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## Selling sex to college females: their attitudes about *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* magazines

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### Abstract

A descriptive statistical snapshot of two of the globally top-selling women's magazines is undertaken in this investigation. The overwhelming conclusion is that "sex sells" in the publishing of *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* magazines based on the 23 attitudinal statements ranked by  $N = 141$  college women subscribers. This descriptive study used content analysis and Likert scale measurement to develop the 23 attitudinal statements. A PAF three factor solution of the attitudinal data was named SEXUALITY, FREEDOM, and OPPORTUNITY by the investigator.

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### 1. Introduction

In the complex and competitive world of magazines, the search for answers goes on. Magazines that cater to the mind, opinion and commentary are still alive but their circulation and revenue figures were flat in 2000. More than half of the new magazines started in the United States failed in 2001 (Husni, 2002).

Steven Cohn, who edits the weekly Media Industry Newsletter in New York, said that magazines appeared threatened in the 1980s by the rise of cable television. The emergence of the Internet in the late 1990s has added competition for consumers' time and interest. "Magazines are very targeted and cheap when compared to TV and other media. The smaller the niche that a magazine serves, the easier it may be to persuade an advertiser who needs that audience to pay top dollar," Cohn said (Colford, 1998, p. 18).

Magazine publishers today are not only worried about their competitors in print but also about the national economy since September 11, 2001. The economy was sluggish before the

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terrorist attack on America. Today it's in recession with the national unemployment at 6%. Analysts are forecasting more layoffs in our nation's labor force (AP, 2002, A4).

With unemployment rising, media advertising revenue is also down more than 35%. KMART, Inc. closed 284 stores nationwide in March 2002. In New Mexico, as an example, the closing of two KMART stores in Carlsbad and Clovis cost the *Carlsbad Current-Argus* (cir. 8,200) and the *Clovis News Journal* (cir. 9,600) more than \$120,000 in annual newspaper advertising. When Enron of Houston filed for bankruptcy, the New Mexico Retirement Fund lost \$20 million. New Mexico's state population is 1.8 million and its per capita income of \$23,600 ranks only ahead of Mississippi and West Virginia by a mere 0.9% (Messenheimer, 2002, pp. 3, 20).

## 2. Top selling magazines

Since the 1970s, two women's magazines have exploded on the global scene.

They are Hearst's *Cosmopolitan* and Conde Nast's *Glamour* (Aronson, 2001, pp. 26–27).

- *Cosmopolitan*. Is the top-selling women's magazine globally. It can be bought in 14 countries including Indonesia (1997), China (1998), Ukraine (1999), and Korea (2000). Hearst also produces another niche edition each month for teen-age girls called *Cosmo Girl!*
- *Glamour*. It can be bought in Europe but it outsells *Cosmo* in Latin America. Now Conde Nast produces a Spanish language U.S. edition of *Glamour* each month that can be purchased in all Wal-Mart stores across America.

What attracts readers to these two women's magazines? Why do they succeed when others fail? Their cover models wear provocative clothing and their articles discuss racy relationship dilemmas. By skimming through the magazines' front cover story titles and subheadings, readers acquire 80% of the information. Their headlines shout:

Our Most Sizzling Sex Survey: 12,000 Men Confess What Makes Their Toes Curl. Even We were Shocked.

The 7 Best Sex Tips You've Ever Heard: Bed-tested, Couple-Approved Ideas—Try them!

Your Guy's Body: 4 Secret Pleasure Trails Every Man Has (Take a Private Tour Tonight!)

Guys Tell What's Sexy (and not sexy) In Bed

What's your limit for infidelity?

141 Sexy Confessions From Men About You: In Bed, At Work, Dressed, Undressed

His Butt: What the Size, Shape, and Pinchability of Those Sweet Cheeks Reveal About His True Self.

