and hence

encourage the cultivation of a more active and pleasure-oriented female sexuality. However, as we shall see, the liberatory discourse is not without its conflicts and contradictions.

The introduction of a liberatory discourse (of female sexuality) in young women's magazines marks a contradiction with the defensive, protective discourse in teen magazines. Whereas girls are encouraged to deny their sexual desires, young women are now encouraged to get in touch with their sexuality and to shed the armour they were encouraged to develop in their youth. In *New Woman's* article "Scent of a Man" (November, 1997), the author provides her own personal celebration of heterosexual female desire. She writes, "I'm not saying that I don't have fun with small electrical devices, but even my favorite vibrator can't hold a burning candle to *the real thing*. Besides the fact that we were created to mate, what is it exactly about the opposite sex that makes us damp between the thighs?" (172). Here, heterosexuality is defined as the authentic form of desire, which is heterosexist, but, nonetheless, female desire receives some positive attention. In what follows, the author goes on to recount her delight in such things as the way men look, smell, and walk. Undeniably, this article addresses the reader as subject, not as object, of desire. Where young women's magazines typically construct the reader as an object of desire, here, albeit momentarily, the reader can take up a position normally reserved for men.

Particularly in *Cosmo*, readers are told that they should become less inhibited and more pleasure-oriented. In *Cosmo's* article "Yes! Yes! Yes! Multiple Orgasms" (July,

1998), the reader is given instructions on how to achieve, or at least aspire to, multiple orgasms. In other articles, there is a clear sense that women have every right to the same desires and pleasures as do men. In another *Cosmo* piece, "Are Sex Hang-Ups Sabotaging Your Love Life" (October, 1997), the writer sympathizes:

It's so unfair. One glance at your lover's face tells you he's relaxed and raring to go. But instead of looking forward to sex, your mind is full of *what-ifs*. *What if he thinks my thighs are too jiggy? What if he wants me to try something weird? What if I just freeze up?* Such inhibitions raise anxiety instead of desire, zapping your pleasure and sometimes your partner's as well. But you can learn to silence your inner worrier. Here's how to tame bedroom worries and unleash your wild, wanton self. (213)

And in the *Glamour* article, "Sexual Confidence: Bold Moves to Make Tonight"

(November, 1997), women are told that they no longer need to cling to "the ideal of the sleeping beauty—of the woman who is 'awakened' by the man." Rather, the writer and a host of psychologists insist that women should be confident and take advantage of their erotic potential (277). While these articles signal a break from teen magazines because they articulate a discourse of female desire and encourage women to take up a position of sexual subjectivity, feminists are skeptical of the liberatory talk in young women's magazines. As Winship (1987) and Myra Macdonald (1995) point out, these publications typically define the world in post-feminist terms, suggesting that the requirements for equality already exist: consequently, young women's magazines promote the view that in order to achieve sexual equality, women simply need to assert themselves and pursue sexual gratification (113; 171). The writers of these articles, however, do not acknowledge that the practices of femininity encouraged elsewhere in the magazines frame women repetitively and exclusively as objects of desire. In the *Cosmo* article, "Are

Sex Hang-Ups Sabotaging Your Love Life" (October, 1997), many of the inhibitions the article instructs the reader to shed are related to body image and her sense of herself as desirable: "It's a rare woman who can walk from the bathroom to the bed in the buff without worrying if she's, well, buff enough" (213). Of course, there is an interesting irony here, considering that so much beauty-related advertising and editorial content is designed to create and/or exacerbate insecurity about the female body as object of desire. Because the articles do not acknowledge the continued construction of gender which habitually positions women as objects of sexual desire and men as subjects of sexual desire, the solution offered in young women's magazines is simplistic: to become more confident, women merely have to have more confidence. One of the psychologists quoted in the *Glamour* article, "Sexual Confidence: Bold Moves to Make Tonight" (November, 1997), explains that "sexual confidence is really a state of mind: it's about a woman who has the self-awareness and guts to be honest about who she is and what she wants—in and out of bed" (277). Moreover, because sexual confidence is simply a "state of mind," it follows that women can only blame themselves if they choose not to take up their rightful position as men's sexual equals. The psychologist adds, "if a woman is ambivalent about taking the sexual lead, she shouldn't blame it on men" (277). In these articles, the reader herself is addressed as the only possible saboteur of her sexual fulfillment. It is her sexuality that is defined as the problem: her fear and inhibition are deemed to be the obstacle to her sexual liberation.

In these articles, the world is defined in post-feminist terms and female sexual

inhibition and repression are defined as *the problem*. Therefore, it follows that any (legal) sexual expression or activity is necessarily liberatory and good for the cause. In the article "Why Erotic Material May be Good for You" (*Cosmo*, November, 1997), women are told that they too might benefit from exploring their own fantasies through the consumption of pornography, traditionally a male territory. The writer, Christie Hefner,¹⁴ argues that pornography is good for women because they can "explore and celebrate *their own* sexual desires and fantasies" (64—my emphasis). But again, the encouragement to "catch up" to men is necessarily contradictory because Hefner does not acknowledge that heterosexual pornography is a genre premised upon *male* desires and fantasies. Rather, she speaks of pornography as if it is primarily about female pleasure. She argues:

