

How do mainstream 'lads' magazines' represent women and construct concepts of femininity?

15Jan06

Beth Granter

“Shag Types: Because women are easier to understand if you stereotype them” (Maxim, 2006: 142).

The commodification of women under prostitution or marriage has been widespread in many societies and cultures for centuries. Second wave feminist calls for the sexual liberation of women in the 1970s might appear to be forgetting mainstream media's representation of women as 'things'. Such is the case in the February 2006 issue of Maxim magazine, where “things and girls” are deemed to deserve to share the same category listing on the contents page. Repeated explicit objectification of women enforces chauvinistic attitudes to the extent that concepts of women as 'things' purely existing in order to receive the male gaze and for the consumption and ownership by men are not challenged.

Much has been written on the representation of women in pornography and mainstream advertising. Feminist criticisms of pornography tend to generalise rather than treat hard and soft core porn as separate genres. Few studies have focused on how women are represented in 'Lads' magazines' specifically or asked questions about whether and how such objectification, if indeed they do objectify women, might affect readers' attitudes towards women. My intention first is to clarify how women are represented and how concepts of femininity are constructed. I ask why these representations are accepted by our society and discuss why as a feminist, I believe they should not be accepted, without calling for any kind of censorship. The fact that they are accepted as general reading material for young men, suitable to be read in public (magforum.com) and are often not even seen to be sexist, are indications that society's attitudes towards women are equally questionable.

In order to assess how women are represented, it is necessary to look at the codes of representation seen in the magazines themselves. Rather than taking individual examples of negative representations of women as some other studies have done, looking at overall themes and repeated styles of images or portrayals in the text will be more effective in identifying the messages being communicated (Hall, 1973 in During 1993: 90-103). Using codes of representation as a methodological analysis will unavoidably result in finding stereotypes constructed by the media in question. However, what is important is what these stereotypes are and whether they empower or objectify women in general. The extent to which the magazines construct stereotypes of women should be revealed by the ease of identifying the codes of representation and the lack of variety in the messages found. According to Foucault (in Jackson 2005: 86) “power operates through discourse to produce a particular personality type so that it might be judged, observed and subjected to the male gaze”.

The three magazines chosen for analysis were bought at the same time to avoid seasonal and periodical variation. The American versions of 'FHM' ('For Him Magazine') and 'Maxim' have been written about as Lads' magazines previously

(Taylor, 2005; Jackson, 2001). Here the British versions of these two mainstream Lads' magazines and also 'Nuts' are used to represent Lads' magazines generally because of their everyday availability in newsagents in Britain and because of their large readership. In 1993, FHM and Maxim sold over 600,000 and 250,000 copies respectively (www.magforum.com). 'Nuts' launched in January 2004 and has a circulation of over 290,000 a week. Nuts is the first weekly lads' magazine, the success of which marks a rise in lad culture in Britain, which appears to be closely followed by America as their production of lad magazines increases (www.magforum.com). Men's magazines such as 'Esquire' and 'GQ' are more fashion oriented and upmarket (Jackson 2005: 88). The content of such men's magazines is deemed less accessible to the majority of young men (i.e. working class young men) than that of typical lad magazines. It was this divide that helped the re-launch of FHM in 1996 (www.magforum.com). 'Top Shelf' soft core pornography magazines such as Playboy, hardcore pornography and special interest magazines aimed at men are not looked at here as these were not classified as 'lads' magazines'. Additionally, sections of the chosen magazines which do not feature women will not be discussed. These tend to be sections on technology or gadgets, film and entertainment, and 'shock' sections with pictures of horrific injuries.

A 'lads' magazine', or 'Lad Mag' as they are commonly called, is a new form of magazine aimed at young, usually single, men, whose main interests are sex, drinking, sport and humour. 'Laddishness' has been seen as a reaction against the media construction of the 'new man' in the early 1990s and is reliant upon biological notions of 'red-blooded', highly sexed, emotionless masculinity (Kehily, 1997). Supporters of such attitudes have claimed that lad culture has grown as a backlash against radical feminism's attacks on ideals thought of as traditionally and naturally masculine. Lad culture could also be understood as socially constructed, if messages in the media are read as instructions for behaviour and attitudes rather than as legitimating excuses for acting on uncontrollable male desires (Jackson 2005: 117).