What exactly is *Cosmo's* and *Glamour's* secret to publishing success? Aronson (2001) reported that the globally published magazines show women how they may not have everything but how they can have anything (p. 16). It's a format where womanly virtues are anything but a disadvantage in the pursuit of happiness. When one closely examines the front cover stories inside both publications, there is more SEX sold than anything else. *Cosmo's* sex survey appearing in its March 2002 edition (pp. 177–179) supposedly asked  $N = 12,000$  male respondents these questions in order to get the following answers:

|      |   |     |
|------|---|-----|
| Q.   | It's most thrilling to watch a woman:                                     |     |
| Ans. | Giving me oral sex  | 37% |
|      | Masturbating to orgasm  | 29% |
|      | Touching her breasts  | 19% |
|      | Touching my penis   | 15% |
| Q.   | Which of the following "eye candy" have you indulged in?                  |     |
| Ans. | Porn movies/magazines   | 88% |
|      | A strip show  | 57% |
|      | Peeped at women undressing or couples making love without their knowledge | 18% |
|      | Watched people making love with their consent                             | 8%  |
| Q.   | Your favorite position is:  |     |
| Ans. | Her on top  | 54% |
|      | Doggie style  | 27% |
|      | Missionary—me on top  | 19% |

Meanwhile, *Glamour's* March 2002 edition (pp. 188–193) asked males ( $N =$  sample not revealed) "141 sexy confessions about females." Here were some of the answers given under the subhead: "What's Not Gross at All About Their Female Partners in Bed (p. 192):

1. Hearing your fantasy about yourself in a lesbian encounter.
2. Kissing you after you've given us oral sex.
3. Porn movies while we're still building up to orgasm.
4. Abundant lubrication.
5. Fresh garlic on your breath from the pasta we've just shared.
6. Inadvertent bodily noises, such as air escaping from orifices.
7. Having sex during your period.
8. Waking up with you in the morning after great sex, no matter how sticky we are, no matter how much chocolate sauce is in your hair, no matter how badly we both need showers.

And, what about advertisers? Never before have so many lined up to show their product's benefits in these two top-selling women's magazines (Aronson, 2001, p. 26). But *Adbuster's*—a foundation critical of the advertising business—reported that nine out of 10 women are dissatisfied with some aspect of their bodies thanks to the "beast of the beauty industry" (Ognianova, 2001, p. 5). Still, Revlon, Maybelline, Max Factor, Nivea, Palmolive, and DKNY want their beauty products inside *Cosmo's* and *Glamour's* covers. The Publishers Information Bureau reported that ad revenue in both magazines grew more than 5% in 2000, a supposedly "flat" year for magazine advertising.

### 3. Purpose of study

A content analysis was done to categorized the front cover story titles and subheadings of two of the top-selling global women's magazines—*Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*—for the development of an *attitudinal perspective* of why college women regularly read and subscribe to them.

#### 4. Content analysis

As a descriptive tool content analysis may be defined as the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics. This research method was initiated by journalism and sociology scholars about 50 years ago (Berelson, 1952). It has gained validation as a research tool in thousands of studies examining messages ranging from television beer commercials to news items on the Greenhouse Effect to published Republican and Democratic Party platforms (Fan, 1988; Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990). According to Naccarato & Neuendorf (1998, p. 20), there has been a recognition of the difference between form variables—those that are linked to the formal features of one medium and cannot endure transfer to another; and content and substance variables—those that may exist independent of the medium (Berelson, 1952; Holbrook & Lehmann, 1980; Huston & Wright, 1983). There is also recognition that rules of good quantitative methodology ought to apply to “analyses of message content” (Krippendorff, 1980; Naccarato & Neuendorf, 1998; Riffe & Freitag, 1997; Zollars, 1994).

Mark Clements Research in New York City is a research provider for the magazine industry. The Clements Co. specializes in editorial research for women’s magazines by providing mail, phone, or in-person interviews for its clients. Some of the topics in a Clements survey might include: (1) appeal of graphics; (2) appraisal of the cover; (3) interest in editorial items including photos, text, and sidebar stories; (4) analyses of what readers want more or less of; (5) demographic profile of the audience; or (6) general evaluation of the issue (Wimmer & Dominick, 1994, p. 275). But none of Clements Research on women’s magazines is done by content analysis. Clements does its survey research of female magazines by mail, phone or in-person interviews. And, it’s expensive to contract because all those interviewees in one-on-one sessions must be paid for their time.

