




Female gender representation in selected South African magazines



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Background: There has been an increase in the number of women's magazines in South Africa, which also contributes to the country's economic growth and development.

Objective: Magazines serve as a source of entertainment and information and they cater for readers interested in learning more about what features in society and even globally, which underscores the importance of quality and gender-sensitive material. The portrayal of females in magazines surfaced as a source of interest in the light of women's liberation and gender equity.

Method/Results: The purpose of this study was to explore the language and content of selected South African women's magazines. The objectives were to determine how language and content are used to represent females in selected South African women's magazines; and determine the professional editors', journalists' and readers' perceptions of the representation of females in the selected English women's magazines.

Conclusion: A qualitative case study design was used, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from the selected participants. The corpus spanned three professional journalists and nine readers, including seven females and five males, purposefully selected, who participated. The data collected through interviews were analysed and thematically discussed. Readers' reception aesthetics were used, in conjunction with feminist literary criticism, as theoretical lenses.

Contribution: The study found that sexualisation and objectification continue especially in advertisements, but that much progress has been made in magazines to represent women as powerful and significant.

Keywords: gender; presentation, South African magazines; reception aesthetics; feminism.

Introduction

The media, embracing newspapers and magazines, play a pivotal role in the portrayal of females and report on the way the perceptions of women have changed; they underscore the way views and opinions surface in the realm of reading as a form of entertainment. Women mainly feature in magazines as aesthetic decorations, and an incremental patriarchal view of females has been central in the portrayal of females (Govender 2015:2). The perception that women are merely decorative in magazines attracted much attention since the modern woman's role has changed. The etymology of the word *magazine* can be traced to the Arabic word *makhzan* indicating a storehouse, since originally a magazine was a place where goods were stored. Women's magazines represent a store of women's views on what happens in real life. Readers interpret this depiction and identify with what is presented. They copy the trends communicated in the magazines. Magazines have become an inseparable part of mass media, and society enjoys them as a source of entertainment, relaxation, and information on topical issues (Gupta 2022:1).

Women's magazines embody perspectives of women's roles in society and are extremely influential; they have shifted from fashion only to include commodities (Gupta 2022:1). They cover not only female empowerment but also the traditional function in which they are being engaged in domestic duties, such as child rearing and taking care of the family's needs. Authors focus in much of their work on the domestic role and marketing of products. They create the impression that women can obtain their emancipation from a patriarchal system through buying beauty products and wearing fashionable clothes (Dillon & Connell 2017:1).

Note: †, 1995–2021.

Problem statement

The objectification and sexualisation of females have been a contentious issue since time immemorial as women were first cast in their domestic roles and only gradually as sexual beings who are more interested in beauty and make-up than anything else. As time passed women were no longer recognised as balanced human beings, while their role in society was not acknowledged, even though many females entered the corporate world and became part of the global economy. The one-sided portrayal of females has been a problem, especially in an emancipated society in which females wish to have their voices heard. It is also true that females are more in number than males and not always fairly catered for. The relationship between magazines and society, as well as the magazine's role as a 'social barometer' for that society, have long been recognised (Rabe 2019:207). Rabe (2019:208) argues that magazines are recognised as active role players in a complicated and forever-changing society, leading debates to take action to promote transformation.

Ethical issues

Ethical issues are challenges or events that force a person or organisation to choose between what must be judged as right (ethical) or incorrect (unethical) (Fleming & Zegwaard 2018:205). The Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) provided ethical clearance.

Confidentiality was further achieved by storing data at the university who granted ethical clearance for the study. Participation was voluntary and personal information is protected as data are only accessible to researchers. The storage of the data was secured and only the researcher and supervisors have access to the data. The data provided by the participants were used only for the purposes of this study. Informed consent was sought to conduct the interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

Literature review

The relevant theories that underpinned the study are discussed next.

Theoretical background: Feminist literary criticism and reception aesthetics

Feminism

Women played a significant role in South Africa's history and have lately featured more prominently, as their contributions have been recognised only recently. History has evidenced a phase in the oppression of women and their endeavour for equal rights in society was ignored for quite some time. The focus in the past was not only on rectifying inequalities regarding racial discrimination, since white people were mostly privileged, but there was also a tendency to grant men more privileges than women, particularly with regard to leadership (South African History Online [SAHO] 2017:1).