As advertisements in magazines have been extensively analysed in how they represent women (Lindner, 2004; Winship, 2000; Orth, 2004), these will be ignored for the purposes of this study, as will be the depiction of men and masculinity.

All three samples used in this study have scantily clad women (although no full frontal nudity) dominating their front covers. In an attempt to separate their identity from top shelf pornographic magazines, all but one men's magazine featured a woman at all on their launch issue cover (www.magforum.com). This increase in confidence to display semi-naked women so openly could be seen as representative of the growing acceptance of the sexualisation of women in all media. The pornography debates prevalent in much feminist discourse are relevant here. Using Kendrick's definition that 'pornography' as "words or images designed primarily for sexual arousal" (in Gibson, 2004: 60), I intend to avoid moral conservative assumptions of negative implications of the genre of pornography itself, whilst acknowledging that "Feminist anti-pornography arguments are seductive because most mainstream pornography obviously embodies the most outrageously sexist ... imagery. That is its function: to position women as – and only as – passive, commoditized, objects for men's sexual arousal" (Gibson, 2004: 62). Rather than simply condemning lads' magazines, it is important to consider the reasons why women are represented in them and the constraints operating which may be preventing alternative representations.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

One feature was chosen from each magazine whose focus was a particular woman, a group of particular women or a discussion about women. These features were chosen not simply as justification for my arguments, but as a generally representative and typical selection of the themes and messages seen throughout the magazines (in my opinion).

As the most down-market publication of the three, 'Nuts' focuses on 'real girls', presumably because these models are cost-free and as they are deemed more 'accessible' to the readers. The title, "Nuts club strip challenge" (see Fig 1) implies that there is some skill involved in taking one's clothes off, although the images on the page hardly appear to reflect this. The first question, "Did you have fun stripping for Nuts?" is a tactic commonly used, using the message of consent as a defense against feminist claims of exploitation. Although her answer reflects pride in appearing in the magazine ("I'm glad I did"), modesty and passivity are reinforced as feminine traits ("It isn't the kind of thing I normally do. I'm a shy girl"). Upon further questioning, the model, Stephanie, feels the need to redeem herself by claiming that such behaviour (stripping) is not representative of her sober identity ("Maybe it was the drink"). The fact that appearing in the magazine in her underwear might have an effect on her reputation and social status is implied in the next question, "What are your mates going to think when they see this?". Her answer gives an insight into her reasons for stripping for the magazine – that she hopes it will help her to gain respect from her peers. Whether she expects to gain this respect as a result of stripping or simply from being featured in a printed newsstand publication (her only access to which is to strip) could be questioned. Her understanding of the power that media spaces hold is implicit in her declaration that "It's not just any girl that gets to appear in Nuts". Her imagined temporary status as a 'media person' is immediately denied as the magazine goes on to clarify that she is a "real girl next door", that is, an 'ordinary person'. This classification reinforces boundaries of access to media spaces as extremely limited and temporary for such 'real girls' and in doing so, disempowers them.

'Maxim' has the audacity to trivialize stereotyping ("women are easier to understand if you stereotype them") and encourage the sexual abuse of women under the influence of alcohol ("she'll never remember anything that you ... do to her!") (see Fig 2) in this feature on women, or "Shag Types" as it calls them. Although it is obvious that this page is intended as tongue-in-cheek humour, this feature can still be read as a set of instructions on how to treat whole groups of women who dare to come close to the stereotype described (in the eyes of the reader). The message that men enjoy a different, more violent kind of sexual intercourse than women, is reinforced by criticising "the kind of fucking sober girls are into". This desexualisation of sober, 'respectable' women in the text both criticises less promiscuous women for being less 'fun' and devalues more promiscuous women by associating them with the ridiculed stereotype of 'The Alcoholic'. Again reinforcing the idea that all women desire a loving monogamous relationship and all men desire a diverse sex life with no emotional attachment, cheating and lying to women is instructed as the solution ("She'll never figure it out"). Domestic abuse claims are trivialised also ("she accuses you [wrongly] of beating her"), alongside criticisms of such women's 'insistence' to wear impractical high heels, the very footwear which is glamorized and sexualised everywhere in the media of our patriarchal society. Finally, the seriousness of safe sex

is lost as the article instructs men not to “bother with contraception”, asserting that pregnancy is the only risk of sexual intercourse that is worthy of male concern.