[Censorship] has particular significance for women because sexual ideas and images that relate to women have often been at the center of conservative attacks. From early attempts to ban birth-control information to more recent anti-pornography efforts, including attempts to suppress lesbian publications in Canada, women frequently have been targeted by censorship campaigns... sometimes by their own gender. Some women regard all sexual imagery as degrading and perhaps even harmful to themselves. It has come to represent a dark force from which women must be safe-guarded. (64)

Here, the inhibition of sexual expression is paralleled with the repression of female sexuality, even though that which is in question, heterosexual pornography, is male centered. It is interesting to note that Hefner conflates lesbian pornography, which is produced for women's pleasure, with heterosexual pornography, which is produced primarily for men's pleasure. The logic here is that if women are, or are shown as, active participants in pleasurable sex, then the sex is necessarily liberated sex. The reader is

¹⁴ Hefner is the daughter of *Playboy's* creator and owner. Hugh Hefner, and she is now the chair and executive officer of Playboy Enterprises.

invited to see heterosexual pornography, like lesbian pornography, as the bell-ringer for female sexual liberation and any opportunity to consider pornography as part of a wider discourse that privileges male desire over female desire is effectively closed off. According to Hefner, culture need not change for female sexuality to emerge in its liberated state but, rather, women only have to choose not to fall victim to old-fashioned fears about their sexuality.

On the one hand, the emphasis on female sexual liberation is transgressive and disruptive to the model of female chastity produced in teen magazines, but, on the other hand, it can also be viewed as an extension of the sexual objectification of the female body for the service of male desire and pleasure. In the *Cosmo* article, "Why I Strip On-Line" (November, 1997), the writer relays the personal narrative of a woman who overcame her repressive religious upbringing and gained more sexual confidence by posting naked pictures of herself on the internet for male spectators. She states: "Best of all, the site has really helped me to come to terms with and express my own sexuality. And that has really spiced things up in the bedroom. Thanks to [the website], I'm more comfortable with my body and more in touch with the sexual side of myself" (168). Interestingly, in this article, the sexual objectification of the female body is coded as liberatory. As McMahon (1990) notes, such an article seems to encourage women to take a more active role in sex; however, it simultaneously takes away the promise of a role for the woman as a desiring subject by defining her sexuality in terms of objectification (392). That is not to say that there is anything inherently problematic with displaying

pictures of the self as object for other's enjoyment. However, it is not incidental that female sexual liberation is often equated with the expression of the self as object of desire and not as subject. As Ethel Spector Person (1980) states:

Sexual liberation is not the same as female liberation.... The sexuality often liberated is a product of sexist conditioning rather than the true individual core that sexuality is so often assumed to be. From the feminist point of view, sexual liberation can be a conservative force in society, insofar as it enshrines the status quo as a bedrock. (628-629)

Because female inhibition is deemed to be the problem, it follows that women are encouraged, even obligated, to have more/better/different sex. As Gail Hawkes (1996) points out, this imperative serves the financial interests of the magazines because anxiety about knowledge and performance is easily mobilized and commodified. She argues that the endless advice, guidance, warnings, and enthusiastic encouragements for new and different sex create doubt and insecurity about the reader's understanding of sex and her repertoire of techniques, thereby stimulating a demand for the information inside the magazine (120). Moreover, Macdonald (1995) points out that the imperative to "loosen up" simply opens women up to exploitation and prescription from men (174). In the *Glamour* article, "Oops! 7 Things You Should Never do to a Man in Bed" (December, 1997), the reader is encouraged to demonstrate her sexual liberation by conforming to male desires and definitions of eroticism. The male author of the article begins: "Admittedly, we men often bear the brunt of a disappointing night of amour. We treat sex as a wrestling match, then head straight for the showers and the postfight meal. We skip important preliminary steps like, say, kissing or removing socks. But women lapse occasionally too. We hate to criticize because we do *not* want to discourage you, but just

as our missteps turn you off, make you feel inadequate or bruise your ego, certain bedroom habits can do the same to us" (222). The implication is that now that women have achieved equality, they too are responsible for providing good sex. Ultimately, however, it is the *male* writer who gets to define what counts as good sex as he goes on to prescribe his own definitions of how women should and should not behave in bed. For example, he suggests, "A woman who refuses to regard vegetables as sexual possibilities, who fails to see the appeal of a quickie in a cheap motel, who cannot whisper at least one obscenity in the heat of battle is a woman who just doesn't want us all that much—or doesn't trust us enough to let go" (223). According to the author, women can no longer hide behind the cloak of repression and are therefore obligated to loosen up. The subtlety of the contradiction is astounding: women are now liberated and therefore should conform to male desires and fantasies—"you are free, now do what I want."

According to young women's magazines, there is no reason why women should not be able to shake their inhibitions and indulge in sexual liberation. Men, the reader is told, are waiting eagerly and enthusiastically for women to join them on the path to sexual fulfillment. As the previously quoted psychologist stated, "if a woman is ambivalent about taking the lead, she shouldn't blame it on men" (*Glamour*, November, 1997: 277). However, while women are encouraged to "catch up" to men and enjoy the freedoms of liberation, there is a clear sense that the complete emulation of men is just not *lady-like*. Particularly in *Cosmo*, ambivalence is expressed regarding the desirability of women taking up male patterns of sexual behaviour. In the *Cosmo* article, "The New