Feminism was, therefore, of specific relevance to this study. Guo (2018:1) asserts that feminists regard language as an

inseparable part of the movement for the liberation of females. Women's lives and their achievements must be recognised and not ignored. Women must be released from oppression and sexual exploitation. Feminists also focus on how the relationship between males and females can be changed to afford females a fair position in society, liberated from restriction, allowing them to participate in the economy. The sexist use of language is an injustice against females; for example, referring to women in unflattering terms. Continual representation of females in offensive words may impact the way members of society think about the use of language and may also affect perceptions of females as the weaker sex.

Feminists changed the way women were oppressed and focused attention on equal treatment, opportunities, jobs and the right to vote. Females are no longer pregnant and only useful in the kitchen, but have jobs, become medical doctors, engineers and mechanics. Equality, also in effect, does not mean similarity; that is, the differences between males and females are not denied. Moreover, the topic of sensitising society regarding female rights and exploitation as sexual objects has by no means gone out of fashion (Loots 2018:26).

Reception aesthetics

Reception aesthetics were also part of the study, since studying language and gender stereotyping in magazines also involves reader responses to the text and the phenomenon at hand. Iser's work is of relevance, too, as he is concerned with readers' response. He claims a text must be experienced by a reader and not just seen as a mere object. Iser (1978:4) focuses on the implied reader, literary repertoire, the text-reader relationship and the reading strategies involved. The reader has the task of building consistency and constantly engages in the readjustment of perceptions when reading a text. Readers are involved in that they are continually adjusting their expectations as the imagination transforms the text as they read. Iser underscores the ideal reader's contribution to make meaning of a text (Mambrol 2016:1).

The readers' historical repertoire is activated through reader engagement with the relevant text. The reading strategies involve the conditions under which the text was created (Mambrol 2016:1). Another proponent who is of relevance is Jauss (1982:7) who identifies the horizon of expectations which is observed through genre, allusion, and poetic language. He focuses on reading against the grain, which implies the interpretation of the text beyond what appears on the page; it involves the implied question, what is the answer, who assumes the shape of the text as norms and how conventions of a community are affected by readers' criticism (Mambrol 2016:2).

Gender stereotyping

Gender stereotypes are more unique than the biological characteristics that distinguish men from women. In various cultures, gender stereotypes may be defined by social behaviours, showing women to be different from men and

may even affect their opportunities when participating publicly (Hakimi le Grand 2021:1). Gender inequality remains an important factor in affecting the status of men and women in society. Men are generally considered leaders, because they are perceived as ambitious, rational and logical, while women are viewed as comfortable and caring at home (Biddle 2018:1). For the purposes of this study, the focus was on how women are portrayed in selected women's magazines in South Africa. The syntactic and vocabulary features that characterise female sexism embrace the use of pronouns, expressive vocabulary, irony and exaggeration. The construction of gender awareness in modern magazines, or advertisements, is a sensitive issue observed by many critics. Although advertising and the movement towards gender equality are often intertwined, as observed in magazines, the use of women's sexual excess and gender stereotypes remain prominent in contemporary advertising. Children copy parents' gender norms; therefore, stereotypes have an impact on children's self-perception. Advertising and marketing influence the process of gender socialisation, and has the potential to promote female empowerment (Ali Haque & Laryea-Adjei 2021:1).

The use of language in magazines

Using language in magazines embraces vocabulary and visuals. Kahane (2015:1) asserts that language is verbal, written and visual, all part of human communicative activity; therefore visuals are included.

Vocabulary in South African magazines

Since women's and consumer magazines generally feature the use of informal words, the lexical units in the colloquial layer may be considered. Kozlowski et al. (2022:1) conducted research on word frequency to investigate female portrayal in magazines and found in their study that words linked to family surfaced as obvious vocabulary on topics such as children, fashion and family, which are prevalent. The topic of women as sex objects also emerged in their investigation but the topic seemed to have disappeared recently, as more scientific topics were gradually incorporated. They observed the more frequent use of words like *abortion*, *feminism* and *horoscope* in the magazines that they studied. It emerged from their study that there has been a growing awareness of female representation and female rights.