The longest established lads’ magazine of the three, ‘FHM’, features an interview with a group of young, attractive, single women (see Fig 3). Their sexual availability and physical attractiveness are their primary reason for being featured, made clear by the title “Hot Dates”, a double spread in the section of the magazine entitled “Sex Confidential”. The article’s pull quote, “‘Sometimes a girl needs a shallow compliment that’s purely about her body’ Nicole”, is a huge generalisation about women and what they want and justifies the objectification of women in the magazine. It is interesting to note that this is a quote from one of Nicole’s original comments, “‘Sometimes a girl needs a personality compliment, and sometimes she needs a shallow one that’s purely about her body’”. The way that this is paraphrased into the shortened pull quote removes her original input about the importance of personality in order to more easily conform to the attitudes of the editors. Irrespective of this bias in the editing, the fact that the statement came from a woman would not make it any less sexist as it is precisely because these women in particular are unlikely to challenge the ideology of the magazine that they are featured. The ‘ordinary’ versus ‘media’ power dynamic is reinforced again by asking the women if men tell them they look like certain famous people (as flattery). The article goes on to ask the women about their favourite body part of themselves, rather than simply their favourite aspect of themselves, forcing the women to be thought of as dissected body parts. The women’s answers, rather than using the question as an opportunity for self empowerment or showing pride in their own bodies, declare what men have told them are their best body parts, which they go on to deny, “Men love my bum, even though I hate it”. This perversion of self depreciation disguises itself as modesty. The one answer which can be read as a display of pride in her own body, “I love my chest”, is set aside an acknowledgement of objectification as necessary to empowerment, “They get me far, these boobs of mine”. The second part of the article focuses on dating stories and flirting techniques. The answers appear to place the women in the category of ‘nice girl’, reassuring the reader that any advances are likely to be met with a kind response. After positioning themselves as ‘nice girls’, their answers to the concluding question juxtapose their acknowledgement of their apparent promiscuity with the shame they feel about appearing so. Overall, the context that these women appear in is oriented around their availability to the reader himself. These are not only the ‘girl next door’, representative of the kinds of women available to the reader, but each of these women is declaring herself as individually available to the reader, as the article concludes with directions to instructions as to how to “hook up with these Hot Dates’.

DISCUSSION

Reference to previous studies (Krassas, 2001; Lindner 2004) identified four codes of representation of women related to the codes first suggested by Goffman: the ‘femme fatale’, ‘submissive’, ‘decorative sexualised’ or those having a ‘functional role’. My interpretation of these identities is that a ‘femme fatale’ has a dangerous mystique, a powerful, sexual edge, whilst still holding the male gaze. She would be the ‘revengeful girlfriend’ or the ‘demanding mistress’. The ‘submissive’ representation refers to more traditional representations of woman as unintelligent and helpless. She would be the ‘needy girlfriend’. An image of a ‘decorative sexualised’ woman depicts just that, a woman with no purpose or interest in anything other than being watched, the ‘beauty’. A woman who is presented in an occupational setting, with a ‘functional

role', appears to be the only totally positive representation of women out of the four. Upon initial examination of the magazines, these categories appeared sufficient. However, when trying to interpret the overall code of representation being used on a particular page, difficulties arose. Almost all women were portrayed as 'decorative sexualised' in the images, but the text sexualised them in different ways. The identities constructed around these women were based either on a 'nice (but sexy) girlfriend' ideal or on a 'lustful porn star' image with others falling somewhere between these two extremes. Rather than presenting these alternatives as a dichotomy of 'Madonna' or 'whore', the sexualisation of all women along this spectrum could be said to be relieving the 'female dilemma' (Dworkin, 1999: 147). That is, these lads' magazines could be said to be using this tactic as a defense against feminist criticisms.

