
Framing Sex, Romance, and Relationships in *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim*

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It's been said that Cosmopolitan and Maxim are alike because the two magazines share similar demographics in terms of age, education, income, and attitude. Although the primary difference is gender, both magazines present messages about incredible sex and physical perfection on their covers. What happens when the Cosmopolitan woman meets the Maxim man? Are similar images and messages about sex, romance, and relationships being presented to Cosmopolitan and Maxim readers? Do the magazines frame sexuality in similar or different ways? A content analysis of the covers of 12 issues of Maxim and 12 issues of Cosmopolitan was done. Two questions were considered in this research: (1) Does the visual representation of women on the covers of Maxim and Cosmopolitan reflect a different framing of female sexuality? (2) Do Maxim and Cosmopolitan's cover lines reveal the use of different frames to represent sexuality?

She's 18 to 34 years old and identifies herself as one of the “millions of fun, fearless females who want to be the best they can be in every area of their lives” (Hearst Corporation, 2008a). A college-educated single woman, she's an avid reader of *Cosmopolitan*, using the magazine as her “lifestylist” for inspiration and information on “just about everything” she'd want to know.

He's in the same age bracket and boasts a bachelor's involvement in “sex, sports, beer, girls, and gadgets” – words associated with every issue of *Maxim*. He depends on the magazine as his “guy's ultimate guide” to “The *Maxim* Years...that magic time when everything – careers, partying, relationships – comes together. It's a time when a man knows what he wants and has the cash to make it happen” (Dennis Publishing, 2001).

What happens when the *Cosmopolitan* woman meets the *Maxim* man? How are their expectations about sex, romance, and relationships shaped by the magazines they read?

Literature Review

Many of these readers' ideas about sex and romance may be shaped by the magazines' framing of heterosexual relationships. Relationships are complex and unique, and – like any news story seeking to communicate an event or issue briefly – magazine articles and advice in this area must necessarily focus on only a few salient aspects of the topic. As Entman (1993) wrote, “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment

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recommendation for the item described” (p. 52). Although Entman (like most framing researchers) primarily discussed political issues, articles about relationships in *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim* also adopt a particular frame and offer specific recommendations for readers to use in their own situations.

A magazine’s staff determines which relationship aspects they will highlight and which they will make less salient in articles. How are those framing decisions made? According to Scheufele (2000), the frames visible in stories can result from the interplay of various pressures, including “social norms and values, organizational pressures and constraints, pressures of interest groups, journalistic routines, and ideological or political orientations of journalists” (p. 307). For example, a story in *Maxim* could focus on “Six Ways to Make Your Relationship Last” – or on “Six Ways to Have a One-Night Stand.” While neither of these articles actually appeared in the magazine, such headlines would represent different ways the magazine might frame relationships, with or without commitment. A magazine staff’s choice of the appropriate frame for an article within the magazine will depend on many factors.

This study considers the frames visible in *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim* magazines, and evaluates the magazines’ use of three primary frames for stories about male-female interaction: sex, romance, and relationships. Through content analysis, this study seeks to understand what frames are promulgated by *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim*, and will try to explain how those frames take shape, particularly as results of the organizational pressures and journalistic routines that Scheufele mentioned.

Although this study does not encompass the possible eventual effects of these frames on readers, research on framing effects does provide a strong incentive to try to understand this content more fully. The question of effects is tricky; Entman (1993) pointed out, “Because salience is a product of the interaction of texts and receivers, the presence of frames in the text ... does not guarantee their influence in audience thinking” (p. 53). In other words, should *Maxim* frame its stories about men and women in terms of one-night stands without commitment, readers will not necessarily be affected by this limited view and may not develop similar “audience frames” (Scheufele, 2000). Their reception will vary based on many personal and social characteristics. However, a number of studies suggest that the way the media frame issues and events can indeed affect how the audience frames them (e.g., Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997).

If theories about framing effects hold true for cultural and interpersonal attitudes, then we should try to understand what ideals and values *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim*, highly gendered media products, represent to media consumers through their framing of sex. Considering that such frames could potentially alter readers’ relationships with and regard for the other gender, the messages presented by these magazines are socially significant. As Currie (1999) stated, “Media representations set a standard to which women strive” (p. 33), and the same is likely true for male magazine readers. Content analysis of the magazines’ frames is a first step toward developing a greater understanding of media consumers’ resulting attitudes and beliefs. This analysis also will explore the factors that may lead to these particular frames’ use.

Magazine Covers

Magazine covers – including images and cover lines – were specifically selected for this study as representative of the stories and ideas chosen by the magazine editors for inclusion in the magazine. In general, there is little research on magazines, and only a

handful of articles have focused on magazine covers (S. Johnson, 2002). However, magazine covers can give a sense of “who wields power and influence” (Johnson & Christ, 1988, p. 892). The choice of whom or what to feature on a magazine cover is not only an editorial one, but also can be studied as a measure of the value and importance placed upon any individual or group in society.