Visuals as language in magazines

Visual language is considered a communication system that includes the recognition, understanding, and generation of visual symbols (semiotics) (Kahane 2015:1). Charts, maps, photographs and images are all considered visual languages. Language and visual communication are parallel and independent ways of human interchange. Considering images, it is essential that photographs used in magazines should be chosen in view of a purposeful feminist stance to uplift women and afford them equal status to men. The development of visuals as a parallel realm to literacy is referred to as graphicacy (Kahane 2015:2).

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020:3) emphasise that visuals must be interpreted within the parameters of society as the ideational meaning may differ for readers. They also propose that the arrangement and composition of the text influence interpretation, underscoring the fact that the visual mode has been neglected. Grammatical signifiers act as resources for 'acknowledging' the interpretation of experiences when interacting with the text. Understanding visuals derives from cultural change and networks impacted by the global power of the Western mass media and technologies (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2020:5). Representation, when involving visuals, is about sign-making, influenced by the cultural orientation and psychological history of the designer. Framed by the environment and the sign-maker, visuals must signify meaning, and communicate through the representational mode (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2020:6). Apart from the visual input, magazines also share cultural ideologies that are interpreted by readers across the globe due to translations (Gupta 2022:1). Cultural perceptions of language and visuals are thus also important.

Akestan et al. (2021:64) conducted research on the effects of gender stereotypes on consumers of different genders to investigate how people are portrayed in advertisements. Gender roles have been part of advertising since time immemorial and have a long history. There is an increasing awareness of gender roles and *femvertising* and *dadvertising* in the advertising business. Readers are aware of the effect that gender stereotypes and portrayals may achieve. It may affect consumers in restricting themselves to perceive themselves as certain stereotypes in the way others see them. Akestan et al. (2021:65) also state that there is more research on how females are stereotyped than how men are stereotyped. The reason for that might be the fact that females are more subjected to stereotypes and this phenomenon may draw attention away from men. Women are subjected to sexual objectification, but it was found in recent research that sexualised advertising can be experienced as self-objectification by both males and females as well (Gupta 2022; Karsay, Knoll & Matthes 2018:10).

Creating stereotypes may limit people in the process of development, as in the case of limiting people to a particular product, or a particular profession in general identified by other stereotypes; also advertising in magazines can be interpreted as a projection of both masculinity and femininity in society. The communication of positive gender norms in advertising and marketing may assist in the promotion of gender equality which is in the interest of children (Ali Haque & Laryea-Adjei 2021:1).

Methodology

Design

The research design refers to the overall strategy that the researcher chooses to integrate the different components of the study in a coherent and logical way, thereby ensuring that the research problem is addressed effectively. It constitutes

the blueprint for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data (Tomaszewski, Zarestky & Gonzalez 2021:2; Yazan 2015:134). Yazan (2015:135) asserts that in a case study in-depth knowledge is developed to understand a complex phenomenon in a real-life situation. Therefore, for the purpose of this study we chose the case study design. We examined the participants' responses and the use of language and representation of women in the selected magazines viz.: *Bona*, *You* and *TrueLove*. We also focused on issues of transition in which magazines show women in a specific manner within settings.

Research paradigm

An interpretivist research paradigm was used as I was interested in lived experiences and documental analysis of how females are projected in the selected magazines. Interpretivists help to understand the interpretation of the world. This is ideal if the researcher needs specific insight into real-world experiences and participants' perceptions. For the purposes of this study, interpretivism facilitated the understanding of participants' use of English as a medium of written communication, as clearly stated in many women's magazines, based on the reader's experience (Al Riyami 2015:2349).

Research approach

Tomaszewski et al. (2021:1) posit that the research approach is a guideline to make choices about the research methods that must be applied to achieve the intended goal. We opted for the qualitative research approach in this study. The qualitative research approach is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems. Tomaszewski et al. (2021:2) maintain that a qualitative approach is used when the researcher intends to understand human behaviour. Consequently, since the study aimed to examine the linguistic and content analysis of female gender representation in selected South African women's magazines, a qualitative approach suited the study well.

