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Performing Heteromascu^linities In South African Men's Magazines

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Internationally and locally, men's magazines have received little attention in comparison to women's magazines. Also, internationally and locally, most studies seem to explore representations of either femininity or masculinity by targeting women's or men's magazines respectively. But women's and men's magazines construct both masculinities and femininities in their contents. In South Africa, there is a relatively small pool of literature exploring the links between race and gender in both women's and men's magazines, and these again tend to privilege femininities.

This presentation comes out of a larger study exploring representations of race and gender, mediated by sexuality and class, in six South African English-medium magazines. These magazines are *Men's Health*, *FHM*, *Blink*, *Fair Lady*, *Femina* and *True Love*. This presentation however, only focuses on the men's magazines *FHM*, *Men's Health* and *Blink* between 2003 and 2005. It is also important to note here that *Blink* magazine stopped publishing in late 2006. What I hope to do here is discuss the ways in which privileges attached to one side of racialised and gendered dichotomies continue to be presented as normative in privately owned, profit-making South African men's glossy magazines. The discussion highlights my findings that men's magazines largely keep intact binaries of male/female; black/white and heterosexuality/homosexuality where one side of the dichotomy operates as invisible but normative. Further, the lack of educational articles (in magazines targeting white men in particular) on national

social challenges related to poverty, HIV/AIDS, homophobia, sexual violence and the like, appears to construct 'whiteness', 'maleness' and heterosexuality as normative and privileged subjectivities.

I will firstly talk a bit about my interviews with the editors of the magazines in my sample. Their views are important because they almost homogenously believed that their magazines presented a 'neutral' and 'objective' position.

1. Men's magazines (*Men's Health*, *FHM* and *Blink*): My findings

Despite the dominant view amongst editors that magazines are neutral and objective in terms of their representations of gender, sexuality and 'race' in both editorial and advertising content, my analysis of the magazines suggests that they tend to reinforce and sustain binaries of gender, sexuality and 'race' which are not transformative.

A. Editors' views on **neutrality and objectivity in magazines: gender, sexuality, 'race' and transformation**

There was the view that it was hard to be socially responsible in South Africa when the global market plays a huge role in determining what goes into editorialized versions local magazines. The global context within which the magazines were produced shaped and framed the choices around which South African stories could be published and which stories would be most 'marketable'. One editor remarked for instance:

It's not the job of the media to fight racism, sexism, homophobia, HIV/AIDS, poverty, TB or whatever. The media plays an important social role but it does not play judge and jury to whatever happens in society. We do have a responsibility to highlight and discuss social phenomena, but ultimately we afford the reader the respect to make her own judgments and opinions. The role that the media occupies – that fourth estate position we occupy is one that is free from bias and judgment (interview with editor of popular South African woman's magazine, 26th May 2006).

This type of view was common in my interviews with editors of magazines targeting male and female readers. Editors overwhelmingly took the position that their magazines reflected neutrality and objectivity. The overriding discourse in editors' opinions was that their magazines always aimed to be neutral and objective, in terms of the reflection of the types of material included on racism, homophobia, HIV/AIDS, sexism or poverty for instance, or in the decisions to exclude material of this type altogether.

B. Heteromascularity as normative through a variety of discourses on ideal masculinities and ideal femininities:

- ***Same-sex relationships as invisible or abnormal***

Between 2003 and 2005, articles on same-sex desire and relationships are generally non-existent. I found one article as a discussion of male homosexuality amongst black-African heterosexual middle-class men in *Blink* magazine during this period, and one in *FHM* constructing homosexuals as criminal and psychopathic (see image below). The reproduction of heterosexuality in the magazines as normative means that when homosexuality is not referred to jokingly, it is almost completely ignored, again reinforcing heterosexuality and pointing to the impossibility of ever producing a neutral publication. A white male deputy editor of a men's magazine narrated for example:

We once ran a story about how to use your gay friend to get a girl. That's the closest we've come. I don't think that's something we'll address. *Our magazine* has a high gay readership but regardless of the story being run, it always has a heterosexual dent. We ignore our homosexual readership. Our greater readership is heterosexual and quite conservative – he doesn't want to be associated with them. We have a very conventional readership and there is a need for us to avoid being associated as a gay magazine. We do cover issues about grooming ...but we wouldn't want to embrace the metrosexual term. You can moisturize but in a 'guy way' (my emphasis).