#### 5. Method

A purposive sample of all 2001 *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* magazine front cover issues were content analyzed for their respective front cover story titles and subheadings. There were 186 front cover story titles and subheadings studied in the 24 (2001) cover editions. The covers averaged 7.75 individual story titles each and, of course, all the beautiful female cover models wore sensual clothing and make-up. The word “sex” appeared in more than 45% of the 186 headlines. The word “sex” was also implied in more than 62% of the headlines (e.g., “hot love,” “intimate affairs”, “erotic tastes,” etc.). Using Holsti’s (1969) intercoder formula for determining the reliability of nominal data in terms of percentage of agreement, an intercoder reliability score of 97 was computed for the cover story titles and subheadings content analyzed.

After completing the content analysis, 23 attitudinal statements were developed by the investigator and pre-tested on college females who subscribed to one of the two magazines. The final  $N = 141$  sample size was recruited and identified in introductory mass communication and human sexuality courses at a southwestern university. A principal factor analysis (PAF) was performed on the attitudinal statement ordinal data by the  $N = 141$  participants.

Table 1

Rank order of mean responses of college females who subscribe to *Cosmopolitan* or *Glamour* magazines on 23 attitudinal variables ( $N = 141$ )

| Higher score, “strongly agree” lower score, “strongly disagree” |   |      |
|---|---|------|
| X <sup>17</sup>   | More than anything else <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines are geared to sex and being single.   | 4.31 |
| X <sup>7</sup>  | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines rely primarily on sex appeal to reach female readers.   | 4.24 |
| X <sup>21</sup>   | Sex is the central theme in both <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines.   | 4.22 |
| X <sup>14</sup>   | I read the sexual advice articles more than anything else appearing in <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> .  | 4.17 |
| X <sup>23</sup>   | Beauty is the central theme in <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines.   | 4.06 |
| X <sup>12</sup>   | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines rely primarily on the sexual desires of female readers.   | 3.89 |
| X <sup>10</sup>   | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> rely primarily on articles about beauty issues to reach female readers.   | 3.77 |
| X <sup>13</sup>   | Females want to be loved and cherished but they also want to be independent. <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> advocate independence to reach female readers. | 3.72 |
| X <sup>20</sup>   | Independence is the central theme in both <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines.  | 3.67 |
| X <sup>3</sup>  | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> portray femininity as an advantage for females to reach success.  | 3.65 |
| X <sup>19</sup>   | Individual success is the central theme in <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines.   | 3.59 |
| X <sup>6</sup>  | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> portray females as independent persons who can be successful.   | 3.57 |
| X <sup>18</sup>   | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> portray females as sexual predators.  | 3.55 |
| X <sup>8</sup>  | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> show inside their covers that females can have anything they want.  | 3.46 |
| X <sup>15</sup>   | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> portray women as career opportunists whose womanly virtues are an advantage in their individual pursuit of job success.     | 3.38 |
| X <sup>16</sup>   | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines portray females as smart go-getters.  | 3.26 |
| X <sup>2</sup>  | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> portray females as smart careerists who can succeed in life.  | 3.03 |
| X <sup>9</sup>  | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> rely primarily on career issues in their articles to reach female magazine readers.   | 2.57 |
| X <sup>11</sup>   | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> establish an image of what a female should be.  | 1.92 |
| X <sup>1</sup>  | I read <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> because each magazine sets the record straight about being female.   | 1.84 |
| X <sup>4</sup>  | The articles appearing in <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> are very personal and appeal to what I want my life style to be.                                  | 1.58 |
| X <sup>5</sup>  | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> rely primarily on health issues in their articles to reach female magazine readers.   | 1.47 |
| X <sup>22</sup>   | Health is the central theme in <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines.   | 1.32 |

Note. The 1–5 Likert scaling ranges from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”  $N = 141$  respondents.

