

'What do you do with a bachelor who thinks he's God's gift to women?': Sexist jokes and the construction of heteronormativity in women's magazines

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Abstract

Previous research on women's magazines has focused on the construction of femininity as a consumerist practice and (detrimental) representations of female body image. The linguistic representation of masculinities in women's magazines has not previously been considered. Working within a (feminist) critical discourse analytic framework, this article demonstrates the role of jokes and humour in the 'gossip' magazines in constructing male-directed sexism, which I assert has negative repercussions for feminism. I argue that the reason such overt sexism is permitted in these articles is that the target readers of the gossip magazines are predominantly middle aged, working class women, who might be influenced by earlier 'feminist' values, which considers male-directed sexism as a way of de-valourizing female-directed sexism.

Keywords: masculinities; women's magazines; critical discourse analysis; evaluation; heteronormativity

1 Introduction

This research is part of a wider corpus-based project, which is concerned with how men are represented in women's magazines available to UK consumers, and of the implications these representations have for feminism. Learning about the ways in which media discourses construct and reflect gender identities is imperative for understanding the relationship between language and society, and for observing gender relations in the context of feminist movements.

The increasing range of women's magazines available equates to an increasing range of femininities being 'catered for', but also to an increasing range of masculine identities. The study of masculine representation in women's magazines contributes to an understanding of how women are constructed as perceiving men; their expectations of how men do, or should, appear and behave. This is important for the development of feminism, because it is through the maintenance of masculine stereotypes that men are able to uphold power over women: if men are defined in terms of essentialist characteristics such as physical strength or a lack of emotional expression, this allows for women to be defined conversely. Additionally, if other, non-hegemonic masculinities are discriminated against, this stifles the ability to subvert sexist attitudes towards women that have been articulated in other media discourses, and which feminism ultimately aims to fight against. If the primary socio-political objective of feminism is gender equality, it needs to treat men and women on equal terms.

In this article I am particularly concerned with how jokes and humour function to produce and reproduce particular images of masculinity in the magazines. The article first provides a review of studies on gender construction in women's magazines. It then discusses the analytical methods and textual data which provide the focus of this research. I then move on to an analysis of the texts, which is followed by some general conclusions about the role of jokes and humour in constructing representations of masculinity in the magazines and their implications for feminism.

2 Women's magazines, gender and the third wave

2.1 Women's magazines and constructions of gender

There has been a wealth of academic study focusing on the role of women's magazines in constructing and maintaining images of femininity within linguistics, sociology, psychology, media and cultural studies (Ballaster et al 1991; McCracken 1993; Currie 1999; Andrews and Talbot 2000; Gough-Yates 2002; Machin and Thornborrow 2003; Tincknell et al 2003; Gill 2007; Jeffries 2007; McRobbie 1991, 1997; Talbot 1995, 1998). Such studies have generally focused on the construction of female body image and femininity as a consumerist practice. Limited research has been carried out on the role of *men* in women's magazines, with the exception of Chang (2000), and Firminger's (2008) study of the representation of males in teenage girls' magazines, but these are not written from a linguistic perspective.

Research on gender construction in men's magazines across disciplines in the social sciences are predominantly preoccupied with analyses of female objectification, and constructions of masculinity for a *male* audience (for instance Edwards 1997; Jackson et al 2001; Benwell 2003; Attwood 2005; Hobza and Rochlen 2009). Language and gender research on the whole has tended to favour women's linguistic behaviour and female representation (for example Coates 1986; 1993; Hall and Bucholtz 1995; Cameron and Kulick 2003; Holmes 2006), and there is only one published volume of academic research dedicated to language and masculinity (Johnson and Meinhof 1997). This has negative repercussions for the feminist cause, because, as Johnson says, "[...] men are more able to sustain an indifference to feminism as long as women remain the primary focus of such theorizing" (1997: 12).