From a critical perspective, the stereotype of 'girlfriend' that is constructed by magazines is harmful in the sense that it portrays all women as incomplete without a boyfriend and as happily adhering to a normative monogamous relationship. The alternative of 'nymphomaniac' is harmful in that it legitimates men's sexual demands on women, which would presumably be undesired if women had not been brainwashed by patriarchal society. Problems with such criticisms identified by Thompson (1994) apply here.

Firstly, this dichotomy is actively reduced in lads' magazines as most representations of women in the magazines sampled bridge this divide, glamorizing the 'pin-up girlfriend' alongside interviews of the models focused on their expectations of male behaviour.

Secondly, the puritanical criticisms of portrayals of women as extremely sexually driven people, from a post-feminist perspective might contribute to feelings of shame in women who honestly enjoy sex (Assiter, 1993: 4). Implying that women could never enjoy such acts and are simply performing for men makes potential increases in women's influence and involvement in pornography production seem impossible and undesirable.

Sexual autonomy for women is a complex issue, bringing in extremist ideas of 'political lesbianism' based on the idea that any heterosexual desire is due to society's brainwashing for exploitative goals (and that desire should be denied by choosing a lesbian identity) (Dworkin 1999: 209), to more liberal post-feminist pro-sex discourse, supported by sex workers and pornographers (Thompson, 1994; Assiter, 1993). It is perhaps naïve to think though, that a lesbian woman's ideals of which images of women are attractive would be any less influenced by society than the ideals of a heterosexual man.

The identities of women presented in lads' magazines are clearly biased as their main purpose is to be erotic for men.

"Pornography reinforces the false universals of sexual archetypes because it denies, or doesn't have time for, or can't find room for, or, because of its underlying ideology, ignores, the social context in which sexual activity takes place, that modifies the very nature of that activity" (Carter in Cornell 2000: 537).

As a feminist, my problem is that these identities are now so mainstream that alternative choices of expression of femininity and identity seem less acceptable. This

has been described as the “pornographication of the mainstream” (McNair, 1996: 137). What it means to be a woman is so much more complex than it appears in mainstream media that pornography becomes oppressive in this context, even when in itself it is not. Aiming to achieve a consensus on what a sexually autonomous woman enjoys or does not enjoy is pointless and oppressive. Accepting the diversity of women’s sexual autonomy on an individual basis seems much more progressive in my opinion. Given that women are represented in such a congruous, always sexualised, always objectified way begs the question as to why the models themselves choose to be in such magazines. In mainstream pornography this can often be explained financially – nude modeling pays much better than waitressing and women in pornographic videos are paid approximately twice the rate of the men (Thompson 1994: 5). However, the financial rewards for posing in lads’ magazines for most of the models are little to none. It seems that the prestige of appearing in a newsstand publication is the main attraction, alongside textual reassurance of their success in conforming to normative ideals of attractiveness. Using pictures of readers’ girlfriends or female readers of the magazines rather than purely celebrities is a defining feature of lads’ magazines. Again, this makes the content feel more accessible to its target audience, as the girls featured are branded as ‘real girls’ (as oppose to ‘celebrity girls’). The cult of celebrity and the divide between ‘ordinary person’ and ‘media person’ in all media gives power to lads’ magazines, a currency which they can exploit to purchase these images of women (Peters in Katz, 2003: 58-73).

More elite magazines such as Esquire tend only to feature professional actresses or existing ‘media people’ as pin-ups and these women are likely to have already established identities in the minds of readers due to their media presence outside of men’s magazines. This means that although a picture of a celebrity itself might appear equally objectifying or demeaning as one of a ‘real girl’, the celebrity has the advantage of access to other media spaces for identity formation which is not only based on their physical appearance. This is rarely true in the case of professional models however. The objectification of catwalk or editorial models could be seen as equally, if not more, extreme than that of the women in lads’ magazines. The extent of nudity does not necessarily have a direct relationship with the extent of objectification of a person. A fully dressed successful model who is never interviewed about her opinions, aspirations or ideas does not represent women any more diversely than a naked woman talking about her opinions on and experiences of sex. Still, by making nudity the only route of access to the media that is offered to ‘real girls’, the women in lads’ magazines have no alternative way to represent themselves but as objects for the male gaze. This may feel empowering to the individual model not because they are expressing their autonomous sexuality but due to the social conditioning of women, as Bartky explains,

“In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other” (in Weitz, 1998: 34).