But these views were challenged by the African black male editor of *Blink* magazine, who insisted that magazines had a responsibility to educate readers about homosexuality:

We most definitely have an obligation to educate readers about homosexuality. A lot of gay men can identify although the tone of the magazine is heterosexual. *It has* a lot to do with male identities – men are grappling with who they are. It's an exciting time for masculinity – before there was a focus on women and women's issues. Rightfully so. Masculinity is now largely a reaction to women's emancipation. Men were always the hunters. Men have to adapt. Conversely, all these different types of men have emerged. *Blink has* a political conscience. We represent this kind of spirit (my emphasis).

- ***Heteromascularity and heterofemininity as biological and innate in Men's Health***

The presentation of (white) men as biologically programmed in *Men's Health* magazine tends to reinforce essentialist binaries of masculine/feminine in ways disguised by scientific authority. Examples of this biologically essentialist discourse include the views of a proclaimed neuroscientist called Daniel Amen in *Men's Health* magazine. Amen states for instance that all men and all women are programmed in particular ways:

Her brain acts very differently to yours. You're keyed in to beauty, shape, fantasy and obsession; on some biological level that she may be unaware of, she's trolling for a mate who will sire healthy children and protect and provide for her and them. And yes, maybe even buy them a family car...Her goals are programmed for the long range, whereas yours are often shockingly short term (*Men's Health*, February, 2005: 56).

Amen also states that adult men can't help but find young 'fertile' girls sexually attractive, as in the following statement: "Young, fertile teenage girls can be very appealing. It's innate...and dangerous...when those feelings are aroused, go for a walk, do the dishes, get out of the house" (2005: 56). Men, according to *Men's Health* just simply must have sex or there might be repercussions for everybody.

They are programmed that way while women are not. These types of discourses reinforce and reproduce the notion that male and female performances of heterosexuality are preordained, unchangeable and biological. Consequently, these types of discourses can be used to rationalize male rape of women and children in a society where gender roles are unequal and where women and children are unsafe.

- ***White heteromascullnity as predatory In FHM: porn watching and the need for multiple sex partners***

The construction of heterosexual men's desire for multiple female sex partners is most extensive in *FHM*, and is linked to the apparent fear of commitment within a monogamous relationship. The magazine claims for instance that "the only commitment you're ready for is your pre-order of *Grand Turismo 4*, but you're dying for some real action, like a one-night stand" (*FHM*, March 2005: 57). Complementing this construction of predatory heteromascullnity is the presentation of (white) men as avid pornography consumers, again existent only in *FHM*. In *FHM*, men are consistently presented as being unable to resist (white) women. For instance, the magazine claims that "man can endure many tortures, but a naked woman asking for sex is not one of them" (*FHM*, November 2004: 56) or worse still "The view between a naked lady's spread-eagled buttocks is something *FHM* will not easily forget" (January 2005: 35).

(White) men, according to *FHM*, are programmed to be on the look-out for heterosex, desire pornography, desire sex with multiple female partners and are incapable of resisting naked (white) women or (white) women offering sex for this reason. This construction defines (white) masculinities in very narrow terms, ways which sustain societal discourses of men as biologically heterosexual, in turn invisibilising same-sex desire between men and reproducing notions of male homosexuality as abnormal.

While the presentation of (hetero)masculinity as predatory is particularly rife in *FHM*, the presentation of African black and white men as ignorant and needing to be taught how to do (hetero)sex is particularly prevalent in *Men's Health* and *Blink* magazine.

- ***Heteromascularity as ignorant in Men's Health and Blink – teaching men how to do heterosex***

Men's Health and *Blink* often set up heterosexual men as ignorant of women's needs and desires in (hetero)sex and promises male readers positive sexual responses from women on the condition that they follow the how-to-do heterosex step-by-step guides. The focus is on sex and sexuality with the magazine endeavoring to explain a homogenous type of female sexuality to its homogenous group of male readers. One such example is the following: "Talking to her – about work, family, the news – is the greatest aphrodisiac for a woman because it establishes a bond of sharing that she equates with romance. To you, it's conversation. To her, its intimacy" (*Men's Health*, April 2005: 62).