Population and sample

A population is a group of people whom the researcher intends to study. According to Gentles, Charles and Ploeg (2015), a population encompasses the total collection of all units of analysis about which the researcher wishes to draw conclusions. The research was conducted in Pretoria (Gauteng province). The sample population consisted of 12 participants (3 journalists and 9 readers) who were approached to provide information during semi-structured interviews. There were also male readers among the participants, as not only females read magazines. Due to COVID-19 only three professional journalists and nine readers participated. Initially six journalists would participate, but COVID-19 caused many challenges in accessing participants, so semi-structured interviews were the most viable. Access to the journalists was delayed due to

the restrictions of lockdown and social distancing. The data for this project were gathered through semi-structured interviews and participants were tape recorded.

According to Gentles et al. (2015:1772), the most suitable sampling method for case studies is purposeful sampling, while viewing a study as purposeful must be validated. Purposive sampling was used in my study, because the researcher realised the importance of journalists as experts, as well as the role readers play to comment on what is published; therefore, rich information was sought. Purposive sampling is also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, and is a form of non-probability sampling in which researchers rely on their own judgment when choosing members of the population to participate in their surveys.

Data collection

This study used semi-structured face-to-face verbal interviews as suggested by Tomaszewski et al. (2020:1). Because of COVID-19, groups posed too many practical problems. The author(s) did so to gain a detailed picture of the participants' beliefs about, or perceptions or account of, a particular topic. Interviews are useful, especially when the topic is complex, controversial, and/or personal. The other reason for the adoption of semi-structured interviews was to draw motives from participants that would inform their deep-seated honest feelings.

Data analysis

The participants' responses were analysed and coded as themes surfaced. Coding was used and descriptive words were added to segments. Segments were underlined in the interviewer's texts, and coding was done as suggested by Tomaszewski et al. (2020:2). Themes were then identified by studying the codes which revealed the prominence of female portrayal in terms of language and content. Journalists working at Media24, and specifically for *Bona*, *You* and *TrueLove*, participated. Readers of these magazines were also interviewed since the readers' perspectives were important. Their details are provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Participants' profile.

| Magazines | Participant and codes | Gender | Age | Ethnicity |
|-------------------------------|--|--------|-----|------------------|
| Magazine 1 <i>Bona</i> | PJM1f: Professional Journalist, Magazine 1 | Female | 28 | African: isiZulu |
| | R1M1m: Reader 1 Magazine 1 | Male | 25 | African: isiZulu |
| | R2M1f: Reader 2 Magazine 1 | Female | 52 | African: isiZulu |
| | R3M1f: Reader 3 Magazine 1 | Female | 20 | Coloured |
| Magazine 2 <i>You</i> | PJM2f: Professional Journalist, Magazine 2 | Female | 30 | African: isiZulu |
| | R1M2m: Reader 1 Magazine 2 | Male | 35 | African: isiZulu |
| | R2M2m: Reader 2 Magazine 2 | Male | 42 | African: isiZulu |
| | R3M2f: Reader 3 Magazine 2 | Female | 26 | Indian: English |
| Magazine 3 <i>TrueLove</i> | PJM3m: Professional Journalist, Magazine 3 | Male | 32 | African: isiZulu |
| | R1M3m: Reader 1 Magazine 3 | Male | 27 | African: isiZulu |
| | R2M3f: Reader 2 Magazine 3 | Female | 26 | African: isiZulu |
| | R3M3f: Reader 2 Magazine 3 | Female | 35 | White: English |

Findings

Below is a discussion of the findings from the study.

Theme 1: Portrayal of women in women's magazines – Content and language

Magazine readers (R2M1f, R1M2m, R2M2m and R1M3m) expressed their concerns, based on their perception of the presentation of females in women's magazines. They mentioned that they were of the view that women are not always represented well in magazines covering topics regarding females. Female reader 1 magazine 1 (R1M1f) said that women's articles usually do not focus on the self-development aspect of life in general. It also emerged that the language used by journalists is linked to the perception of females as the nurturing gender. When reporting on the content, the use of vocabulary formed an integral part of the response to women. Words such as *beauty*, *body* and *physical appearance* often featured, even in headlines. The following verbal quotes are from the readers to support this:

Female reader 1 magazine 1 (R1M1f) said:

'Women are depicted as people who focus on materialistic things like fashion, accessories and romance. Words that are used are e.g. *lifestyle*, *beauty* and *sex lives*. The vocabulary portrays women as people who are less concerned about their self-advancement and education in their endeavours. Words such as *beauty* and *physique* are used to depict females as the sex linked with physical *beauty*. Women in this regard are only featured in articles when they have achieved something. For instance, Miss South Africa only featured after she won the title. However, Miss SA's consistent efforts or the process to enter is not often covered.'

