

What a Feeling: Women, Advertising and Ecology

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Introduction

It is obvious from a cursory look at magazines, television programs, or films, that the media subjects women to a continuous stream of images of 'perfect' women, whether supermodels, famous actresses or others in the public spotlight. Women, in general, cannot hope to look like these icons that are paraded in front of them. The images, then, may leave some women feeling inadequate or dissatisfied, and therefore in the right 'buying mood' to purchase the bewildering range of products from eye-shadow to exercise machines which advertisers subtly imply will help them achieve the ideal.

We know that language has the power to inspire, to evoke great passion, to incite hate or to teach and encourage. The subtle use of language to create imaginary problems and implant the idea that purchase can magically provide a solution could be described as a 'destructive discourse' because the result is dissatisfaction, unnecessary consumption, and, ultimately, environmental destruction. The damage to the environment, and the ecosystems that support it, is due to exploitation of natural resources, energy costs in production and transportation of items and the waste that is produced when they are discarded.

This article will look at some specific examples of the power of a potentially destructive discourse. In particular it will focus on two women's magazines, *Cosmopolitan*, (January 2007) and *Good Housekeeping* (January 2007). It will consider how magazine editors and advertisers manipulate language and how this can create a sense of dissatisfaction in women's lives, subliminally encouraging them to want to be more beautiful, to look younger, or have bigger, more expensive or luxurious homes. This ultimately creates a consumer driven world in which material belongings are all important and our sense of the world in which we live is neglected and ultimately negated.

Investigation

To carry out my research I looked at a two life style magazines aimed at different demographic groups of women. The National Magazine Company (2006) publishes both magazines and promotes them in the following way in a promotional leaflet brought out for Christmas 2006:

Good Housekeeping provides hundreds of thousands of women with vital information and genuinely useful advice on a broad range of subjects relevant to their lives. From food to fashion, beauty to home buys, relationships, health, financial tips and great interviews with interesting women.

Glamorous and gutsy as well as frank and intimate, *Cosmopolitan* celebrates being a woman by recognising that women today are stronger, braver and more exceptional than ever.

Good Housekeeping is marketed on a practical level, using the noun phrases 'vital information', 'useful advice', 'subjects relevant to their lives', and 'tips'. In other words, it aims giving women concrete information they can use to help determine *what they do* in their everyday lives. On the other hand, *Cosmopolitan* is marketed with a series of adjectives: 'glamorous', 'gutsy', 'frank', 'intimate', 'stronger', 'braver' and 'more exceptional'. These are a conflation of adjectives which describe the magazine and 'women today', but could equally be considered a description of what the aspiring reader could become if she reads the magazine. *Cosmopolitan*, then, aims at helping women determine *who they are*. Interestingly, the adjectives used by *Cosmopolitan* are ones which may at one time have been more traditionally associated with men.

I was interested to see what headlines each magazine used to grab their readers attention. I was also interested to see what number of adverts each contained and what type of products were being promoted in each due to their different target readerships.

Some of the headlines on the cover of *Good Housekeeping* (2006) were;

- '10 SURPRISING WAYS to look and feel younger',
- '£309 SAVED in the great GH beauty sale'
- and '15 WINTER COATS to flatter your shape'

All of these refer to physical appearance and presuppose that women want to look younger, more beautiful and would only really need a winter coat to 'flatter' them - not to keep them warm or dry! All relate to a manufactured superficial desire to look good, or the magazines' interpretation of this and all require a purchase of some material item to do so.

Likewise, *Cosmopolitan* (Jan 2007) targets an entirely different readership, with the following headlines on the front cover:

- 'What men wish you knew ABOUT SEX'
- '5 CELLULITE ZAPPING TRICKS THAT ACTUALLY WORK (AND DON'T HURT)'
- 'Consult the orgasm oracle. We've found one for every occasion!'

These headlines seem to suggest that *Cosmopolitan's* readers should be preoccupied by both their own sexual gratification and also those of the men in their lives! Whilst this may be relevant to a proportion of readers it makes the assumption that the readers are involved in a relationship or are sexually active. There is a risk that the women reading this magazine will feel that they have something to live up to. In addition, there is no mention of contraception or safe sex in these headlines, and women could go out seeking

this type of experience with little thought of their own emotional or sexual health.

The headlines could also be seen as contributing to the creation of body image insecurities for women. For instance, a completely normal physical appearance of the skin, which is not unhealthy in any way, is given a name 'cellulite', and then treated as a problem which must be solved.

Both magazines use a variety of fonts, eye catching headlines, hyperbole and alliteration, 'orgasm oracle' (Cosmopolitan Jan 2007), to grab their readers attention. They also feature 'real life stories', a confessional buddy type ploy where the reader can either identify with or pity someone else's real life experience. They play on human interest. All these draw the readers in, but the ultimate commercial purpose of the magazine, to sell advertising space and encourage a 'buying mood', is never mentioned.

Once inside the magazines the number of adverts is overwhelming. Inside *Good Housekeeping* there are 48 adverts and inside *Cosmopolitan* there are 66! Both feature numerous adverts for perfume, make up and hair products all of which feature implausibly beautiful women, air brushed to perfection and who in no way reflect the real women who read the magazine. The danger is that if women try to aspire to this look, they will inevitably fail and then potentially suffer from feelings of inadequacy, stress and anxiety. They may be persuaded to purchase these items in an attempt to replicate the images they see, thus contributing to the consumerist society that we live in which our planet cannot sustain.