Condom Etiquette" (October, 1997), the writers—a gay man and a straight woman—provide the reader with tips on how to introduce condoms with a new partner. They write, "A word of advice here: Even if you purchased a case of condoms in preparation, it's probably wise to keep only a reasonable number, say two to four, in the container by your bed. Gay men realize that their partners have sex with others. Straight men, on the other hand, don't want to think you're entertaining the troops, so it's best to appear prepared, but not professional" (136).¹⁵ Of course, female liberation is desirable to the extent that it makes women sexually available to men but, at the same time, according to these two authors, men are uncomfortable with the idea of women enjoying full sexual independence. The word "professional" is, of course, a substitute for "prostitute" and, in our culture, the word "prostitute" or "whore" is easily exchanged for "slut." Similarly, in the *Cosmo* article, "Why Men Really Do Prefer Nice Girls," (November, 1997), the male author explains that although women have "this strange notion that men prefer bad girls," in truth, "attempting a relationship with a bad girl is sheer torment" (60). What exactly he means by a "bad girl" is never explicitly stated but he does say of a bad girl he once dated that "she could write an addendum to the Kama Sutra." Thus, a defining feature of a bad girl is good, fun, exciting (liberated?) sex. And although he states that he enjoyed the sex, the author goes on to explain that their relationship came to an abrupt end when he

¹⁵ Admittedly, the appearance of a gay writer seems to signal a counter discourse to compulsory heterosexuality. In this article, gayness is treated as "normal" and without need of explanation. However, reference to, and input from, gay men and lesbians is marginal in these publications, reflecting a liberal tolerance for homosexuality but by no means seriously destabilizing heterosexism.

realized that she was sexually involved with someone else at the same time. Whereas the male desire to see other women is justified in other articles and assumed to be inherent in male sexuality, women's refusal of monogamy is necessarily painted in a negative light and deemed deviant. Paradoxically, he closes with the ambiguous statement: "And no guy can resist a really sweet girl when it's her turn to be naughty. 'Cause when a nice girl is bad, it's no act" (60). On the one hand, women are encouraged to emulate male sexuality on the grounds that males are supposedly sexually liberated. Not coincidentally, the liberation-imperative gets men laid. However, above and beyond making women sexually available to men and receptive to male desires and fantasies, social ambivalence toward the idea of women completely emulating male patterns of sexual behaviour is apparent. As Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (1983) argue, "men have been the first to benefit from a new era of sexual experimentation, but when women join them—when women, too, say 'fuck'—everyone feels a tug on the deepest moorings of family, decency, and the eternal order of things" (12).

The liberatory discourse in young women's magazines is thus at once deceptive and contradictory. At the same time that women are encouraged to let go of their fears, shake their inhibitions, and join men in the front seat as they drive down the road to sexual fulfillment, it is clear that men would like to remain behind the wheel. Moreover, they do not want to have to stop for directions. In "*Cosmo* Plays Sex Translator" (July, 1998), the reader is given council on how to protect the male sense of prowess while she goes about "requesting" sexual pleasure. The male author writes: "Directing a man in bed

without sounding like a drill sergeant will be easier if you word things our way" (112). The author then goes on to give the reader advice on how to communicate her desires with nonverbal techniques, such as strategic moaning and "showing" not telling, because "It's important to keep him feeling positive about his explorations" (115). Female sexual liberation is thus compatible with heterosexual relations, provided a woman's *demand* for sexual pleasure (or shall we say, her *hope* for sexual pleasure) does not undermine the man's position as hunter/predator/aggressor and sexual know-it-all. As Winship argues, the advice "to be assertive but mind you don't upset him" is contradictory. Such advice undercuts the injunction that she assert her wishes and desires (Winship, 1983: 114).

Many articles in young women's magazines operate with the notion that women's sexuality has been "repressed" and requires liberation. There is a clear sense that women deserve the same sexual citizenship as do men and, hence, editors and writers insist that women should express *their* desire and pursue *their* sexual pleasure. However, many other articles prescribe that women express their sexuality within male-defined parameters. Furthermore, whereas women are encouraged to loosen up and to be sexually self-interested, they are also advised on how not to offend the male sexual ego by appearing aggressive or *too* pleasure-oriented. Even in the nineties, the female fear of being perceived as slutty or pushy remains. The imperative to take up a position as sexual subject, rather than object, is thus necessarily ambiguous as the magazines engender anxiety about the possibility of women entirely imitating male sexual patterns. Ultimately, contradiction arises as women are encouraged to "catch up" to men but then

told to stay one step behind.

4.4 *Thinking about the Other Side of the Binary: Problematizing Masculine Desire*

Many of the articles in the nine issues of young women's magazines that I surveyed insist that women are free to take up a position of erotic self-determination, yet, paradoxically, female readers are also counseled to submit to male definitions of eroticism. The reason the magazines unwittingly produce this contradiction is that the articles discussed above do not acknowledge that the *continuing* construction of male sexuality—in which the magazines themselves participate—is incompatible with full female sexual subjectivity. As John Stoltenberg (1990) points out, masculine sexuality is constructed to be dominant, aggressive, and powerful—the very core ingredients of masculinity (Stoltenberg, 1990: 63). Young women's magazines, however, do not typically acknowledge this construction and, hence, their insistence that women are free to pursue liberation is necessarily contradictory. Although many articles unproblematically or unwittingly reproduce masculine sexuality there are “moments” in these publications in which masculine desire is problematized and related to a consideration of wider power relations between men and women. However, as Winship (1987) argues, the criticism of masculinity in these publications is both limited and contradictory.