Previous work on women's magazines has acknowledged that they promote gender stereotypes, present conflicting messages and assume a heteronormative stance; advocating a 'difference' model of gender. Little research has been carried out on how masculinity is negotiated in these texts, and yet most studies of

women's magazines acknowledge the fact that men are a core focus of all mainstream women's magazines, and that these publications are heavily engaged in instructing women on how to please men (Firminger 2008; Litosseliti 2006; McLoughlin 2000; Jeffries 2007; Ménard and Kleinplatz 2008). Women are constructed as actively pursuing heterosexual relationships, and as primarily responsible for their relationships with men (Eggins and Ledema 1997; Litosseliti 2006: 100).

Ballaster et al (1991: 9) sum up the contradictory messages we get about men in women's magazines: "there is an evident tension between the need to confirm the centrality and desirability of men in all women's lives and the equally insistent recognition of men as a problem for and threat to women." Men are an important subject in women's magazines precisely *because* of this tension between threat and desire. This study considers when the magazines show men to be desirable and when they are threatening, and how these representations might affect the reader's expectations of men and gender relations.

It is also important to note that women's magazines generally uphold a very essentialist view of gender: men are necessarily masculine, where women are necessarily feminine. This is how discourses of gendered practices are created, such as the familiar stereotypes of women as being obsessed with shoes, and men obsessed with football. If feminism is ever to achieve the gender equality it seeks, it needs to expose and change the essentialism of texts such as these.

2.2 Heteronormativity and the woman's magazine

The term 'heteronormativity' was first coined by Warner (1993) and refers to "the assumption that everyone is heterosexual and the recognition that all social institutions [...] are built around a heterosexual model of male/female relations" (Nagel 2003: 49-50, cited in Baker 2008: 109). Heteronormativity is therefore aligned with essentialist definitions of gender and the notion that all human beings can be categorised in terms of a male/female binary, and promotes the notion that "sexual relations are *only* normal when they occur between two people of the opposite sex" (Baker 2008: 109). Consequently, heteronormativity is also engaged in the silencing of non-heterosexual practices.

Mainstream women's magazines presuppose this universal heterosexuality via a number of linguistic and visual strategies, including the use of male pronouns to refer to objects of sexual desire, and 'eroticised' images of men; these in turn preclude sexualised images of women and the linguistic placement of women

as objects of desire for female readers. Gill (2007: 184) identifies a discernable shift in discourses of sex in women's magazines since the 1990s, where notions of 'how to please men' become a key focus of the texts. So, while heteronormativity has always been a key 'ingredient' of women's magazines, its presence is more prominent now than it ever has been. From a feminist perspective, heteronormativity needs to be challenged because of its link to discourses of gender 'difference', as well as its contribution to homophobic, hegemonic discourses.

2.3 Feminism and women's magazines

Second wave feminists have been campaigning against the discrimination of women as a global group since the 1960s. Second wave feminism has achieved a great deal in terms of changing attitudes towards the role of women in Western society, affecting legislation relating to equal opportunities, childcare, contraception and abortion (Mills 2004: 1).

Third wave feminism may be perceived as a development from second wave feminism, which holds individualism at the core of its theoretical and political agenda. Third wave feminism celebrates the diversity of women, because "even if sisterhood is global, not all women's lives and experiences are identical" (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003: 9). Third wave feminist linguistic analysis is concerned with a focus on the influence of context and individuality on language use: reflecting an acknowledgement of the creation of plural femininities and masculinities, influenced by postmodernism (Mills 2004). A focus on plurality is certainly reflected in the range of gender identities on offer in mainstream women's magazines; in 1994 *Diva* was launched as the UK's only mainstream lesbian magazine (Turner 2008: 377), and there are now magazines targeted at Asian, black American and British women (such as *Asiana*, *Pride* and *Envy*). However, there are significantly more magazines available aimed at white, middle class, heterosexual demographics (Gill 2007: 200-201).

In light of this, third wave feminism may be interpreted as both an epistemological *and* historical shift from second wave feminist thought, influenced by postmodernist thinking; it signals a critical engagement with earlier feminisms, questioning the notion of global gender difference (Gill 2007: 150-1). I argue that the use of humour in women's magazines reflects gender relations as characterised by the 'battle of the sexes', which is firmly located in a second wave rationale, and which sits uneasily in a third wave feminist context.