## 6. Results

Table 1 gives the mean responses on the 23 attitudinal statement variables by the  $N = 141$  college females. The four highest ranked attitudinal statements contained the cue word “sex” in the wording. They were:

|                 |   |      |
|-----------------|---|------|
| X <sup>17</sup> | More than anything else <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines are geared to sex and being single.             | 4.31 |
| X <sup>7</sup>  | <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines rely primarily on sex appeal to reach female readers.                   | 4.24 |
| X <sup>21</sup> | Sex is the central theme in both <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines.                                       | 4.22 |
| X <sup>14</sup> | I read the sexual advice articles more than anything else appearing in <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines. | 4.17 |

Table 2  
Factor loadings on college female subscribers' attitudes about *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* magazines

| Variable statement   | I (49%)<br>(sexuality) | II (15%)<br>(freedom) | III (11%)<br>(opportunity) |
|--|------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| $X^1$ = I read <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> because each magazine sets the record straight about being female.  | .56                    | -.13                  | -.23                       |
| $X^2$ = <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> portray females as smart careerists who can succeed in life.   | .00                    | .45                   | -.17                       |
| $X^3$ = <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> portray femininity as an advantage for females to reach success.   | -.44                   | -.27                  | .31                        |
| $X^4$ = The articles appearing in <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> are very personal and appeal to what I want my life style to be.                                     | -.19                   | .66                   | -.04                       |
| $X^5$ = <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> rely primarily on health issues in their articles to reach female magazine readers.  | .00                    | -.12                  | .05                        |
| $X^6$ = <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> portray females as independent persons who can be successful.  | -.10                   | .71                   | .28                        |
| $X^7$ = <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines rely primarily on sex appeal to reach female readers.  | .85                    | .35                   | -.14                       |
| $X^8$ = <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> show inside their covers that females can have anything they want.   | .18                    | .52                   | .40                        |
| $X^9$ = <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> rely primarily on career issues in their articles to reach female readers.   | .00                    | -.09                  | .37                        |
| $X^{10}$ = <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> rely primarily on articles about beauty issues to reach female readers.   | .80                    | .15                   | -.39                       |
| $X^{11}$ = <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines establish an image of what a female should be.  | -.30                   | .45                   | .19                        |
| $X^{12}$ = <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines rely primarily on the sexual desires of female readers.   | .87                    | .06                   | .03                        |
| $X^{13}$ = Females want to be loved and cherished but they also want to be independent. <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> advocate independence to reach female readers. | -.21                   | .74                   | .31                        |
| $X^{14}$ = I read the sexual advice articles more than anything else appearing in <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines.   | .64                    | .38                   | -.22                       |
| $X^{15}$ = <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> portray females as career opportunists whose womanly virtues are an advantage in their individual pursuit of job success.   | .23                    | .55                   | .34                        |
| $X^{16}$ = <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines portray females as smart go-getters.  | -.12                   | .35                   | .55                        |
| $X^{17}$ = More than anything else <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines are geared to sex and being single.   | .88                    | .47                   | .18                        |
| $X^{18}$ = <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> portray females as sexual predators.  | .73                    | .19                   | .02                        |
| $X^{19}$ = Individual success is the central theme in <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines.   | -.35                   | .45                   | .36                        |
| $X^{20}$ = Independence is the central theme in both <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines.  | .00                    | .64                   | .45                        |
| $X^{21}$ = Sex is the central theme in both <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines.   | .91                    | .41                   | -.05                       |
| $X^{22}$ = Health is the central theme in <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines.   | -.10                   | .09                   | .00                        |
| $X^{23}$ = Beauty is the central theme in <i>Cosmo</i> and <i>Glamour</i> magazines.   | .90                    | .20                   | .15                        |

Note. The PAF produced three major attitudinal patterns accounting for 75% of the variance toward the magazines in the Likert scale survey of the  $N = 141$  college female subscribers to *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*. The numbers above are varimax-rotated factor loadings.

It took 18 iterations in the PAF analysis to uncover a three factor solution the investigator named:

Sexuality  
Freedom  
Opportunity

The PAF analysis is reported in [Table 2](#). The varimax-rotated three factor loadings accounted for 75% of the total variance under SEXUALITY (49%), FREEDOM (15%) and OPPORTUNITY (11%).