The piece that very clearly touches on the notion that it may not just be a case of *women* changing their minds but that masculine desire may stand in tension with female

sexual empowerment is the *New Woman* article, "When You Want Sex More than He Does" (April, 1997). Here, the author considers the possibility that "changing sex roles" is threatening to men because it represents a loss of control, and, so, men lose interest in sex because they feel emasculated. She writes, "women's empowerment has created its own backlash: If women 'can do anything,' where does this leave the men? We women may say that it leaves *both* sexes better off, but many men still harbor the suspicion that if *they're* not running the show, then *we* must be, and they don't like that" (100). The author then goes on to recount a number of stories of women whose partners began to lose sexual interest when the women began to display more sexual interest and initiative (165). Although the deconstruction of masculinity stops there, and the rest of the article provides examples of *individual* solutions to what is a *social* problem, the entire premise of the article rests on the tension between masculine sexual ego and female sexual subjectivity. Implicit here is the recognition that in phallogentric discourse to be a man is to be the one who initiates and acts out desire, while to be a woman is to receive and submit to male desire (Valverde, 1987: 39). As the author of the article acknowledges, the phallus is deflated, literally and figuratively, when female bodies move in on traditionally male territory through the display of sexual interest and assertiveness. As Stoltenberg (1990) argues the "the sexuality of male supremacy" is so insidious and pervasive that erection can be conditioned to it, and orgasm habituated to it (63). Men might not be so enthusiastic about women achieving full sexual subjectivity because it would require a transformation of masculinity, a transformation many men might resist, consciously or

unconsciously, because masculinity awards them with dominion over the position of desiring subject and places them on the dominant side of a power relation.

Similarly, in the article mentioned earlier, "Why They Catcall Us" (October, 1997), alongside the answers that are intended to justify catcalling, the author provides an opportunity for the reader to think critically about catcalling. He writes: "Because men want power over women... shock is power. Shock is control. In a split second, in a shiver, he tries to take back everything that men have lost to women since the dawn of feminism" (155). Of course, in this case, feminists would not emphasize "shock" as the source of power but, rather, as Susan Faludi (1991) argues, male backlash against feminism often manifests itself in the form of sexual objectification and intimidation (45). As Michael Kimmel (1996) offers, masculinity, as institutionalized power, is intimately bound up with the right to desire and the sexual objectification of women and, therefore, men's imposition of their desire on women is a means of reiterating their masculinity, their power (319). Unfortunately, the magazine writer's criticism of masculine sexuality is situated beside a number of reasons which naturalize this behaviour. He closes by suggesting that "the world would not turn without catcalls... would you really want to live in a world where a beautiful woman walking past 15 guys got no reaction at all?" (190). Female sexual objectification is at once defined as a manifestation and imposition of male power and a natural, healthy, *desirable* part of heterosexual relations.

Similar contradictions about masculine sexuality and its relationship to power can be found in *Cosmo*. In the advice column, "Agony" (November, 1997), the reader is told

about a woman whose boyfriend continually pressures her to participate in a threesome with another woman. The woman turns down her boyfriend's request and looks to the columnist, Irma Kurtz, for support. Kurtz validates her feelings: "Not everyone would agree with me on this, but I find the idea of three in a bed destructive, unloving, dangerous and tacky. The threesome is a power play, usually by the male partner, who, 8 times out of 10, is the one to suggest it. 'Look at what I can make my little woman do for me' he is saying" (66). Here, the columnist is critical of the male inclination to impose his desires on women; moreover, Kurtz acknowledges that masculine sexuality is bound up with power—the power to define sex and eroticism. Whereas articles like *Glamour's* "Oops! 7 Things You Should Never do to a Man in Bed" (December, 1997) pressure women to acquiesce to male defined forms of eroticism in the name of sexual equality, here, Kurtz admonishes the reader *not* to submit to this particular male fantasy on the grounds that it is a "power play." Unfortunately, Kurtz' feminist insight into the workings of masculinity is short-lived, for in another exchange on the same page she suggests that a woman comply with her male partner's need to feel powerful. The writer explains that she became disturbed when her boyfriend asked her to role-play and pretend to be a prepubescent virgin: "I found it disturbing that he wanted to have sex with such a young girl, and it turned me off." Kurtz begins by defending his fantasy and invalidating the woman's disturbance on the grounds that it is merely a fantasy and does not necessarily reflect a real desire to have sex with young girls. Then she states, "it could be that this fantasy turns him on because it gives him the kind of power a lot of men feel uncertain of

in the real world" (66). What is at the heart of this masculine fantasy is the eroticization of male power and female powerlessness. Through fantasizing about being with someone who is inexperienced and innocent, he fantasizes about being with someone who has less power than he has; ultimately, his sense of power is achieved by its contrast to her deficit of power. Kurtz seems to acknowledge that this is another instance of a male "power play"; moreover, she concedes that the masculine drive for power in the bedroom is related to power relations outside the bedroom. But rather than discuss what all of this *means* in terms of a wider network of power relations between men and women, Kurtz encourages the woman to submit to his need to feel powerful. Whereas many other articles encourage women to take up a position as men's sexual equals, here the woman in question is told to submit to a man's desire to feel more powerful than his partner. In the end, the columnist emphasizes the innocuousness of this fantasy in the context of a trusting relationship and implies that the woman should not judge her lover: "He trusted you with his fantasy not because he wanted it to come true but because he wanted to playact in a way that would not harm anyone" (66). Rather than legitimating *her feelings*, Kurtz' response suggests that the woman should feel guilty for being uptight and denying her partner *his right to his sexual fantasies*.