2 Critical Discourse Analysis and Evaluation

2.1 Critical discourse analysis

The broad approach to text analysis I am using alongside corpus methods is Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1998; Wodak and Meyer 2001; Weiss and Wodak 2003). While practitioners of CDA utilise a number of different tools for textual analysis, all approaches to CDA perceive language as contributing to the production and reproduction of social inequalities, ideologies and hegemony. The overall aim of CDA is thus to “link linguistic analysis to social analysis” (Woods and Krager 2000: 206). My analysis of women’s magazines is motivated by such a desire to ‘expose’ the ideologies at play in the texts, in the context of their implications for society’s conceptualisations of gender and gender relations.

2.2 Evaluation

If CDA is partly concerned with the extent to which writers use attitudinal language to ‘persuade’ the reader of particular points of view, evaluation theory should be a useful complement to CDA analyses. Evaluation is concerned with the means by which discourses and attitudinal stance are constructed (Bednarek 2006: 3). Thompson & Hunston (2000) use ‘evaluation’ as a cover term for “the expression of the speaker or writer’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about” (2000: 5).

All models of evaluation perceive the writer’s authorial position in terms of attitudinal (usually concerning lexis) and epistemic stances (concerning modality), which form part of the interpersonal metafunction of language (Thompson and Hunston 2000). These aspects correspond to Thompson & Hunston’s (2000: 22) ‘good/bad’ and ‘certain/uncertain’ parameters of evaluation, which refer to the positive and negative values and degrees of probability assigned to entities or propositions. Semantic and pragmatic concepts such as presupposition, entailment and inference are also an important part of ideological construction and reader interpretation (Fairclough 1998: 107), and thus constitute an essential complement to evaluation. Investigating these types of implicit meaning is inherently useful for exposing the ideologies at play in women’s magazines.

3 The data: ‘bloke jokes’

This study analyses six jokes from three magazines representative of the ‘gossip’ genre: *Love It* (n=1), *Pick Me Up* (n=1) and *That’s Life* (n=4). I have included a greater number of jokes from *That’s Life* because they

feature together in a regular section of the magazine and are representative of a 'compulsory heterosexuality' discourse that other studies of women's magazines have identified (for example Firminger 2008; Jeffries 2007; Litosseliti 2006).

The jokes and humour analysed here are representative of others found in these and other 'gossip' magazines; they show how humour functions to homogenise men and emphasise men's stupidity. The articles the jokes are taken from are all 'reader columns' dedicated to representing the men in readers' lives and include short anecdotes, profiles of celebrity men, images of 'real life' men sent in by readers, and the jokes themselves. The fact that there are whole articles dedicated to the exposition of men's behaviour says something about the way in which these magazines view gender difference as inherently polarised.

The 'gossip' genre of women's magazines refers to those with a focus on celebrity and real life stories, are in a low price range, and tend to be produced on a weekly basis (Hermes 1995: 6). These may be distinguished from the 'glossy' category, which have a larger and wider range of material, including content on sex and relationships, careers and health and beauty, use high quality 'glossy' print, are more expensive, and are usually produced on a monthly basis (Hermes 1995: 6). These two categories also comply with target demographics according to socio-economic class: the 'glossy' magazines are on the whole marketed at middle class readerships, where 'gossip' magazines are generally targeted at working class women.¹

Feminist linguist Sara Mills (1995: 137-141) observes that it is women who are usually the butt of sexist jokes, and that these function "as a way of affirming sexist views within society without allowing for a challenge to be made to them". She argues that sexist jokes form part of a wider discursive structure which discriminates against women. While her focus is on female-directed sexism, jokes which place men as the objects of humour in the gossip magazine sub-corpus also serve a similar function, producing discriminatory constructions of men as stupid, unsatisfactory to women, and sex obsessed.

4 Analysis

The first 'bloke joke' from the sample comes from *Love It's* regular column 'You've got Male':

What do you do with a bachelor who thinks he's God's gift to women?
Exchange him.