Few scholars are attracted to studying magazine covers because designing magazine covers is an art and not a science. Sumner observed, “Because covers are primarily art and not text, they can’t be studied by content analysis as easily as text for ‘positive,’ ‘negative,’ or ‘neutral’ directional content” (S. Johnson, 2002.). Sumner also noted that scholars and professional journalists take different approaches in studying magazine covers:

Editors and journalists assume that the cover is simply a way to sell the magazine. It never occurs to editors whether their covers are an accurate reflection of the demographics of society, of social trends, or whether they reflect any of their own political or ideological orientations. They just want to sell the magazine so they can keep their jobs and preferably get promoted to a better job. ... Scholars from other disciplines assume that magazines are supposed to be a “cultural artifact” and in some vague way accurately reflect or influence society. It never occurs to scholars that magazines have to make money to stay in business. They think that designing a cover so that it will sell the magazine is the result of some lowly, beastly motive. (S. Johnson, 2002)

Nevertheless, both industry and academic researchers have concluded that the cover sets the tone and personality of the magazine. They agree with former *People* managing editor and former *Time* editor James Gaines, who stated, “Your cover defines you in popular perception” (Johnson and Prijatelj, 2007, p. 288). Additionally, as McCracken (1993) noted, “The front cover, in addition to being the magazine’s most important advertisement, is the vehicle by which we distinguish one magazine from another” (p. 19). In terms of culture, then, “the most dominant cover factor is the image. Most people remember the image and who was on the cover the last time,” according to John Peter, a New York magazine consultant (Johnson and Christ, 1995, p. 216).

Sumner’s (2002) study of professional literature found five generally accepted principles about covers:

1. *Covers with women sell better than covers with men. Even women’s magazine-sportray mostly women on their covers.*
2. *Covers with people on them sell better than covers with objects.*
3. *Movie stars and entertainers sell better than politicians or business leaders.*
4. *Sex always sells.*
5. *Good news sells better than bad news. Most covers emphasize positive, upbeat themes and cover lines.*

Two of these statements concern women and sex, and some research has focused specifically on this aspect of magazine covers. Malkin, Wornian, and Chrisler (1999) analyzed the covers of 21 popular men’s and women’s magazines ranging from *Field and Stream* to *Ms.* for gender messages related to bodily appearance. The authors reviewed

each cover using a checklist designed to analyze visual images and texts as well as the placement of each on the covers. They reported: “Seventy-eight percent of the covers of the women’s magazines contained a message regarding bodily appearance, whereas none of the covers of the men’s magazines did so” (p. 647).

According to Lambiase and Reichert (2001), best-selling covers tend to feature the voluptuous female body, which men lust for and women aspire to have. Lambiase and Reichert (2001) pointed out, “Magazine publishers construct covers that are sexually provocative and attention-getting precisely because they know these stimuli will increase the likelihood of magazine purchases” (pp. 8-9). That supports McCracken’s (1993) argument that a beautiful female image is difficult to resist, regardless of gender. McCracken said for the readers of *Cosmopolitan*, the cover is the “window to the future self” that allows them to “imagine that I can someday be like the women in the magazine – beautiful, successful, etc.” (p. 6). By communicating who their ideal reader is through the covers, magazines provide “selective frames that color both our perceptions of idealized femininity and what is to follow in the magazines” (McCracken, p. 14).

Historical View

A historical perspective on *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim* helps develop an understanding of their current content and ideal reader. The historical beginnings of *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim* are as far apart as women being from Venus and men from Mars. Yet despite their differences in background and longevity, the two magazines have arrived at the same place in terms of their appeal to a specific audience. In fact, readers of *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim* share similar demographic traits in terms of age, education, income, and attitude. The primary difference is in gender and the expectations that go along with being male or female.

Cosmopolitan. *Cosmopolitan* has come a long way from its founding in 1886 as “a first-class family magazine...with articles on fashions, on household decoration, on cooking, and the care and management of children, etc.” (Mott, 1957, p. 480). Historian Algernon Tassin (1916) described the initial magazine as “a clergyman’s child ... conservative and domestic” (p. 358). Acquired by the Hearst Corporation in 1889, *Cosmopolitan* became one of the top muckraking magazines of the late 19th and early 20th century, with forceful essays and in-your-face investigative articles about corruption in the U.S. Senate, the need for child labor laws, and bribes in city and state governments. By 1912, however, *Cosmopolitan* had dropped its muckraking tone to focus on fiction. Soon, *Cosmopolitan* was one of the leading literary magazines in the United States, with serialized novels, short stories, poetry, and travelogues. But by the early 1960s, circulation had declined, advertising was flat, and the format had grown dull.

In one of the most amazing about-faces in magazine history, *Cosmopolitan* was remade from a staid general interest magazine into a sexy, sophisticated relationship guidebook that spoke to the newly liberated woman of the mid-1960s. The force behind that metamorphosis, Helen Gurley Brown, modeled the magazine after her successful book, *Sex and the Single Girl*. Her advice to *Cosmopolitan* readers was clear: “The fact is, if you’re not a sex object, that’s when you have to worry. To be desired sexually, in my opinion, is about the best thing there is” (Roberts, 1997, p. 46).