The liberatory discourse presented in young women's magazines is necessarily contradictory and problematic because editors do not typically point to the continued construction of masculinity as an impediment to the pursuit of female sexual subjectivity. Moreover, articles do not typically acknowledge the wider power relations between men

and women which sustain and are sustained by the paradigms of masculinity and femininity. As Winship (1987) argues, although young women's magazines periodically criticize masculinity, this criticism is more often displaced by repetitive attention to solving sexual problems in individual contexts and relationships. In so doing, young women's magazines promote the view that women can *will* themselves to empowerment all on their own. Of course, while it is true that the reader has jurisdiction over her own actions and thus can refuse to take up the practices of femininity and insist on becoming more pleasure-oriented, such resistance to phallogentric discourse remains isolated and personal, and does little to disrupt men's social power on a wider scale. Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland (1993) argue that while women can assert their pleasures in particular relationships, they can still be raped, be paid less than men, and be perceived as sexual objects (260). They suggest that little will change in women's experiences of sexual power until the consolidation of men's power more generally is changed (258).

4.5 Summary

In young women's magazines, heterosexuality continues to be vexed by conflicting interests that arise from the construction of sexual difference. Much of the relationship and sex-related editorial content deals with the conflict that arises as women try to secure committed, monogamous relationships with men who are ostensibly more sexually-driven. In teen magazines, we witness an obvious contradiction: through their own sexual objectification, women are to cultivate and encourage a behaviour in men that

will ultimately cause problems for women. However, in contrast to teen magazines, it is accepted in young women's magazines that adult women will be having sex and that they have a right to sexual pleasure. The problem, therefore, is not defined as one of women being "used" for sex; rather, the problem is that it will be difficult for women to secure male devotion because male sexuality is essentialized as compulsive. Whereas in teen magazines, male sexuality is deemed to be dangerous and threatening, in young women's magazines, male sexuality is defined as pathetic and ridiculous. At the same time that these texts belittle and chastise male sexuality for emerging as compulsive and indiscriminate, women are incited to take pleasure from male attention and to view it as a source of personal validation. Moreover, with the power of male sexuality deflated, its compulsiveness acts as a source of power for women who can use the sexual objectification of the female body to further their own interests. Once again, these assumptions generate a confusing paradox, for much of the other editorial material in the magazines deems male sexual compulsiveness to be a source of distress, not pleasure or power.

In young women's magazines, there is also evidence of a liberatory discourse of female sexuality, one that encourages women into a position of sexual agency through the exploration and expression of their desires. Unfortunately, however, the discourse of female desire is often contained by the simultaneous privileging of male desire and male-centred expressions of sexuality. The production of a discourse of female desire is thus also characterized by contradiction as women are told to become more self-serving but

only in a way that men will find desirable. The liberatory discourse in young women's magazines is necessarily contradictory because the magazines do not acknowledge that the continuing construction of male sexuality stands in conflict with the terms of female sexual "liberation." Although women's magazines clearly stand behind the conviction that women deserve to take up a position of full sexual subjectivity, this feminist principle is compromised by the magazines' unwillingness to suggest that men must give up their dominion over this position. Having said that, we have seen that there are brief instances in young women's magazines when male sexuality is criticized and deemed to be problematic for women. In one conspicuous example, there is tacit acknowledgement that one of the manifestations of male power is the binary arrangement which eroticizes male dominance and female submission. Although young women's magazines do not typically problematize male sexuality in this way, there are moments in which a handful of writers seem to suggest that masculine desire is incongruent with women's equality and/or happiness in heterosexual relationships.

Even more than teen magazines, young women's magazines produce highly contradictory discourses of female sexuality. Young women's magazines oscillate between producing phallogentric constructions of difference and reacting to those constructions. The charged and contradictory sphere of these magazines points to an increasingly difficult path for women readers, especially as they become readers of adult magazines where the field of contradictions grows more dense.

Conclusions

Popular women's magazines, along with the industries that advertise within these publications, have been able to exploit sexual difference and create huge revenues from the perpetuation of phallogentric constructions of female (and male) sexuality. However, because the magazines are designed to appeal to both advertisers and readers, sexual difference, as we have seen, is deployed in contradictory ways. On the one hand, because advertising is the primary source of revenue, the magazines facilitate the construction of sexual difference and profit directly from the production of the feminine body. The practices and effects of transforming the female body into the sexually desirable body (the feminine body) are held out to the reader as desirable, beneficial and even liberatory. Toward the end of fulfilling female *romantic* desire (securing a committed, monogamous heterosexual relationship), women are encouraged to sexually objectify their bodies, thereby appealing to, and reproducing, male *sexual* desire. Women are thus encouraged to pay for and to participate in the construction of sexual difference and the sexing of desire.