Here the term *bachelor* is evaluated negatively by the writer. The relative pronoun 'who' marking the subordinate clause refers to 'bachelor' as the object of the main clause, contributing to the presupposition

that bachelors think they are attractive to women. The punch line “exchange him” produces a negative evaluation of bachelors: the imperative structure instructs the reader to reject men who think they are overtly desirable to women. The reader’s inference of humour relies on the use of the verb “exchange” as alluding to a semantic field of purchasing, manipulating the polysemous meaning of gift. In order to find this joke amusing, it is necessary for the reader to reject any positive connotations of the word *bachelor*.

This is interesting when considered in relation to instinctively positive associations with the word *bachelor*; for instance, Baker’s (2008) corpus study of the words *bachelor* and *spinster* in the British National Corpus revealed that collocates of *bachelor* usually imply a positive discourse prosody (2008: 81). The question remains as to whether or not this might reflect a change in the way single men are perceived by women. Indeed, the negative evaluation of men here sits in stark contrast to other, more positive evaluations of men in the article. For instance, this page also features two images of men posing shirtless: one is a photograph sent in of a reader’s boyfriend, and the other is of television celebrity Jesse Metcalfe. The image sent in by the reader is accompanied by the following description: ‘This is my boyfriend, David. Not only is he gorgeous, but he’s also a perfect dad to our son, Dexter.’ It is interesting that physical appearance is afforded greater import than paternal ability to a ‘successful’ performance of masculinity, triggered linguistically by both the order of adjectival modification within the sentence, and the use of adverbial phrase *Not only* at the start of the main clause. The man’s perceived paternal qualities are evaluated here as a ‘bonus’, rather than a central tenet of male identity. This may be interpreted as implying that parenthood is chiefly the domain of woman.

The description of celebrity Jesse Metcalfe also uses positive evaluators of physical appearance:

Since Jesse Metcalfe, 29, first hit our screens as **sexy** gardener John Rowland in *Desperate Housewives*, we’ve been spellbound. With his **phenomenally hot body** and **puppy dog eyes**, Jesse’s a **treat** for any woman.

The use of inclusive pronoun *we* places the reader in subject position in the sexual objectification of Jesse here. His physical attractiveness is presupposed by the use of ‘possessive pronoun *his* + noun phrase’, where ‘body’ and ‘eyes’ are modified by evaluative adverb ‘phenomenally’, adjective ‘hot’ and the metaphorical descriptive noun phrase ‘puppy dog’. The use of ‘treat’ in the final clause alludes to a discourse of commodification, due to its associations with luxury items: the male image is represented here as a product to be consumed by the reader. Of course, the commodification of the male body is by no means a new concept. According to Benyon (2000: 103), from the 1980s

the commercial exploitation of men-as-sex-objects became very big business. The sexualisation of the female body, its packaging as visual erotica, was now transferred to the male body with the same purpose in mind – to sell, sell, sell.

The issue that needs addressing here is how useful such commoditised objectification really is for gender equality in the context of third wave feminism.

Under a section entitled 'Man Talk', humour is again employed to construct hegemonic, sexist definitions of masculinity:

- 1 HE SAYS: 'Why don't you have a bath, babe?'
HE MEANS: 'I've got a new PlayStation game and I need you out of the way at the moment.'
- 2 HE SAYS: 'I was listening, but I've got a lot on my mind.'
HE MEANS: 'I'm trying to watch SkySports.'
- 3 HE SAYS: 'I'm feeling ill – I think I might be dying.'
HE MEANS: 'I've just sneezed.'
- 4 HE SAYS: 'I've done the weekly shop.'
HE MEANS: 'I bought alcohol, a loaf of bread and a Pepperami.'

The propositions expressed here draw on gendered social practices and behaviours/attributes, where computer gaming and televised sports are constructed as stereotypical male pursuits (1 and 2), and men are perceived as unhealthy hypochondriacs (3 and 4). It may also be argued that in (2), the reader's inference of humour relies on the equation of watching televised sport with mental passivity, perhaps even 'empty headedness', given that the propositions entailed by 'HE SAYS' and 'HE MEANS' are set up in opposition to one another; being actively engaged in thought is constructed as in opposition to watching SkySports.

The use of 'HE' as a generic referent to men in these examples has a homogenising affect, constructing essentialist definitions of gender and social roles. For instance, the reader may infer from the declarative statement "I've done the weekly shop" in the fourth example that it is women who usually carry out the task of food shopping, which implies that domesticity is the domain of woman.