Female reader 2 magazine 3 (R2M3f) opined:

'The magazines portray females as hard workers and people who can conquer anything that comes their way when they are united and focused. For example, the magazine *TrueLove* is mainly about celebrating women and supporting them.'

Female reader 2 magazine 3 (R2M3f) further elaborated:

'Advertisements do not reflect reality in society. Women have been portrayed in stereotypical roles for years. Typical stereotypes include the adoptive mother or attractive woman.'

Male reader 3 magazine 2 (R1M3m) was of the view that:

'Most South African females nowadays are portrayed as hustlers, successful business personas, protective mothers, romantic partners, fragile and sensitive individuals, strong, caring, kind, and revengeful due to bad experiences, spiteful, housewives, and some celebratory individuals are portrayed as intelligent persons.'

Based on the above responses, it can be inferred that some participants were of the view that females were indeed portrayed in a positive light (R1M3m and R2M3m). The responses supporting this view came from two male participants. The way females are depicted also bears testimony to the way their freedom is affected. It was reported

that some readers who enjoy female magazines try to defend themselves and to focus on magazines' positive attributes. In addition, there were those (R1M1f and R2M3f) who, as readers, think that women are not respected in the public space and are being used as objects to sell the products in advertisements.

Female reader 3 magazine 2 (R3M2f) said:

'Some contents are completely unacceptable as nude women are shown publicly, which makes most people to lose respect for that person. Sometimes they dress up as physically decorated women, who are characterised as a woman who symbolises the physical ideal image.'

Female reader participant R2M1 said:

'In my opinion, women magazine content has turned women into objects, or ornaments especially in advertisements, where they wear revealing clothes and are used to sell products. This has not changed much from the previous years.'

Female professional journalist of magazine 1 (PJM1f) said:

'Women are depicted in various contexts; if there is a woman that is doing amazing work in the community, she will be in that publication. If there is a woman, for instance, maybe a first black CEO, she will be included in the publication. Any women who are breaking barriers will always be included in publications. *TrueLove* and *Bona* have always been focusing on black women who are doing amazing things whether in the workplace, as parents or in the community or leadership.'

She continued to say:

'I do love the fact that we cover positive stories about them, sharing what they do for the community, and what they do for their children at work especially when they are profiled like women who are succeeding to achieve extraordinary milestones, but in the same vein I do sometimes feel like the advice given to women, especially when it deals with their sexual performance, and the need to keep a man happy and how to make him stay or how to make sure he enjoys sex are always about what women must do.'

Female professional journalist of magazine 2 (PJM2f) said:

'At the two magazines that I have worked for, the portrayal of females, and the visuals that they use are fine to me. The two magazines that I was engaged in have always focused on *body* positivity and the tendency to use skinny models is no longer a requirement. Magazines nowadays use big women, skinny women and all types of women, but the magazines with largely white readers always use skinny women and they are perfect. This sends out the wrong message to those who do not manage to imitate these high standards. The magazines with more black readers like *TrueLove* and *Bona* portray women of all body types.'

Male professional journalist of magazine 3 (PJM3m) said:

'Gender bias is reflected behind the scenes; there is gender bias but also in the actual magazine itself you would see articles about everything on how to please your man, what to do for your man and all those things. Most magazines depict women as incomplete without men.'

Furthermore, all three the journalists, involved as participants, said the magazines catering for black readers are not so focused on skinny models. They also use larger size models to teach the readers about being balanced and beautiful despite a fuller figure.

The professional journalist of magazine 1 (PMJ1f) said:

'We do try to pick formidable females to entertain and serve our readers. We are also aware that equality must be addressed and that males cannot be portrayed as the superior gender. Advertising, however, complicates matters because advertisers support the magazines and we are a business who must pay our employees.'