On the other hand, with an audience in mind, women's magazines must react to sexual difference and acknowledge that a heterosexuality based on difference and gendered desire is problematic for women. As I have shown, editors recognize that it is difficult for girls and women to fulfill feminine desire (the desire to secure commitment from males) when boys and men are often more interested in fulfilling masculine desire (the desire for sexual encounters with women) than they are in emotional intimacy and commitment. Although sexual difference is treated as if it were inevitable, editors

acknowledge that it results in gender polarity. Young women's magazines take the analysis of sexual difference even further and acknowledge, at least on some level, that difference amounts to inequality and is *not* inevitable. In many of the articles in my sample of young women's magazines, editors encourage women to pursue full sexual subjectivity and take up a position as men's sexual equals, thus implicitly suggesting that difference is not inevitable. While the beauty-related content of popular women's magazines suggests that sexual difference is desirable, beneficial, and liberatory, the implicit analysis in much of the sex and relationship material is that difference is not desirable, not beneficial, and not liberatory. Contradiction and inconsistency are thus key features of the construction and representation of female sexuality.

For all of their discussion about the difficulties that arise from sexual difference, editors do not effectively undermine the reproduction of sexual difference. When discussing heterosexual antagonism, although sympathetic to women's relationship difficulties, editors do not question the constructedness of gender relations. Similarly, when discussing the possibility of female "liberation," they do not, as a rule, implicate masculinity and the wider power relations that sustain sexual difference. None of this is surprising, for if editors were seriously to challenge sexual difference and acknowledge the power imbalances that sustain and are sustained by asymmetric gender relations, they would essentially undermine their own commercial project. Were editors to point a finger at the construction of sexual difference, they would ultimately point a finger at the practices of femininity promoted on adjacent pages. Likewise, were editors to

acknowledge that femininity and masculinity are practices that belong to and maintain a wider system of male dominance, they would admit that women cannot achieve liberation all on their own (not to mention that all of the articles which claim to demystify male sexual patterns would subsequently be implicated as an attempt to normalize the privileging of masculine desire). Effectively, such an acknowledgement would render the self-help and individual-based advice useless.

Although I would not argue that editors, advertisers, and publishers are necessarily conscious of their role in the maintenance of gendered power relations through the perpetuation of sexual difference, the fact remains that they profit from those relations and have little reason to instigate change. Not only would it be tantamount to shooting themselves in the foot were editors to incriminate feminine practice as a source of female disempowerment but it would also be self-defeating were editors regularly to implicate masculinity and the larger network of power relations as *external* obstacles to women's empowerment. Ultimately, masculinity and male power are largely out of the *individual* woman's control and, hence, out of the text's reach. The popular woman's magazine cannot profit from calls for large-scale social transformation. It is, therefore, not practical to do so. It is, however, practical to encourage the view that women can overcome the conflicts and imbalances that arise from sexual difference on their own, at an individual level. The private reader *is* within the magazine's reach and these publications can elicit profit by insisting that she manage socially contrived problems on her own. Articles suggest that the reader can manage the conflicts and difficulties that

inhere in a heterosexuality based on difference and that she can overcome inequality on her own. She is told that with the appropriate strategy and with insight into the male psyche—both of which are provided by the magazine—she can successfully navigate sexual difference. Similarly, she is told that with the appropriate strategy and insight into her own sexuality—again, both of which are provided by the magazine—she can overcome female sexual “repression” and transform heterosexuality on her own. Women are recruited to solve what is defined as *their own problems* and the magazines sustain an audience for their advice.

Popular women’s magazines offer women individual solutions to socially contrived conflicts and, therefore, whether intentionally or not, they contribute to the reproduction of those conflicts. Without social transformation, without the displacement of masculinity and femininity, without the disruption of power relations between men and women, gender conflict will continue to vex heterosexuality. Moreover, women will be left in the difficult position of trying to manage or absorb those conflicts. Without social transformation, girls and women will be kept in the difficult position of trying to reconcile the feminine desire for commitment and the masculine desire for sexual pleasure without being “used,” cheated on, or left for another woman; and they will also be kept in the tricky position of trying to shed their own inhibitions and become more pleasure-oriented without threatening a male partner’s sense of masculinity. In obscuring the social origin of these conflicts, these texts help to undermine challenge and resistance, thereby promoting the reproduction of gender conflict.

Ultimately, these magazines make use of and profit from sexual difference, both by facilitating its reproduction and by offering editorial material that claims to help the reader deal with or overcome its consequences. Not only do these commercial publications profit directly from the deployment of sexual difference, they also profit indirectly from the effects of sexual difference. Essentially, women's magazines participate in a cyclical, self-sustaining discourse which produces sexual difference and subsequently defends against its subversion. Women's magazines encourage the reader to participate in the construction of difference and then offer themselves as the source of help to deal with the problems and inequalities that arise from difference. In so doing, the social origin of the conflict is obscured and the reader can continuously be recruited for the fruitless task of solving social issues in individual contexts.

From a feminist perspective, women's magazines are problematic because they covertly participate in the construction of sexual difference and subsequently claim to have access to information that will help women deal with the consequences of difference. These texts keep the reader's attention focused on ways to manage or contain conflict—often with the prescription that she modify her behaviour and improve herself—and effectively avert women's attention from the practices and power imbalances that create those conflicts. It is thus of obvious importance to keep tracking these commercial texts, especially in light of their enormous success. Considering the length of the genre's life span (dating back to 1693) and the huge revenues that they are able to create, it is unlikely that popular women's magazines will disappear anytime soon.

or that editors will alter the content substantially. Moreover, because of the large circulation numbers claimed by these magazines, we can assume that millions of girls and women find these publications appealing and are receptive to their content.