Nakedness in itself however, cannot be said to disempower, to shame and disgrace women, unless the viewers or models have negative attitudes towards the naked female body. Wearing little or no clothing in our society is seen as ‘slutty’, as akin to prostitution, and as an indicator of promiscuous behaviour and an irresponsible

lifestyle. The immediate association of these images with disrespectful behaviour strikes a dualism alongside their depiction as attractive images. The appraisal of extremely sexualised images of women is used as a defence against feminist attacks on the basis of sexism (Jackson 2005: 134) but cannot excuse them as examples of objectification.

The women in lads' magazines are sometimes portrayed as 'ladettes', women sharing similar ideals to the lads who read the magazines and are equally a part of lad culture. Promiscuity and sexual experience are prized in lad culture, however these are still seen as positive traits mainly in men, with women expected to operate under an unspoken upper limit. The fact that most of the women in lads' magazines do not do full frontal shots but would pose in their underwear could be seen as indicative of their feelings that the extent of their nudity is a reference to the extent of their promiscuity. Appearing too promiscuous would be disempowering because of the negative attitudes towards such lifestyles for women in wider society. Then, it seems, being partially naked and proud of it might actually empower the model herself as, within her ladette culture, she is able to gain some recognition and appraisal. The feminist in her might use second wave notions of 'free-love' and the promotion of women as sexual beings as encouragement for such involvement.

In thinking about solutions and steps towards positive representations of women in lads' magazines, the context that the magazines are sold in and representations of women in all of media and society needs to be addressed. Censorship of the "increasingly sexualised atmosphere of Western society" (Gibson, 2004: vii) would not be helpful as it would inevitably drive such media back underground where it cannot be monitored for ethical production (Assiter, 1993: 146). As distasteful as the messages about women in these magazines may be, the fact that they are the same messages as are seen everywhere in mainstream media is an indication that this aspect of lad magazines is a symptom of lad culture, which itself is a symptom of our chauvinistic society.

Laws classifying how pornography is rated, hard core vs soft core, could themselves be a large part of the problem. The fact that, in Britain, soft core cannot show couples having sex removes any possibility of sexualising mutuality. The laws preventing images of erect penises in soft core have been said to prevent the sexualisation of the male nude, leaving the female nude as the only option for erotic imagery not seen as obscene (Thompson 2005: 167). As the target audience is a heterosexual male, a male nude alone is assumed non-erotic and therefore would not be considered as an option for content. Although full frontals of women are not found in lads' magazines either, the impact of such laws are likely to form people's presupposed ideas surrounding erotic images and their acceptability. Images declared as 'obscene' are often nothing more than naked bodies, certainly unlikely to "deprave and corrupt" people" as the term 'obscene' is agreed to mean (Thompson 2005: 1). In the fight against sexism, feminists should propose relaxing the regulation and classification system of pornography to allow sexualisation of the male nude and mutuality.

Biology clearly denotes guidelines as to what features we find attractive in a potential sexual partner. However, it is an ongoing debate as to which features these are and to what extent these might be learnt responses. The ability to sell beauty to women has meant big business for decades and relies on a society holding unattainable ideals of attractiveness. Notwithstanding is the argument that such ideals are used to disempower women for purposes of exploitation in the home and workplace for economic benefit.

Due to these well established sexism that our society has relied on for so long, lads' magazines cannot be expected to suddenly start publishing alternative representations of women. Positive (even sexualised) portrayals of career women, mothers and independent intellectual women would not sell in our society as it stands. The source for any change lies in the political and economic system which presently denies women equal opportunities to men and gives us few alternatives to playing the game of objectification that so many of us are forced to use to attain 'success'. When women and men are paid equally for equal work, given equal maternity and paternity leave and acknowledged for their achievements irrelevant of their physical appearance or gender, successful female role models will appear who are respected by men and women alike and seen as attractive for their achievements and personality, as well as (not only) for their appearance.

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APPENDIX:

Fig 1 (Nuts, 2006: 23)

Fig 2 (Maxim, 2006: 142)

Fig 3 (FHM, 2006: 50-51)