Editor-in-chief Brown called her idealized 18- to 34-year-old reader “the *Cosmo*

Girl”¹ and each issue featured a gorgeous, perfect model wearing blouses or dresses whose notable neckline either plunged to the waist or tickled the chin in see-through filmy fabric. If this sounds like a description of a *Playboy* Playmate, that image wasn’t far from Brown’s mind: “A guy reading *Playboy* can say, ‘Hey, That’s me.’ I want my *Cosmo* Girl to be able to say the same thing” (Ouellette, 2003, p. 120). Along with cleavage and sex tips on every cover (“How to Be *Very* Good in Bed”; “*Cosmo*’s Complete Guide to Enjoying Sex”; “Secrets of Sensational Sex”), *Cosmopolitan*’s editorial content was anchored by the sex quiz and its explicit questions. That was followed by advice on improving your sex life and your appeal to men, even if he showed more interest in his car than you: “Appeal to his fixation: Perfume the bedroom with an auto air freshener. Attach fuzzy dice, like tassels, to your breasts” (Carlson, 1997, p. C7).

Under Brown’s leadership, *Cosmopolitan* became the best-selling young women’s lifestyle magazine in the world, with 29 international editions (Carlson, 1997, p. C7). When Brown retired in 1997 at age 73, the “*Cosmo* Girl” label was dropped in favor of the “Fun Fearless Female” designation that currently drives the magazine. Still the leading young women’s magazine after more than 40 years, *Cosmopolitan*’s formula remains provocative, titillating, and sexy. The covers continue to feature fabulously beautiful women (although more celebrities than models appear now, such as Eva Longoria, Katherine Heigl, and Scarlett Johansson), and the cover lines perpetually emphasize sex (“100 Sex Tips from Guys”; “Have More Fun in Bed”; “7 New Pulse-Pounding Positions”). Obviously, the “fun, fearless female” is bold – she doesn’t wait for a man to make the first move, no matter what that move might be.

Today, *Cosmopolitan* is published in 36 languages and 58 international editions. It is sold in more than 100 countries, “making it one of the most dynamic brands on the planet” (Hearst Corporation, 2008a). As of December 31, 2007, *Cosmopolitan*’s total paid monthly circulation was 2,902,797 (SRDS, 2008a). *Glamour*, its nearest category competitor, had a total paid circulation of 2,353,854. In its annual list of the top 300 magazines *Advertising Age* ranked *Cosmopolitan* 11th in total advertising and circulation revenue for 2006, while *Glamour* ranked 19th in total advertising and circulation revenue (Special Report: Magazine 300, 2007). Even more significant, *Cosmopolitan* sells out on the newsstands, issue after issue, for full cover price; it consistently is number one in single copy sales, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (Hearst Corporation, 2008a). With an enviable secondary or pass-along rate of 6.63 readers per copy, *Cosmopolitan* reaches almost 18 million readers every month. *Cosmopolitan* also is the number one selling title in college bookstores, and has been for the past 25 years (Hearst Corporation, 2008a).

1 Established in 1999 for teen girls aged 12 to 17 years, *CosmoGIRL!* was a branding tour de force that evolved from one of the most recognized women’s magazines in the world, *Cosmopolitan*. *CosmoGIRL!* quickly reached a circulation of more than 1.3 million, challenging the long dominant *Seventeen* with its edgy tone, sassy attitude, and mixture of practical and puff articles. *CosmoGIRL!* readers were told they are “Born to Lead,” making it a logical prequel to becoming a “Fun Fearless Female” (Hearst Corporation, 2008b). Unfortunately, declining circulation and ad sales in 2008 led the Hearst Corporation to shut down *CosmoGIRL!* in December 2008. It remains online only, with its subscriber base folded into *Seventeen*, the largest selling monthly teen magazine on newsstands (Clifford, 2008).

Maxim. *Maxim* made its American debut in 1997, one of several “lad” magazines to be exported in name and content from England. *Maxim* made a splash in the men’s market and in less than two years became the number one general interest men’s lifestyle magazine in the United States. By 1999, magazine industry watchers were referring to the “*Maxim*-ization of America” and calling *Maxim* “the millennial magazine of the moment” (Dennis Publishing, 2004). In 2000, *Advertising Age* named *Maxim* the “Magazine of the Year,” and in 2002, *Adweek* named it the “Hottest Magazine of the Year.”

Until *Maxim*, the assumption was that guys in the highly desirable 18- to 34-year-old age group didn’t buy lifestyle magazines. They were more likely to watch TV than to read. Plus, there was a perception problem. According to the Ragan *Media Relations Report* (2002):

Pictorial mags like Playboy and Penthouse were too blatant for many men to buy (at least publicly), and GQ and Esquire were considered too fashion-oriented and too literary, respectively. Maxim came into the market saying, “We’re a magazine for men who don’t think about anything except sex, cars, music, beer, and gadgets.” Maxim made a smart move in deciding not to use blatant nudity in its editorial so a guy can buy it and leave it on his coffee table, and his girlfriend won’t get angry at him.