Theme 2: Gender equality

It was reported that basic human rights entail that all human beings are equal and must be treated with respect and dignity. Women are in jeopardy because of the gender bias detected in women's magazines. The focus was to check the imbalance in the treatment of women when comparing their position in relation to that of their male counterparts. The aim was also to hear what the participants thought about the overall view of women's submissiveness or oppression in magazines. To address this theme, readers were asked to share their views on the inequalities portrayed in magazines. Their responses showed their dissatisfaction with the way women are treated and projected in magazines. They pointed out inequalities portrayed by magazines and focused on the way women are held accountable to be nurturers who are mainly responsible for their husbands' well-being.

The following is from male reader 1 of magazine 2 who responded (R1M2m), on gender bias reflected in the selected magazines:

'My view is that magazines in most cases favour women.'

Reader 3 of magazine 1 (R3M1f) said:

'The magazine simply says commit to and look after your husband or boyfriend so it is not just about you only; there is no statement that says a man should also be fair towards a woman.'

Reader 2 of magazine 3 (R2M3f) mentioned:

'In most cases, men are more likely to be represented in work situations and in senior management positions than women.'

In the development of movements related to raising awareness and reporting on gender stereotypes, discrimination and abuse surfaced, and it was pointed out that women must be viewed as equal to men. The assumption was that negative attitudes towards women and the abuse of power are conducive to a hostile environment for women.

Reader participant of magazine 1 (R1M1m) said:

'Yes, they are if there is a feature where women are treated as housekeepers whereas men are wearing suits showing progress in life.'

Reader participant 2 of magazine 1 (R2M1f) opined:

'Yes, women are depicted as submissive to men, as women are groomed naturally and culturally to be submissive. There are discussions on how to be a good wife or a girlfriend to your husband but there are no discussions with men on how they should be good husbands or boyfriends.'

Reader 2 of magazine 2 (R2M2m) said:

'No, it is just that women are not able to speak up whenever they have problems, unlike men.'

The journalists were a bit defensive as they said that the magazines were aware of equality and portrayal of females as strong and equal to men.

Professional journalist magazine 2 (PJM2f) said:

'We feature females in strong positions on our cover pages to put across the message that females are afforded their rightful position. We do focus on equality.'

Theme 3: The influence of women's magazines on readers

This theme discusses the influence that magazines have on readers and the focus is on whether they are portrayed as positive or negative. Furthermore, the idea was to determine whether magazines influence readers positively, regarding the fair perception of women as an equal gender. The following responses were provided.

Reader 1 of magazine 1 (R1M1m) opined:

'Women's magazines use the images of pretty, good-looking females; also, feminine beautiful places can be satisfying to one's intellect. Readers are attracted to these ladies who serve as role models.'

Reader 3 of magazine 1 (R3M1f) said:

'Women's magazines exert a positive influence on women. They are relevant to women's lives, for instance some articles are inspirational like they feature successful businesswomen. Magazines further give tips on healthy living, diets and how to exercise; it also provides guidance on skin care as we know women love their skins.'

Reader 3 of magazine 2 (R3M2f) said:

'Magazines have an influence on women because they teach women a lot. I would say women's magazines are the diary of a woman. Even if you do not have friends, magazines will accompany you. As women we learn new trends, fashion, cooking, even motoring, because some women do not have enough knowledge about cars, so magazines play an important role in teaching women.'

Professional journalist of magazine 3 (PJM3m) said:

'We are aware that readers must be respected and entertained as they pay to read our magazines. Magazines are purposeless if not read by the readers. Buying the magazines is the last part of the communication chain and we must render a service that is up to standard.'

Theme 4: The role of advertising

Advertising may have evolved over time to become a tool for entering the consumer society, but it is also a tool for exchanging meaning in the use of products and services in today's world. Women's fashion magazines have become a popular advertising tool; advertising is viewed as an extremely sensational way of conducting marketing in modern society involving using the media to persuade the audience to buy products. The focus on the objectification of women has become a crucial aspect in advertising and taboo-smashing marketing has become central to combat this tendency (Royle 2020).