While the investigation of popular women's magazines is of obvious importance to the end of understanding the cultural construction of gender and desire, it is also crucial to explore how meanings of gender and desire are resisted or reproduced in social settings by embodied women. As Currie (1999) suggests, social texts, such as women's magazines, "can never contain 'the entire story'" (284). While we can use the industry's circulation numbers and profit revenues as indicators of women's receptiveness to the content and textual strategies of popular women's magazines, this says little about how *real* readers interact with texts and negotiate meanings. Existing research, such as that of Ballaster et al. (1991) and Currie (1999), suggests that reading mainstream women's magazines is a complicated and intricate process. For example, through an analysis of adult readers of women's magazines, Ballaster et al. (1991) found that the women they interviewed often identified and complained of the magazines' reliance on "stereotypes." Interestingly, Ballaster et al. report that for the women readers, the use of stereotypes was related to the *ease*, and, therefore, the *pleasure*, of reading (131-132). Similarly, in her investigation of teen readers of women's magazines, Currie (1999) found that many readers reject particular fashion codes and recognize the magazine standards of beauty to be unrealistic. However, their everyday experience tells teenage girls that the cultural mandate to beautiful *is* real and hence, Currie asserts that girls' criticizing of magazine

images is an indictment of the reality which requires them to look good (215, 245). The work of Ballaster et al. and Currie is important because it reveals the complicated ways that readers negotiate meanings, ways that are often unforeseen by the researcher and, therefore, cannot simply be read off the text.

My analysis should be understood as a beginning, a point of entry into the complex process of reading and interacting with textually mediated meanings of gender and sexuality. Ultimately, my research brings up a number of questions regarding how readers *use* popular women's magazines. Do readers perceive magazine emphasis on "sexiness" as a demonstration of female sexual liberation? Are readers able to locate the conventional sexual double standard that continues to inform much of the advice presented in these publications, despite the magazines' presentation of a "modern" or liberated image of female sexuality? What sense do readers make of the conflicting and contradictory meanings of gender and sexuality that are embedded in these texts? What is the relationship between the meanings of gender and sexuality constructed in popular women's magazines and readers' everyday practices? How do readers reconcile the conflicting and contradictory in their everyday experiences? Are they aware of the relationship between the meanings of gender and desire found in the text and the commercial interests of the magazine? All of these questions are certainly worthy of further research if we are to fully appreciate the construction of female sexuality, involving both texts and readers, and to begin thinking about avenues for change.

Appendix I

The following is a list of the magazines and specific issues included in my sample, as well as their circulation rates. All information was obtained through email or phone interviews with magazine personnel at the publishing corporations listed.

<u>Magazine</u>	<u>Circulation Rate</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Issues</u>
<i>Seventeen</i> Primedia. New York	2 300 000	1997	February, 1998 April, 1998 May, 1998
<i>YM</i> Gruner and Jahr. New York	2 183 000	1997	April, 1998 Prom Issue, 1998 Special Issue, 1998
<i>Teen</i> Petersen. Los Angeles	1 800 000	1998	February, 1998 April, 1998 May, 1998
<i>Cosmopolitan</i> Hearst. New York	2 300 000	1997	October, 1997 November, 1997 July, 1998
<i>Glamour</i> Conde Nast. New York	2 164 000	1998	October, 1997 November, 1997 December, 1997
<i>New Woman</i> KIII Magazines. New York	1 190 000	1997	March, 1997 April, 1997 October, 1997

Bibliography

- Althusser, Louis. (1977) *Lenin and Philosophy, and other Essays*. 2nd ed. London: New Left Books.
- Bailey, M.E. (1993) "Foucauldian Feminism: Contesting bodies, sexuality and identity." *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of some tensions between Foucault and feminism*. ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ballaster, Ros, Margaret Beetham, Elizabeth Frazer and Sandra Hebron. (1991) *Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine*. London: MacMillan.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee. (1988) "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power." *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*. eds. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. (1968) *The Second Sex*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Bordo, Susan. (1989) "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault." *Gender/Body/Knowledge*. eds. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press.
- Bordo, Susan. (1993) "Reading the Slender Body." *Unbearable Weight: feminism, Western Culture, and the body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Braithwaite, Brian. (1995) *Women's Magazines: The First 300 Years*. London: Peter Owen.
- Brownmiller, Susan. (1984) *Femininity*. New York: Linden Press / Simon & Schuster.
- Budgeon, Shelley. (1994) "Fashion Magazine Advertising: constructing femininity in the 'postfeminist' era." *Gender and Utopia in Advertising: a critical reader*. eds. Luigi Manca and Alessandra Manca eds. Lisle: Procopian Press.
- Butler, Judith. (1991) "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. ed. Diana Fuss. New York and London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. (1993) *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge.

- Carpenter, Laura M. (1998) "From Girls into Women: Scripts for Sexuality and Romance in *Seventeen* Magazines, 1974-1994." *The Journal of Sex Research*. 35 (2): 158-168.
- Coward, Rosalind. (1987) "'Sexual Liberation' and the Family." *Looking On: Images of Women in the Visual Arts and Media*. ed. Rosemary Betterton. London: Pandora Press.
- Currie, Dawn H. (1999) *Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and Their Readers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Davidowitz, Esther. (1999) "The Fuller Effect." *Columbia Journalism Review*. May/June: 50-52.
- Doner, Kalia. (1993) "Women's Magazines: Slouching Towards Feminism." *Social Policy*. 23 (4): 37-43.
- Endres, Kathleen L., and Therese L. Lueck. (1995) *Women's Periodicals in the United States*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Evans, Ellis D., Judith Rutberg, Carmela Sather and Charli Turner. "Content Analysis of Contemporary Teen Magazines for Adolescent Females." *Youth and Society*. 23 (1): 99-120.
- Faludi, Susan. (1991) *Backlash: the undeclared war against American Women*. New York: Crown.
- Fine, Michelle. (1988) "Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire." *Harvard Educational Review*. 58 (1): 29-53.
- Flax, Jane. (1990) "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory." *Feminism/Postmodernism*. ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: London.
- Foucault, Michel. (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Tavistock.
- Foucault, Michel. (1977) *Discipline and Punish*. Harmondsworth: Peregrine.
- Foucault, Michel. (1978) *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction*. New York: Pantheon.
- Friedan, Betty. (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