In fact, she’s likely to pick up the magazine and read it: 23% of *Maxim*’s readers are women (SRDS, 2008b). Founding editor-in-chief Keith Blanchard said women read *Maxim* because “it’s a peek into the playbook” (P. Johnson, 2002, p. 3D). What distinguishes *Maxim*’s “playbook” from other men’s magazines is its raunchy, frat-house sense of humor. *Maxim* mocks everyone and everything (“Monkeys & Lesbians: Eeep! Eeep! Eeep!”), including themselves (“Date Out of Your League: Pickup Tips So Good You Won’t Believe Your Luck!”), on the cover and inside the magazine. For example, three pages on how to “beat the crap out of somebody” showed the *Maxim* lad bashing a Gandhi look-alike.

As Blanchard (2002) explained in an address to students at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism’s Summer Publishing Course:

Maxim provides world-class sex and relationship advice . . . The cover is necessarily shorthand, right down to the main image, which you’ll notice on Maxim is almost never a shot of Bret Favre looking pensive. It turns out, shock of all shocks, that the most reliable way to catch a guy’s eye quickly is with a sexy girl. To the wandering critic, this apparently translates to the lowest common denominator. But who cares? It does the job for the reader, and that’s all I care about.

So it’s not surprising to find such *Maxim* cover lines as “Sex Express! How to Spot the Girl with a Condom in Her Purse” and “Jump-start Your Sex Life! We Even Show You Where to Put the Alligator Clips!”

Maxim’s circulation as of December 31, 2007 was 2,548,610 (SRDS 2008b). *Advertising Age* placed *Maxim* 32nd in total advertising and circulation gross revenue in 2006 (Special Report: Magazine 300, 2007). Its pass-along rate is more than five, for a reach of almost 13 million readers (SRDS 2008b). While *Playboy* has a larger circulation, at 2,700,653, its revenues are considerably less, resulting in a rank of 60th on the *Advertising Age* list (Special Report: Magazine 300, 2007). Plus, *Playboy* appeals to an

older demographic, with many “lads” considering it to be the magazine their fathers read. *Maxim* places fourth among bestselling magazines in college bookstores and is the number one men’s lifestyle magazine (SRDS 2008b).

Media buyers in the magazine industry have noticed the similarity between *Maxim* and *Cosmopolitan* in terms of cover designs and messages, saying the two publications have a “boyfriend and girlfriend-like relationship” (Davids, 1999, p. 16). Priya Narang, senior vice-president/media director of DeWitt Media in New York, simply said, “*Cosmo* is like *Maxim*” (Davids, 1999, p. 16). Either way, you reach the 20-something single professional. If *Cosmopolitan* is like *Maxim*, what components do they have in common? Do the magazines frame sexuality in similar or different ways? Two questions were considered in this research.

RQ1: *Does the visual representation – the image – of women on the covers of Maxim and Cosmopolitan reflect a different framing of female sexuality?*

RQ2: *Do Maxim and Cosmopolitan’s cover lines reveal the use of different frames to represent sexuality?*

Method

The sample consisted of 24 magazines: all 12 of the 2002 issues of *Cosmopolitan* and all 12 issues of *Maxim* from 2002. The year 2002 was chosen as representing a five-year benchmark for both magazines. *Cosmopolitan* had been using its “Fun Fearless Female” designation since 1997 and *Maxim* celebrated its fifth anniversary in 2002. Five years is a turning point for magazine start-ups and campaigns, a time when magazines show significant financial and editorial success (Johnson and Prijatelj, 2007). Additionally, 2002 was selected because *Maxim* had been named “hottest” magazine for that year by the prestigious trade magazine *Adweek* (Dennis Publishing, 2004).

Procedures. Physically accumulating an entire year of each magazine was not an easy task, despite the promises of ebay.com and other auction sites offering copies for sale. Few libraries archive such popular magazines, and attempting to enlarge thumbnail images of covers obtained from the Internet doesn’t result in an easy – or accurate – reading of all the cover lines. Eventually, all 24 issues for 2002 were acquired as hard copies in their original published form.

Cover images. The magazine covers were analyzed individually and coded based on research from Goffman (1979), Kang (1997), and Malkin, Wornian, and Chrisler (1999). To consistently code the cover images, a checklist of eight criteria was developed: (a) the type of body-revealing clothing worn by the image (mini-skirts, tight skirts, any article of clothing that showed cleavage, or see-through clothing) and whether the attire was appropriate for public wear; (b) the amount of body exposure of the image (partial nudity, full nudity, or being clothed only in a towel); (c) if the image was touching anything; (d) where the image was looking; (e) what type of body shot was portrayed; (f) what view of the head was illustrated; (g) in what pose was the image positioned; and (h) where the image’s hands were in reference to the body. Also, if an identifiable celebrity – a movie star, TV star, musician, entertainer, or sports figure – appeared, that was coded. Models, whether named or unnamed, also were coded.