I will focus on two adverts that I found interesting and which steered away from beauty products. These were still aimed at women, trying to tap into their desires and needs and offering them a quick fix. The first advert was by a supermarket chain promoting a simple bottle of water and the second for some rather expensive looking laminate flooring.

The first advertisement was for SPAR shops, showcasing their special offer on Evian mineral water (Good Housekeeping Jan 2007). It features a relatively attractive woman, dressed for exercise and reasonably trim, but with a slightly sagging stomach. She is looking into a large full-length mirror and frowning, and the words 'What a feeling!' are superimposed prominently in a sagging font. 'What a feeling!' is a direct quote from a song in the 1983 film, *Flashdance*, in which a very fit beautiful woman is seen exercising in front of a mirror. There is therefore a strong sense of irony to the caption and the picture. At the bottom of the ad, the follow appears in a small font:

Dawn Hardy didn't feel too confident about returning to the gym, so she went to SPAR and stocked up on lots of healthy stuff instead, including Evian 75cl for just 45p

The advert personalises the woman by giving her a name, and uses the third person throughout. This is an interesting use of language because if the advertisement had used the second person 'you' ('Are *you* not feeling too confident about returning to the gym?')

Go down to SPAR'), it would risk directly insulting the reader. Clearly though, the advertiser is hoping that the reader will identify with the marginally overweight model, lose the confidence to appear in the public setting of the gym, and instead purchase the mineral water. This subtly implies that confidence depends on physical shape, which is an overwhelmingly powerful message from the media.

Readers, then, may identify with Dawn Hardy's reluctance to get back to exercise, just after Christmas, and the ad is implicitly suggesting that with a shape too embarrassingly large even to go to the gym, similar results can be achieved by buying a bottle of water! A quick fix, material purchase will reap the same rewards as exercise. Clearly this is not the case, and advertisers seem to be trying to create and use dissatisfaction with body image in order to sell. The bigger picture is that, as well as having a potentially negative affect on the reader, every bottle of water purchased uses vital resources: plastic derived from oil, energy to process the materials and transport them and, ultimately rubbish for landfill if not disposed of responsibly. None of this is necessary since all a reader needs to do is grab a drink of tap water and go for a nice long walk.

The second advert I found is by a company called Quick Step (Good Housekeeping Jan 2007) for laminate flooring. The advert features a woman in a black cocktail dress reclining elegantly on an expensive-looking sofa, in front of a window with a beautiful view of grassy plains, green trees, and blue skies behind her. It creates the ultimate image of high class. The room she is in is tastefully decorated, with a camera angle which places the warm red 'wooden' floor in the foreground while the woman is in the background. The title reads, 'Natural floor designs by quick-step'. The word 'natural' is cleverly placed to be ambiguous as to whether it is modifying the word 'floor' or 'designs'. In this case it is modifying the word 'designs' because the floor is entirely made from artificial laminates.

The wording goes on to describe the beauty of the rare Asian wood, Merbau. It points out how easy it is to have the alternative - laminate flooring! They emphasise how it is durable and easy to clean. By highlighting how rare the tree is they are suggesting that it can create an image of discernment, which matches the image of the high class reclining woman. They invite the reader to 'add charm to your interior.' This advertisement taps into class insecurities, suggesting that whatever class or income the reader is, they can have what previously only the rich could have - a charming and elegant interior. This has the danger of creating a spiral of dissatisfaction, consumption and waste, as people discard their old flooring, furniture and interior items in order to buy new ones and 'keep up with the Joneses' who are undoubtedly doing the same.

The final item I will focus on is a leaflet enclosed in Cosmopolitan. This was for a credit card from Capital One. It features a picture of a card with a 'cute', digitally enhanced pink pig with an oversized snout peering out from it. The header 'Invitation to apply' seems to suggest that this is a personal invitation and coupled with the statement 'over 10,000 people worldwide accepted every day' it seems to be indicating an exclusive club of some sort. The customer is encouraged to 'look inside' and to 'choose your card design'. There is an assumption that this is a done deal. Once inside the list of benefits

jumps out of the page. ‘You will enjoy’ amongst other things;

- Credit limit between £200 and 2500
- Credit limit increase on your 4th statement
- Choose your favourite card design
- Cash just when you need it
- 5 minute freepost application.

The massive 34.9% APR is tucked away at the bottom of the page, as if it is less important than the cuteness of the picture on the card ‘your favourite card design’. Details on interest rates are in small type on a plain white background. This is another quick fix looking to appeal to the consumerist member of society who wants everything now but risks running up debt, which can affect their stress levels, happiness and other aspects of life. Ironically, the pictures on the cards celebrate the natural world: a zebra, a leopard, a lion, a picture of the earth, even though these are exactly what is being threatened by over-consumption.

Conclusion

Having carried out this research into a very small area of the media it seems we live in a consumer society, driven by the artificially created desires for material possessions and a convenient life. We seem to have forgotten about life’s simple pleasures and are always looking for the ‘quick fix’. We almost live in a virtual world, detached from real experience and desensitised to the impact our actions may have. The prospect may appear bleak but there is hope that through education and challenging the socially constructed ‘norm’, as individuals we may make a difference. It is not necessary to believe the hype and the information that the media and advertisers feed us. By looking at language in a more analytical way it is possible to see through this and make decisions based on common sense which will benefit our quality of life as well as on a larger global basis.

References

- Cosmopolitan*, UK edition (Jan 2007)
Good Housekeeping, UK edition (Jan 2007)
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