Professional journalist of magazine 1 (PJM1f) opined:

'Advertising is about selling products and making a profit. It is a business. Advertisers pay the magazine to publish their advertisements. We do decide on the acceptability of these visuals and concentrate on avoiding nude pictures as the magazines are not pornographic in essence.'

Professional journalist of magazine 3 (PJM3m) said:

'The advertisements used are linked with the topic of our magazine and that is to provide guidance on true love, how to find it and how to be happy. We are careful indeed of what we publish.'

It was found that even though women's magazines influence the readers in promoting the role of females by sending a message to multitudes of readers, a careful selection of visuals and adverts remains the focal point. Promoting women depends on the magazines' journalists. The magazine plays a great role in the intellectual training of women, and exerts a powerful influence on women because it is progressive and educates women.

Reader 1 of magazine 1 (R1M1m) was of the opinion that:

'I love reading magazines and finding out more about new useful products is important. We do that through reading through the advertisements. Yet, women are featured as objects and little attention is paid to add words to describe her leadership qualities.'

Discussion of findings

Discussion of theme 1: Portrayal of women in women's magazines – content and language

It was revealed that magazines sometimes portray females in an inappropriate way. Women's nudity is displayed publicly, which may cause most people to lose respect for females. This negative way of representing women affects the way readers perceive females. The women in the magazine are seen by readers as inappropriate objects; it affects the readers as audience since readers may follow the examples that they see in magazines.

It emerged that there was a gradual and growing coverage of real women in magazines; however, some stereotypical representations may continue to prevail. On the other hand,

the content of women's magazines promotes the realistic personal growth of women and improves their physical confidence, which may lead to irrational assumptions about unrealistic expectations of women to reduce their self-esteem and confidence.

Broderick (2017:1) comments on the way females are represented and says that even though there has been a slight shift in the way they are exhibited, they are still seen as archetypes of beauty. She asserts that the most damaging part may be traced to visuals appearing in magazines when females are merely used as fillers to appear in the background. They are not characterised as protagonists unless it is for cleaning products. The role of women in magazines is, however, gradually changing to focus on other positive attributes. Broderick's (2017:1) findings correspond to the views as provided by the research participants in this study.

The professional journalists (PJM1f and PJM2f) reported that magazines provide a way for women to improve their appearance and transform, or change, and impact the perspective of readers. Journalists have recently focused on featuring females as more prominent instead of reflecting the idea of casting them as mere peripheral characters (Broderick 2017:1). Anjalin (2015:1) on the other hand found in her study that female stereotyping is rife in magazines, and that they are often afforded very limited roles, since they are frequently shown as sex objects. Unwomen (2020:1) holds that female stereotypes and the underrepresentation of women in the media impacted the way males behave towards females; disrespect and violence are recognised as ways in which discrimination against females surfaces.

The content of magazines is advancing strong businesswomen or women who are doing great jobs as mothers or doing whatever they prefer. The content strives to be positive but touches obviously also on negative experiences. The journalists opined that women are being shown as submissive to men, as well as incomplete without men. Female journalists (PJM1f and PJM2f) indicated that there is still a strong influence of older perceptions that men are superior to women and that women cannot be successful on their own. This view of women as subordinate to men was also observed by researchers such as Kuipers, Van der Laan and Arfini (2017:1982).

It was revealed that the unfair representation of females has not quite changed. Even though women do receive credit for achievements and the milestones they reach, they are still portrayed as dependent, sexually available and are lacking the same power as men. This view is also supported by Kuipers et al. (2017:1984). Even though participants reported a slight change by referring to the acknowledgement of female achievements, they are still less influential than men and in need of men. Gender inequality still prevails. Conventions are still in place and are less explicit regarding power, but more in the way female desirability surfaces (Kuipers et al. 2017:1985).

Discussion of theme 2: Gender equality

Overall, magazines continue to portray women and men in a stereotypical way that limits the perception of human capabilities. Typically, it was reported that men are seen as active, adventurous, strong willed, belligerent, and largely indifferent to human relationships. Cultural views about gender focused on the woman as submissive to the man. Women are sexualised as objects and the ones featuring in magazines are often young, beautiful, thin, passive, dependent, and sometimes incompetent and boring. It emerged that magazines present female characters that devote their energy to improving their appearance and caring for homes and people. Because the media permeate society, their gender-distorting ways may affect how the various genders perceive themselves and predict what is normal and desirable for men.