Cover lines. Cover lines were categorized as being about sex, romance, or relationships. These categories were used in a “list of frames” approach to the coding of frames, as described by Tankard (2001). Sex cover lines were identified as “Jump-Start Your Sex

Life”; “Sexy Hair”; or “In Bed with Tara Reid,” while *romance* cover lines were “25 Little Rituals That Make Love Last” or “Sarah Michelle Gellar: Her Smokin’ Career and Sizzling Romance.” *Relationship* cover lines included “Denise Richards Talks about Marrying Hollywood’s Bad Boy”; “Did

She Poison Her Husband?”; or “Are You Too Honest with Your Man?” The category of *miscellaneous* was added to include cover lines that did not clearly fit any of the above categories but had a sexual, romantic, or relationship overtone, such as “Our Bitch List” or “A Cross-Dressing Billionaire.” Cover lines about beauty, fashion, diet, exercise, food, entertainment, cars, or gadgets were not coded unless they had a sexual, romantic, or relationship overtone.

While cover lines would seem to present only a superficial view of the content of a magazine, they do in fact provide a relatively efficient way to examine the framing of the magazine’s content. McCracken (1993) described the magazine cover itself as a “frame” that “extends structures of meaning to what follows. ...While ostensibly announcing only what one can read in the magazine, the headlines attempt to position us positively toward all of the magazine’s contents” (p. 33). Additionally, McCracken expanded Stuart Hall’s notion of “pre-embedded definitions” to encompass magazine covers and their cover lines, arguing that these cover lines influence the readers’ entry into the content within the magazine, setting up their expectations, and, to some degree, constraining the messages they will receive from the content (p. 34).

This idea of “pre-embedded definitions” is very similar to the concept of framing at the story level, which addresses the process of prioritizing and defining information within a particular story in order to support a particular interpretation of the story by the reader. In this case, cover lines serve two functions. Individually, the cover lines signal the reader as to the significant content of particular stories within the magazine. Additionally, the accumulated cover lines present an overarching frame for the reader’s experience of the magazine as a whole. Although readers’ own interpretations are likely to vary, McCracken argued that “a given model of interpretation is part of the cover’s code and exerts strong influence” (1993, p. 37). Therefore, an analysis of cover lines can serve as an accurate guide to the framing present in the entire magazine, and is also suggestive regarding the reader’s understanding of the magazine.

The covers of 12 issues of each magazine were examined. If there was a question about the meaning of the cover line, the actual article was studied. All cover content was coded by three independent coders with an inter-coder reliability of .95 for each variable based on Holsti’s (1969) formula.

Results

The results revealed that while both magazines emphasized sex on their covers, *Cosmopolitan* had more total cover lines framed in terms of sex than did *Maxim*. *Cosmopolitan* had 54 cover lines (50%) that fit the sex frame, while *Maxim* had 36 cover lines (50%) in the sex frame. *Cosmopolitan*’s covers contained more cover lines during the year (108 to *Maxim*’s 72); a percentage comparison doesn’t accurately reflect the overall frequency or number of cover lines per issue dealing with sex.

Maxim depicted women in more overtly sexual positions on all 12 issues (100%) in terms of physical position and clothing, while *Cosmopolitan* did not. All of *Maxim*’s cover women were shown partially nude or with minimal clothing, while all of *Cosmopolitan*’s cover women had on sexy yet traditional clothing that could be worn in public.

Cover Images. All 24 covers for *Maxim* and *Cosmopolitan* published during 2002 displayed females with cleavage wearing revealing clothing. In all 24 issues studied, their gaze was aimed toward the camera in a frontal shot. However, the remaining criteria varied from cover to cover.

All *Cosmopolitan* covers featured the woman in a frontal shot of the body in a standing pose showing her figure from above the knees to the head. All of the women gazed directly at the camera, with either a toothy or closed lip smile. All 12 of the women on the covers of *Cosmopolitan* were touching themselves, with all but two shown with both hands on their hips, thighs, or a hip and a thigh. For example, the February issue positioned the woman with her hands behind her head, rather than touching her hips or thighs; the position was closer to a stretch than a thrust. The hands of the woman on the October issue were behind her, touching her buttocks. Seven of the women on *Cosmopolitan's* covers, or 58%, were celebrities: Britney Spears, Cameron Diaz, Jennifer Lopez, Denise Richards, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Katie Holmes, and Halle Berry. Five of the women were professional models.

Seven of the women wore sexy yet traditional feminine attire, with four wearing a low-cut dress and three wearing a mini-skirt and revealing top. On five covers, the women wore pants and a sexy, revealing top. Seven of the *Cosmopolitan* issues showed the models' midriffs and all showed cleavage. None of the women wore revealing lingerie or swimsuits, nor were any of the women shown in partial nudity. All clothing could be worn in public.

While *Cosmopolitan* showed the midriff on seven of its covers, *Maxim* showed the midriff on nine of its covers. All of the *Maxim* cover women stared at the camera in a frontal shot of the head; on six of the covers, the woman's eyes were tilted slightly upwards at the camera. Only two of the women were smiling; 10 women had slightly open, glistening lips.

Eight of the *Maxim* covers showed the women touching themselves on their hips or thighs. The woman on the April cover had her arms folded across her bare breasts. The November issue showed the woman with one hand covering her crotch and the other arm above and behind her head in a thrusting pose; the June issue also portrayed the woman with her arm behind her head in a thrusting motion, and her other hand on her thigh. The January issue was the only one where the woman was not touching her own body; instead, her arms were positioned behind her as if on a table or sofa, resulting in an elevation of her upper torso. The December 2002 issue, billed as a special collector's edition, was the only cover with multiple women. On a pullout page, seven women wearing bras, garter belts, fishnet hose, and black gloves were depicted.