The anxiety-provoking advice emanating from men's magazines place a substantial amount of pressure on men to perform (hetero)sexually. In *Men's Health* and *Blink*, African black and white men seem to be burdened with the responsibility of satisfying their passive female partners. These discourses, while presenting men as ignorant, also function to define women as a passive homogenous group who are recipients of male desire. In *Men's Health* and *Blink*, men are presented as responsible for women's sexuality in the ways that the magazines promise men sexual rewards from women through men's performances of romance, attention and proper etiquette during sexual encounters with women. In interviews with the editors of the magazines noted here but analysed elsewhere, the notion that magazines do not shape readers' perceptions and that magazines can therefore not "educate" their readers about issues of gender for instance, was rife amongst editors. Given this perspective, it seems contradictory that editorial contents in men's magazines find it necessary

to 'teach' men how to do (hetero)sex, and to advise them on an activity that should come naturally. And there is an additional paradox - even though men are told over and over again how to behave in order to procure sex with women, they are also told that their behaviour is biologically programmed. These conflicting discourses seem to jostle alongside each other very comfortably in the pages of *Men's Health*.

- ***Women as sex objects***

The objectification of women in the media has been widely argued and illustrated in feminist literature and within other disciplines. Most studies on representations of women in the media reflect the ways in which the female body is sexually objectified within *advertisements*. Three often competing and contradictory discourses contribute to the presentation of white and African black women as primarily sexual objects: women as passive sexual objects, women as active sexual objects and women performing for male pleasure.

The presentation of mostly white women as passive and vulnerable is not only pervasive in advertising contents within *FHM*, but cuts across various sites within the magazine (see images). In *Blink* magazine, the presentation of African black women as sexual objects is limited to the 'Sticky Pages' feature, a feature which presents women as two kinds of sexual objects at different points - passive sex objects and active sex objects (see images). Women - both black and white - in *FHM* and *Blink* are often presented in passive and vulnerable positions - lounging, standing or sitting - where attention is drawn to particular parts of their bodies which our society deems sexual - buttocks, breasts, legs, mouth, and where they are presented as 'available' to the male reader. When (white) women's bodies appear in imagery, they have more flesh exposed than male bodies, which seldom if ever appear even semi-naked either in *FHM* or *Blink*.

- **Women as active sexual objects**

But in *Blink* magazine, there is also another presentation of African black women – that of active sex objects. So while the images of these women are similar to *FHM*'s images of passive sexual objects, there are differences. An important one is that these African black women speak with a voice that simultaneously centralizes their physical bodies while also acknowledging that they are more than the sum of their body parts. An example is where a part-time model is also identified as a fifth-year medical student. On the one hand stereotypical gender roles are reinforced by presenting an image of Lungile Mthembu that focuses on her body and by recording that her ambition to be a doctor is because she wants to help people “the satisfaction I get from that is worth more than anything else” (May 2005: 21). And yet at the same time becoming a doctor is evidence of her agency.

Text that suggests that women are agents tends to be overwhelmed by a combination of images of women's sexualized bodies designed to appeal to male readers, alongside language meant to be titillating to male readers, and repeatedly articulates the message that women do not really control their sexualities, their bodies or their minds. Even when African black women are presented as persons in control of their choices as in *Blink*'s 'Sticky Pages', their bodies are still sexualised. Overall these images and texts combine to construct discourses that reflect the ways in which women's bodies – across racial constructs - operate as sites of oppression within a heteropatriachal system where they seem to have little agency in presenting themselves differently. But this is not the only set of representations of women in the magazines. The next section looks at the ways (white) women in *FHM* are depicted as performers in search of male attention in men's magazines.

- ***Women performing for male attention***

(White) women are often presented in *FHM* as performing in particular ways, where their sexualised bodies function as tools for (white) men's attention. One example in *FHM* for instance includes visual imagery of (white) women performing intoxicated in a bikini competition for men: "It's getting harder and harder to beat these college girls. Plus, I've got bruises all the way up and down my legs from the guys grabbing me" (January 2005: 90). There is a difference in *FHM* compared to *Blink* and *Men's Health* in terms of its presentation of women performing *sexually* for male titillation, echoing depictions of woman-woman sex in traditional heterosexual pornography targeting men (Dines, Jensen, Russo, 1998). While on the surface these images might appear that the women are pleasing themselves, the pictures and text make it very clear that the performance is for men's entertainment (see image).

But just in case anyone might think that women could really prefer women, the January 2005 edition emphasises that a woman being with another woman "doesn't make you a lesbian, it's just for fun...yeah, I need a man. There's gotta be a man in there!" (January 2005: 104). In other words, same-sex desire and/or relationships between women are not taken seriously in the men's magazines in my sample. Instead, same-sex practices between women are portrayed as unerotic between women, but as producing sexual arousal in men. In this way, the notion of women loving women is distorted so that it fits very comfortably within a heteropatriarchal framework where men are the definers of women's sexualities.