Locke (2019:1) asserts that bias in the workplace has been an age-old problem and is still a contentious issue. Critics maintain that equality laws have been encouraged and established to address the problem of gender inequality. The perception of men as superior to women is rooted in societal beliefs about gender and leadership role models.

The emphasis on physical attractiveness, has been addressed recently as advertising companies have been alerted to the tokenistic 'femvertising' as observed by the Advertising Standards Authority and an effort is made to avoid the objectification of females. The focus on the equality of the genders must not only receive annual pink-washing, but must be afforded attention to enjoy equal and respectful representation (Royle 2020:1).

Discussion of theme 3: The influence of women's magazines on readers

It emerged from the responses provided by the participants that magazines do exert a powerful influence on readers since many topics in the magazines are educational, for instance how to be a more effective leader at home and in society. Women love to read about physical beauty and health and magazines were reported to fill that gap. Readers were able to respond against their horizon of expectations and fill in the gaps in the magazine texts by learning how to be more efficient in their domestic lives *and* in society.

Discussion of theme 4: The role of advertising

Bayazit (2020:429) found in his study that visuals have a more powerful impact than language in advertising. He asserts that the portrayal of women in advertising is extremely powerful and that magazines must guard against objectification of the female body. Objectification of females, however, increases effectiveness and has an influence on magazine sales. Advertisers were found to deliberately objectify females to preclude them from progressing in life. Bayazit (2020:430) criticises magazines for exploiting women to advance their sales. Swift and Gould (2021:1) report that magazines incorporating advertisements set the gauge for

what is acceptable, or not, regarding the sexualisation and objectification of female bodies. Portraying women as sexual objects contributes to harmful gender stereotypes that may create the impression that it is normal to become violent against females. A stance that condones the objectification of female bodies encourages violence and sexualisation of the female gender.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- Magazine media contribute by building the knowledge base and raising awareness of gender issues. They can inspire readers to become educated consumers who will be able to make well-informed choices that contribute to their identity construction.
- Magazines must provide high-quality content that underscores the achievements of women from all walks of life. This will help to provide appropriate role models for women, as well as add to media transparency, accuracy, and integrity.
- Magazine journalists and professionals must avoid stereotypical representations and focus on modern-day aspects of femininity and masculinity, since it is impossible to have a perfect body.
- Readers may form part of the dialogue on gender equality and contribute by alerting magazines to their influential role and that magazines could make a difference by projecting females realistically and equal to men in magazines.

Conclusion

This study found that magazines have a considerable influence on readers and society, because of their representation, which adds to the perceptions of the world, as well as personal and social identities. Magazine content and language may be used as a vehicle to address the challenging inequalities of power and gender-based violence. This study found that stereotypical, patriarchal images of women continue to persist in magazine media, based on a qualitative analysis of how magazines present women and their influence on identity building. This finding supports the concerns raised by feminists that the problem regarding gender equality still needs attention. The reception theory underscores the role the reader plays in giving feedback to magazines and making their voice heard. Most of the content in the publications in this study represents women in stereotypical ways, as they are dismissed and limited by underestimating their achievements. Women are frequently objectified in magazines by being reduced to incidental characters as sex objects of men's desire. The subjective treatment of women in the media devalues the women's remarkable achievements. It was, however, also found that there has been a shift in perceptions and that women are increasingly shown as powerful people who could make a difference in society and their environment. Journalists must be alerted to their role in society when publishing content in

the media and they must be sensitised regarding the representation of females and gender equality.

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The authors declare that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

Since the student N.N.S. died after having passed her examination, C.G.S. wrote this article from her dissertation. It is allowed by our university to do that when a student passes away. She passed on just before the article could be written, so I, as main supervisor, wrote the article in cooperation with S.R.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by TUT, Faculty Committee for Research Ethics – Humanities (FCRE-HUM). The ethics clearance will be attached, as well as the student's death certificate. The student did quite well in her exams, and I am very keen to honour her memory, as well as her daughter by putting in an effort to attempt the submission and publication. She passed the exams so well. FCRE/APL/STD/2018/10.

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The supervisor confirms that the data supporting this article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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