All but one of the *Maxim* covers, or 92%, featured a celebrity. These included Jessica Simpson, Tara Reid, Leonor Varela, Kelly Hu, Jeri Ryan, Shakira, Beyoncé, Lucy Liu, Mila Kunis, Rebecca Romijn, and Christina Applegate.

All of *Maxim's* cover women were shown partially nude or with very minimal clothing. Four of the covers featured women in revealing or see-through lingerie; four women wore hip-hugger panties (not the kind that could be worn in public) and revealing tops; one wore a bikini bottom with no top (her arms crossed her breasts, covering her nipples); one wore a scanty swimsuit; and two women wore hip-hugger slacks and bustiers. Five women were pictured standing, cropped at the crotch; two women were shown standing in a mid-thigh to the top of the head pose. Four women were seated, and one had a furry white blanket wedged between her spread legs. Only the December issue

showed full body shots from head to below the knee.

Cover Lines. The number of cover lines on each magazine varied from issue to issue. *Cosmopolitan* contained the most cover lines, with an average of nine cover lines per issue. *Cosmopolitan's* 12 issues contained a total of 108 cover lines, while *Maxim* had 72 cover lines for the entire year.

The most prevalent frame seen in the cover lines was sex for both *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim*. *Cosmopolitan* had 54 (50%) cover lines framed in terms of sex, 5 (5%) as romance, 13 (12%) as relationships, and 7 (6%) were miscellaneous (with a sexual, romantic, or relationship overtone in their framing). Seventy-three percent of *Cosmopolitan's* total cover lines were framed in terms of sex, romance, or relationships. *Maxim* had 36 (50%) cover lines framed as sex, none as romance, none as relationships, and 3 (4%) miscellaneous, for a total of 54% of its cover lines framed as sex, romance, or relationships.

Discussion

This analysis of *Cosmopolitan's* and *Maxim's* framing of sexuality reveals that while the two magazines both prioritize sex in their content, they adopt different frames in presenting content for their two audiences. Both approaches, however, result in a simplified version of sexuality that objectifies women and men, and that reduces sex to little more than the physical act itself.

Visually, women on *Cosmopolitan's* covers appear more real, in their street-appropriate clothing and facial expressions. They exhibit a certain confidence and self-awareness in their physical postures, reflecting the “fun fearless female” image promoted by the magazine. The women of *Cosmopolitan's* covers, while physically attractive, toned, and manicured beyond most readers' day-to-day possibilities, still appear to be more than their bodies. *Cosmopolitan's* women had a more straightforward gaze, as opposed to the upward glancing, “come hither” look of *Maxim's* women. Also, *Cosmopolitan's* hands-on-the-hips stance by all but one woman was more reminiscent of Mae West taking charge of Cary Grant than of a sex kitten wanting to be stroked. The fact that all of the *Cosmopolitan* women were standing – not sitting or leaning – also makes a statement of independence and sexual power. They may reveal their cleavage and their midriffs, but they retain something more beyond those features.

The *Maxim* women were presented as more submissive and fantasized objects of desire than the *Cosmopolitan* women. The *Maxim* women touched themselves more suggestively and offered themselves as being sexually available by their seated and thrusting poses, more like Playmate centerfolds than like models who often exude an aura of unavailability in their perfection. They show far more skin than *Cosmopolitan* women. Only three of the outfits worn by the *Maxim* women might be appropriate for public situations – and those three exposed more flesh than the *Cosmopolitan* clothes. The *Maxim* women's appearances and facial expressions promise sexual opportunity to the male reader.

In *Cosmopolitan*, sex is represented as a positive way to express oneself, and the women on the covers seem sexually confident in their attractive yet still covered bodies. This view echoes Helen Gurley Brown's advice to readers: “If you're not a sex object, that's when you have to worry” (Roberts, 1997, p. 46). These women are definitely sexual beings, but they are happy to be so; the cover lines of the magazine resonate with this drive for sexual satisfaction. Specific suggestions for achieving satisfaction were of-

ferred on the covers, often through a step-by-step approach or a list: “Blow His Mind! Lock the Doors, Dim the Lights, and Try This Naughty ‘Number’ Tonight”; “Make Him Ache for You: Shoot to the Top of His To-Do List with Our Saucy Moves”; “15 Places to Have ‘Fast Love’”; “75 Sexy Ways to Thrill a Man”; and “35 Ways to Turn a Man into a Mushball.” Additionally, women seeking sexual satisfaction need to maintain a standard of physical beauty as “modeled” by the cover women, utilizing information in articles like “The Sexiest Jeans”; “Sexy Swimsuits”; and “Sexy Party Clothes (Guaranteed to Jingle His Bells).”

Even beauty and clothing are represented as tools to be used toward the goal of sexual satisfaction. Men are also sometimes shown in sex-framed cover lines as objects to be used for this goal, positioning the *Cosmopolitan* woman as being as sexually sophisticated and predatory as a man. Examples of these cover lines were “His Butt: What the Size, Shape, and *Pinchability* of Those Sweet Cheeks Reveal about His True Self”; “Naked Men! Well, Half-Naked. Feast Your Eyes on Our Hunks in Trunks”; and “30 Seductive Lines to Use on a Guy.”