- Garner, Ana, Helen M. Sterk, and Shawn Adams. (1998) "Narrative Analysis of Sexual Etiquette in Teenage Magazines." *Journal of Communication*. 48 (4): 59-78.
- Gatens, Moira. (1991) *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Grant, Judith. (1993) *Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Hawkes, Gail. (1996) *A Sociology of Sex and Sexuality*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Harstock, Nancy. (1990) "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" *Feminism/Postmodernism*. ed. Linda Nicholson. New York and London: Routledge.
- Holland, Janet, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe, and Rachel Thomson. (1994) "Power and Desire: The Embodiment of Female Sexuality" *Feminist Review*. 46: 21-38.
- Ferguson, Marjorie. (1983) *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity*. London and Exeter: Heinemann.
- Jackson, Stevi and Sue Scott. (1996) *Feminism and Sexuality: a Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kimmel, Michael S. (1996) *Manhood in America: a cultural history*. New York: Free Press.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. (1987) *Technologies of Gender: essays on theory, film, and fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- MacCurdy, Marion. (1994) "The Four Women of the Apocalypse: polarized feminine images in in magazine advertisements." eds. *Gender and Utopia in Advertising: a critical reader*. Luigi Manca and Alessandra Manca. Lisle: Procopian Press.
- Macdonald, Myra. (1995) *Representing Women: myths of femininity in the popular media*. London and New York: E. Arnold.
- McCracken, Ellen. (1993) *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

- McIntosh, Mary. (1992) "Liberalism and the Contradictions of Sexual Politics." *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*. eds. Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh. London: Virago.
- McMahon, Kathryn. (1990) "The *Cosmopolitan* Ideology and the Management of Desire." *The Journal of Sex Research*. 27 (3): 381-396.
- McNay, Lois. (1993) *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- McRobbie, Angela. (1991) *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Mills, Sara. (1997). *Discourse*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Peirce, Kate. (1990) "A Feminist Theoretical Perspective on the Socialization of Teenage Girls Through *Seventeen* Magazine." *Sex Roles*. 23 (9/10): 491-500.
- Peirce, Kate. (1993) "Socialization of Teenage Girls Through Teen-Magazine Fiction: The Making of a New Woman or and Old Lady?" *Sex Roles*. 29 (1/2): 59-68.
- Rakow, Lana. (1986) "Rethinking Gender Research in Communication." *Journal of Popular Culture*. 36 (4): 11-26.
- Ramazanoglu, Caroline and Janet Holland. (1993) "Women's sexuality and men's appropriation of desire" *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of some tensions between Foucault and feminism*. ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rich, Adrienne. (1978) "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" Reprinted in (1996) *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*. eds. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sawicki, Jana. (1991) *Disciplining Foucault: feminism, power and the body*. New York: Routledge.
- Scott, Joan. (1988) "Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism." *Feminist Studies*. 14 (1): 33-51.
- Silverman, Kaja. (1983) *The Subject of Semiotics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Silverman, Kaja. (1984) "Histoire d'O: The Construction of a Female Subject." *Pleasure and Danger: exploring female sexuality*. ed. Carole S. Vance. Boston, London, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Smith, Dorothy. (1990) *Texts, Facts and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling*. London: Routledge.
- Snitow, Ann. (1983). "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different." *Powers of Desire*. eds. Ann Barr Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Snitow, Ann, Christine Stansell, Sharon Thompson. (1983) *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Spector Person, Ethel. (1980) "Sexuality as the Mainstay of Identity: Psychoanalytic Perspectives." *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 5 (4): 605-630.
- Spender, Dale. (1980) *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul..
- Stoltenberg, John. (1990) "Pornography and Freedom." *Men Confront Pornography*. ed. Michael S. Kimmel. New York: Penguin.
- Thompson, Sharon. (1990) "Putting a Big Thing into a Little Hole: Teenage Girls' Accounts of Sexual Initiation." *The Journal of Sex Research*. 27 (3): 341-361.
- Tolman, Deborah. (1994) "Doing Desire: Adolescent Girls's Struggles for/with Sexuality." *Gender and Society*. 8 (3): 324-342.
- Valverde, Mariana. (1985) *Sex, Power, and Pleasure*. Toronto: Women's Press.
- Weedon, Chris. (1987) *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell.
- Weeks, Jeffrey. (1986) *Sexuality*. London: Routledge.
- White, Cynthia. (1970) *Women's Magazines: 1693-1968*. London: Joseph.
- Winship, Janice. (1987) *Inside Women's Magazines*. London and New York: Pandora.
- van Zoonen, Liesbet. (1994) *Feminist Media Studies*. London: Sage.