## 7. Discussion

Success breeds “sequels” in the movie industry business. In the magazine business it breeds “imitators.” *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* are so successful today that their respective publishing houses have launched imitators. *Glamour* can be bought at U.S. Wal-Mart stores in a Spanish edition. *Cosmo Girl!* is now produced for a teen-age female niche. Britney Spears, who turned 20 in 2002, might be too old for *Cosmo Girl!* Spears was on the cover of *Cosmopolitan*’s February 2002 edition photographed in a revealing Valentine Day’s form-fitting red dress. But teen-age pop icon Mandy Moore graced the March 2002 *Cosmo Girl!* front cover while headlines screamed: “371 Ways to Look Hot This Spring” and “The Games Guys Play (and how to win!).” Sex sells and it is always a topic of contemporary psycho-social significance ([Rutman, 2000](#), p. 78). In an age when Americans are surrounded by sexual innuendo, “naughty and kinky” as “cute and mainstream” may be what it takes today to sell products ([Lippert, 2001](#), p. 20). While sex sell, gratuitous sexual content can also drive some readers away from a publication and product ([Rutman](#), p. 83). The target market for *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* includes today’s fastest-growing college enrollment of females 18–25-years-old. This market is single and sexually experimenting by hooking-up in relationships ([Fetto, 2001](#), pp. 10–11). While the use of sex in product promotion may easily draw on a male’s biological instincts to get his attention, a female’s sexual desire is a combination of many factors that are almost impossible to put in one particular ad ([Tafinger, 1999](#), pp. 9–10). Both men and women find female bodies to be emotionally appealing ([Cohan, 2001](#), p. 327). And, *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* magazines use the female body and “titillating” story titles on front covers to sell their product. They must. Millions of dollars are at stake with the beauty products and fashion lines portrayed in the advertising between their covers. The buyers? They are the 18–25-year-old females who are now dominating today’s college enrollments. They are single and they are in relationships. [Reichart \(2001, p. 50\)](#) said the bottom line is that 17–24-year-olds are targeted for sex in product promotion because they have more disposable income for such things as clothing, beauty products, entertainment, food, and magazines.

## 8. Conclusion

Are the magazines in this little study selling sex? Not only are they selling sex in their respective hard copy versions, they are selling sex on their national web sites. One could

have reviewed the “Studies of Carnal Curriculum” at *Cosmo*’s “Sex University,” February 6, 2002 (<http://magazines.ivillage.com/cosmopolitan/sex/sexu>). Founded in 2001, *Cosmo*’s Sex University is the first correspondence school of its kind (or so it reports):

Our carnal college curriculum offers a comprehensive approach to teach you how to max out your own pleasure and give your man the most erotic experiences he could ever dream of. All courses are taught by the renowned sex writer Baroness Sheri de Borchgrave (recently returned from a sex-studying sabbatical), who has helped millions of women in her weekly column for *Cosmopolitan.com*. (Feb. 6, 2002).

On that same *Cosmo* (February 6) web page was its latest front page cover edition that admonishes, “Land that man, ace your job, and look your sexiest ever!”

If one visited *Glamour*’s official web site (<http://us.glamour.com/>), one could communicate directly with “Jake, *Glamour*’s Guy Spy” (April 9, 2002). What’s this all about? It’s where females can “glimpse into the male mine about being sexy” by asking “what’s-up-with-that?” guy questions and then look for “Jake’s” answers in upcoming issues of *Glamour*.

This descriptive statistical study has tried to provide some quantitative documentation of why college females support these two top-selling magazines. It used the following research steps: (1) did a literature review of the theme; (2) conducted a content analysis of the product; (3) selected the scale measurement for the data to be gathered; (4) wrote attitudinal statements for the scale measurement selected; (5) pre-tested the instrument used; (6) did a purposive sample of those who buy the product; (7) collected the data of the products’ consumers; and (8) did a statistical analysis that would quantify, document and describe the investigation.

The three solution PAF factor analysis by the investigator attempted to describe the attitudes of college females who support the two magazines’ editorial content of SEXUALITY, FREEDOM and OPPORTUNITY. But when all is said and done, what’s really new here? Why does one segment (females) of our global population continue to support such magazines? And, why does one infinitesimal niche sample of that population segment (college coeds at a south-western university) continue to read and subscribe to the magazines? The answer might be this one: females find *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* entertaining to read. The magazines appeal to the niche audience who supports them. Nothing more, nothing less. “But the images portrayed inside the magazines are totally unrealistic in today’s world,” said a 42-year-old female nursing student who did not participate in the survey. The woman said she used to subscribe to *Cosmo* years ago. Perhaps she outgrew the product and the content offered between the covers.

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