The romance frame took a back seat to sex in *Cosmopolitan*, with cover lines in the romance frame making up only five (5%) of the overall cover line total. The romantic cover lines were presented simplistically and stereotypically: “The Love Test: Answer These 5 Questions to Know If He’s a Keeper”; “25 Little Rituals That Make Love Last”; and “Are You Meant for Each Other?”

Some of the 13 (12%) relationship cover lines in the overall total offered a message about commitment, but not enough to counteract the dominant sex messages. Relationship cover lines fell into two areas: (a) suggestions for couples and (b) cautionary stories. About half of the relationship cover lines presented such obvious suggestions for couples as “You and Him, Happy as Hell: How to *Stay* Blissfully Bonded”; “The 6 Signs a Guy Is Hooked”; “Will He Cheat? Give Him This Test?”; “5 Games You *Should* Play in a Relationship”; and “Are You Too Honest with Your Man? 5 Times to Zip It.” Other relationship cover lines were presented as cautionary “real-life reads,” such as “Her Boyfriend Did a Shocking Thing in His Sleep. Could Yours?”; “Did She Poison Her Husband? You Be the Jury”; “The Terrifying Way Her Ex Tried to Win Her Back”; and “I Found His Ex in Our Bed!” These “real-life” relationship cover lines were negative rather than positive.

Overall, the use of the relationship frame in *Cosmopolitan* was minimal, and was often simplistic and negative in tone. Only the cover lines in the sex frame were consistently positive, empowering women to be aggressive toward the goal of achieving sexual bliss, and providing specific guidelines for doing so.

The seven (6%) miscellaneous (but still sexually oriented) *Cosmopolitan* cover lines dealt with violence and sex (“4 Tricks Rapists Use in Summer” and “The Surprising Thing That Can Make You a Target for Rape”); women and their relationships with one another (“You’ll Be Shocked by What 39% of Women Do with Their Girlfriends”), and women’s attitudes toward sex, romance, and relationships (“Your Bitch List: 30 Things You Should *Never* Apologize for” and “Bedside Astrologer”). Although Helen Gurley Brown made this statement in her final column as editor in 1997, the message is clearly still central to today’s *Cosmopolitan*: “Sex is one of the three best things there is. ... I’m not sure what are the other *two*. Yes, it’s best with someone you love and adore, but each encounter doesn’t *have* to be heaven-scripted – an affectionate friend is okay, too” (Carlson, 1997, p. C7).

The net result of the sex, romance, and relationship frames in *Cosmopolitan* is more complex than a simple representation of a “fun fearless female.” While the ideal woman as constructed by *Cosmopolitan* may be physically beautiful, sexually adventurous, and sexually assertive, she is not necessarily more than the sum of those qualities. The visual representations of women on *Cosmopolitan* covers, while less abjectly sexual than those on *Maxim* covers, still are sexualized and represent a largely unrealistic ideal of physical beauty that is not attainable for most women. Additionally, the framing of male-female interaction seen in the *Cosmopolitan* cover lines reduces that interaction to sex and not much more. There is little substance there beyond the physical act, and *Cosmopolitan* provides sparse assistance to its readers in establishing a relationship or even a romantic mood to accompany sex.

Maxim's sex cover lines were as salacious and seductive as *Cosmopolitan*'s – yet *Maxim* had considerably fewer of them. In an entire year of 12 issues, only 39 of *Maxim*'s 72 cover lines fell into the sex, romance, or relationships frames, for a total of 54% to *Cosmopolitan*'s 73%. The *Maxim* women were clothed as sexual objects, ready to have sex (not romance and not a relationship).

Indeed, *Maxim* had no cover lines devoted to romance or to relationships. Thirty-six of the cover lines (50%) used the sex frame, and three (4%) were miscellaneous. *Maxim*'s cover lines often had a raunchy, frat-boy quality to them and were clearly focused on sex. For example, the January cover promoted “3 Girls in a Bed: The *Maxim* ‘Big O’ Test,” while March declared, “Compare Yourself: How Your Salary, Sex Life, and . . . Gulp! Sausage Stack Up.” Other examples of sex cover lines included “Sex Express! How to Spot the Girl with a Condom in Her Purse”; “Naked Twister! It's *Maxim*'s New Sex Guide – Take Your Positions”; “Master Your Johnson”; and “A Foreplay Cheat Sheet.” The three miscellaneous cover lines were: “A Cross-dressing Billionaire Murderer? We Can't Make This Stuff Up”; “The Macho World of Broadway Musicals!”; and “Are You a Girl? Take This Quiz and Find Out, Nancy!”

In 1962, Helen Gurley Brown stated, “Sex is a powerful weapon for a single woman in getting what she wants from life” (Ouellette, 2003, p. 124). This is essentially the same advice given to men on the covers of *Maxim* – that sex is a powerful weapon for them to use in their relationships with women. Like *Cosmopolitan*, *Maxim*'s use of the sex frame proposes that sexual satisfaction can be reduced to a simplistic formula, and *Maxim* takes this reduction a step further in its cover lines by completely avoiding the romance and relationship frames. However, *Maxim* does talk about other topics without referencing women: guns, gadgets, cars, and drinking.