- ***The 'Blink Woman'***

There are presentations of African black women which challenge the construction of women as passive, active or performing sexual objects, one which does not sexualise African black women's physical bodies. This feature appears in a

regular column called '*Blink Woman*' and consists of interviews with African black women who have excelled in their careers. This feature appears to be an attempt at celebrating African black women's achievements through profiling their experiences. The images of these women differ from the sexually objectifying presentations of women in the men's magazines. Instead, these '*Blink Women*' are fully-clothed and no attention is drawn to particular parts of their bodies deemed sexual such as boobs and bottoms. One example is the profile article of Marang Setshwaelo, co-director of events, production and public relations company called Dreamcatcher Multimedia. She states "when you're young, black and female, you do have a lot to prove...Being the underdog is a mixed blessing – the payoff is that when you prove yourself, the victory is that much sweeter" (*Blink*, June 2005: 79).

C. Whiteness as invisible through unmarkedness in *FHM* and *Men's Health*:

- ***Socio-political constructions of African black masculinities***

There is a paucity of literature on the ways in which whiteness as a racialised subjectivity operates as normative in media, impacting on the ways in which blackness is presented as marked and visible in media presentations. International and local authors such as Frankenburg (1993), Chambers (1997), Ferber (1999), Nakayama and Krizek (1999), Moreton-Robinson (2000) and Steyn (2001) argue that whiteness as a racialised subjectivity is often constructed as invisible through being unnamed and unmarked, while blackness on the other hand, is often named and marked. Within magazines, it has been suggested that "black male identity is differentiated from white male identity within *Blink* through an emphasis on political responsibility that underscores the Afro-centric nature of the magazine" (Viljoen, forthcoming 2007).

My findings suggest that racialised constructions of African black men in *Blink* magazine operate to politicize African black masculinities, and to locate African black men as socially and politically responsible, and well as community agents.

The unmarkedness of white subjectivities in *Men's Health* and *FHM* however, allows white male readers to dissociate from social responsibility, presenting white male subjectivities as normative.

Discourses on blackness in the magazines are also etched within African knowledge production which centralizes the telling of African stories by Africans and challenges the hegemony of European standards: "We need our own cinema, our own stories, to preserve our own culture. We need to leave an ideological and political stamp on our times" (Khalo Matabane in *Blink*, August 2005: 86). The examples above reflect that at least some African black men are presented as responsible for the development of the poor communities they emerged from. In contrast, white men are not linked to obligations around community building and nurturing in the same kinds of ways. Through the lack of articles on socially-relevant issues, whiteness in *FHM* and *Men's Health* is not linked to discourses on community development or nation-building. Whiteness, it seems, can separate itself from these challenges.

Men's Health and *FHM* seldom, if ever, present articles on socially relevant matters to their mostly white male readers. The *Blink* man however is presented as interested in and implicated in social challenges through educational articles which highlight and critique violence against women and children. One example of this is present in the August 2005 edition of *Blink* magazine where male violence against women is presented by an African black male writer as a serious social problem where men are implicated.

Even though African black masculinities in *Blink* are presented as politically and socially responsible in these ways, these socio-political presentations of African black masculinity in *Blink* magazines do not always escape the tendencies to reinforce hegemonic understandings of socio-economic status. Where there is an absolute silence around class, privilege and affluence in *FHM* and *Men's Health*,

the notion of wealth in *Blink* magazine is set up as an aspiration for African black male readers.

But African black masculinity in *Blink* magazine is mostly conflated with political and social responsibility that presents these men as inseparable from the damaging political system of the past, as well as the current socio-political climate in South Africa. African black men, unlike white men in *Men's Health* and *FHM*, are portrayed as products of South African history. Because whiteness is presented as invisible in *Men's Health* and *FHM*, white men are presented outside of a South African history. This is in contrast to presentations in *FHM* and *Men's Health*, where whiteness is not labeled and named, contributing to its invisibility and normalcy, and presenting masculinities in *FHM* and *Men's Health*, in Viljoen's terms (forthcoming 2007), as "globalised, cosmopolitan and non-racialised (but white)" (Viljoen, forthcoming 2007, my emphasis). Despite the overwhelming images of (white) women and men, the unmarkedness of whiteness (and therefore its invisibility) in *Men's Health* and *FHM* contributes to its presentation as normative in the pages of these magazines targeting (white) men. African black men, *Blink* implies, have political and social responsibilities that white men do not have.