Carolyn Kremins, *Maxim*'s advertising group publisher, said, “We have created a vehicle that's entertaining. It wasn't brain surgery. Guys are guys, and we gave them what they wanted” (Kaufman, 2002, p. C11). And what they wanted, besides pictures of scantily clad women, was “information they're not going to ask their buddy or girlfriend or wife about.” According to *Maxim* marketing director Kim Willis, although sex sells to young men, using humor is a way of connecting and relating to them:

We've succeeded in helping men better relate to women, not some tramp . . . but real women they'd want to have relationships with. Guys are given a bad rap. They are sensitive and caring and all this stuff, but it's just a matter of semantics. If you ask a guy, “Do you care about your relationship?” he'll say no. But if you say, “Do you want to have more sex?” Yes. “Do you want to fight less?” Yes. It's semantics. (Kaufman, 2002, p. C11)

Indeed, it's possible that inside *Maxim*, there is additional information addressing the concerns Willis describes above. Such stories may not be featured in these terms on the cover of the magazine in order to preserve the magazine's external appearance of sexiness. If so, this content analysis may have missed the magazine's intent to address these issues by focusing solely on cover lines. However, even if that were the case, the image projected by the magazine's cover – as shaped by its framing of sex and its pictures of women – is still a rich source of insight into the staff's desired representation of sexuality in the magazine. This is especially true if one accepts arguments by McCracken (1993) that cover lines provide “pre-embedded definitions” that affect readers' interpretations of the remainder of the magazine (p. 14).

Readers' interpretations are, however, not the topic of this study. It is tempting to condemn *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim* as propagating sexual stereotypes of both men and women, and it does seem that these stereotypes are ubiquitous in our culture and in media products. According to Currie (1999), assuming such a universal effect of reading a particular type of content is impossible, and further reduces readers' powers of self-determination: “Readers of women's culture are more discerning, more critical, and more reflexive ... [and] do not always behave in ways that theoreticians might prefer” (p. 89). Additionally, how do male readers view the content of *Maxim*? As van Zoonen (1994) notes, “We know next to nothing about the use of ‘men's’ genres by male audiences” (p. 125). Individual readers are likely to have a whole range of readings of and reactions to the content of *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim* that go beyond the frames found in this study.

Conclusion

Regardless of what readers find in this framing, the fact remains that *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim* persist in creating a simplistic and stereotypical image of men and women's sexuality in the content of their magazine covers. While the preceding paragraphs sound like an indictment of these magazines for their framing of sex, this is not the case. The financial pressures on magazines to retain and gain advertisers may occasionally lead to conscious manipulation of content, but it is more likely that the staffs of these magazines engage in this framing of sex without conscious awareness. It may instead be the case that, within a society rife with these sexual stereotypes, these magazine journalists are simply striving to produce stories that fit a particular mold to which they have become accustomed. Their stories must also adhere to the standards of both their medium and their particular genre within that medium.

The repeated use of particular story structures may affect story content (Shoemaker and Reese, 1991), as in the reduction of sex to a numerical list of tips or a quiz in either magazine. Those particular story structures, visible in many cover lines, by their very nature require the oversimplification of this complex topic. Additionally, the habit of framing everything as related to sex (even a woman's jeans and a man's salary) may be partly a storytelling routine that allows for a quick and easy interpretation of the topic – by the writer and, perhaps, the reader – that fits with the magazines' ongoing themes from issue to issue. This routine supports the use of the sex frame that the writer may use to present the material to the reader, as well as the images that will accompany a story or appear on the cover.

With these magazines, there is an organizational history – such as the legacy of Helen Gurley Brown and her sexual philosophy at *Cosmopolitan* – that may encourage particular types of content. *Maxim* also mimics its even raunchier British predecessor of

the same name. These histories encourage the particular framing of sex in the magazines' present-day content as shown through this study of their covers.

There is also, perhaps more importantly, the influence of the magazines' need for advertising on their editorial content. As Shoemaker and Reese (1991) note:

To the extent that they are consumed by desirable target audiences, print and broadcast media are attractive to advertisers. They must also provide messages compatible with the ads. Ms. magazine, for example, achieved a wide circulation, but its aggressive social issues content was not attractive to advertisers who preferred the softer content of the more traditional women's magazines. (p. 123)

If the content of *Cosmopolitan* or *Maxim* ventures too far beyond what advertisers expect, or if the magazines lose readers for other reasons, they face a loss of revenue that could be fatal. Thus, there are significant reasons to maintain a particular type of content in these magazines, and journalists may not always be conscious of – or able to remedy – these influences on their work.

Both *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim* offer an unrealistic connection between appearance and identity. They promise that sexual gratification can be achieved if you look like the women on the covers. Obviously, their bodies are their best assets – not their minds or their sense of humor or their compassion, three crucial components to a successful, realistic, and loving relationship. Essentially, *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim* objectify both men and women in the framing of sex, romance, and relationships.

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