- **Conclusion**

Despite the emphasis on heterogeneity and diversity in a democratic climate such as South Africa, and the strides made in terms of gender equality over the last ten years, discourses on masculinities and femininities, blackness and whiteness, and homosexuality and heterosexuality, in men's magazines leave very little space for presenting alternative ways of owning femininities and masculinities in South Africa. Hegemonic constructs of masculinity and femininity are frequently employed in men's magazines, sustaining binaries of the passive female/active male dichotomy, popular in societal discourses. Contemporary heteronormative

discourse in men's magazines normalise notions of men as inherently heterosexual on the look-out for sex, and women as sex objects.

Men's Health and *FHM* sustain and reinforce a particular version of patriarchal white (hetero)masculinity as normative and privileged. In the magazines, heteropatriarchal discourses on white women's sexuality is contradictory, with women being objectified as sex objects in complex ways. But the bulk of these presentations portray them as sexually passive.

I find these discourses to be particularly disturbing in its presentations as normative within a South African context where male rape of women and other forms of male sexual violence against women are rampant.

White subjectivities are unmarked and unnamed, helping to sustain notions of whiteness as invisible in its normality. And while *Blink* magazine in some ways disrupts the notion of whiteness as normative and privileged through editorial and advertising contents which names and marks African blackness in the pages of its magazine, it also enforces (hetero)patriarchy through privileging a particular version of African black masculinity which functions comfortably within a binary where femininities are sexualised. But unlike *Men's Health* and *FHM*, there is a divergent presentation of women as sex objects in the '*Blink Woman*' feature, presenting African black women in ways valuing their contributions outside of sexualised roles. In terms of presentations of (hetero)masculinity privileged across the magazines, *Blink* magazine idealises a type of African black masculinity which does not conform to the more traditional (hetero)masculine constructs preferred in *Men's Health* and *FHM*, through the construction of African black men as politically and socially obligated, which, in terms of the invisibility of whiteness in *FHM* and *Men's Health*, contributes to the notion that white men can dissociate from these obligations.

The type of blackness preferred in *Blink* magazine does not appear to include coloured or Indian Africans. Racialised constructions are limited to either African black or white in the range of magazines I explored. This lack of diverse representation – in fact almost an invisibility – contributes to societal notions of ‘race’ as indicative of either ‘blackness’ or ‘whiteness’. The cultural work of magazines as exhibiting a particular rhetoric around gender and race is in contradiction to the transformative principle of democratization. The magazine media maintains and reproduces historically significant meanings around masculinities and femininities for the purpose of profit. In other words, the magazine media is not only playing a minimal role in nation-building and redressing the injustices of the past – they are sustaining discourses which serve as a direct antithesis to the transformation project in South Africa, particularly in terms of gender equality.



Alison Bullen/Hsrc
05/12/2008 12:10 PM

To Hanlie Rossinger/Hsrc@HSRC, Inter Library
Loans/Hsrc@HSRC
cc
bcc

Subject re: research papers on magazines

Hi Hanlie
Can you arrange for Martin to copy these and forward them to Mlungisi at the Weekender
Thanks
Alison

Alison Bullen
Human Sciences Research Council (Information Services)
69 Plein Street Cape Town 8001 Phone: 27 21 4667994 Fax: 27 21 4667993

Dear Allison

My name is Mlungisi Zondi, a journalist at The Weekender newspaper in Gauteng. I'm writing a feature article about men's and black magazines and was hoping to use Nadia Sanger's papers on the subjects as expert reference material. Would you be in a position to e-mail them to me at the above email address for publication in my story this weekend. At the risk of sounding ungrateful, would you be able to email them today? The papers are listed below:

2. Magazine editors, objectivity and neutrality. **Library Shelf no 4825**
3. Scripts of Western heteronormativity: South African lifestyle magazines and (hetero) socialization. Shelf no 5004
4. Constructions of whiteness, gender, class and sexuality in South African English-medium men's and women's magazines. **shelf no 1659**
5. Feminist intellectual activism within and beyond the academy: constructions of whiteness, gender and sexuality in South African magazines. shelf number 4198
6. Performing heteromasculinities in South African men's magazines. **shelf number 4919**

Thank you

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