Pick Me Up's Reader Survey 'Him Indoors' also contains a 'bloke joke' that constructs a negative image of men:

What did God say after creating man?
I can do better

For the reader to infer humour from this joke, she must accept the presupposition that men are unsatisfactory, and consequently, that women are superior to men. This is undeniably sexist, and draws on the notion that the answer to female-directed sexism is male-directed sexism. Again, this joke lies in juxtaposition to other letters and images sent in by readers which express positive sentiments towards the men in their lives, alluding to Ballaster et al's (1991: 9) acknowledgement of the conflicting representations of men in women's magazines as both "threatening" and "desirable" to women.

That's Life's Reader Survey 'Aren't Men Daft' contains a section entitled 'Rude Jokes of the Week'. These all involve heterosexual couples, and the effect of humour relies on the recognition of gender stereotypes and heteronormative gender practices.

The first of these draws on stereotypes about male and female sexuality:

A man and a wife are at the zoo, when a gorilla sees the wife and gets excited.

'Lift your skirt and tease him,' the man says. The ape goes mental. 'OK, get your breasts out.'
The ape goes berserk.

Finally the man opens the cage and throws his wife in... 'Now tell him you've got a headache!'

In terms of transitivity, in this joke it is notable that the man is the Sayer of the verbiage in each case; he has an active role where the woman is passive. Indeed, she is only discussed in terms of her relation to the man as his wife, and her actions are merely implied through the imperative structure of the man's discourse. The amusement value of this joke relies on the recognition of stereotypes of women as sexually manipulative, and of men as sexually driven. This corresponds with Holloway's reference to a 'male sexual drive' discourse that prevails in women's magazines (1984, cited in Litosseliti 2006: 100), where men 'cannot help' having a high sexual drive. This again contributes to an essentialist definition of gender. The acceptance of such a definition of masculinity also validates men's objectification of women, alluding to an anti-feminist discourse.

The next joke focuses on female heterosexual identity:

If men refer to their private parts as the male organ, should women call a vibrator an electric organ?

Here it is the polysemous senses of 'organ' as both a musical instrument and a part of the human anatomy which creates a humorous effect. The reader's acknowledgement of *men* and *women* as 'conventional' opposites allows 'private parts' and 'vibrator' to become 'unconventional' opposites in the parallel clause

structures here (Davies 2007). This contributes to the expectation that it is only women who use vibrators, which in turn may be interpreted as constructing heteronormative sexual identities.

In the following joke, the humour relies on the pragmatic presupposition that women perceive men's talk as unsatisfactory or inferior in some way, which may be a result of the familiar stereotype of men as uncommunicative:

A sad-looking woman goes into a bar and the barmaid asks why she's so glum. The woman explains she had a row with her husband and he vowed not to speak to her for a month.

"So?" the barmaid says.

"Well," the woman replies, "this is the last night of that month."

The implication that the Sayer in this joke does not enjoy conversation with her husband is interesting, as it draws on wider societal expectations and ideologies surrounding marriage; notably that married couples are expected to 'work through' marital problems regardless of whatever effects this has on the individuals' emotional wellbeing. The barmaid's initial reaction to the woman's account of her marriage problems ("So?") indicates the perceived normality of such a scenario. It could be argued that the reader is also encouraged to align with this perspective: despite the heterodiegetic narration of the joke, the woman is originally encountered from the psychological point of view of the barmaid; she *appears* sad. I suggest that given the older target age range for this type of women's magazine, we could attribute this to perceived generational differences in gender relations and attitudes to relationships.

The final joke draws on stereotypes about young male sexuality:

A university lecturer is reminding her students of the next day's exam.

"I won't tolerate any excuses for you not being here," she tells them. "I might consider a nuclear attack or a serious personal injury, or illness, or possibly even a death in your family – but nothing else!"

One student at the back of the room raises his hand and asks: "What if tomorrow I said I was suffering from complete sexual exhaustion?"

"Well," the lecturer replies, "I suppose you'd have to write with your other hand."

The presupposition that young men are more likely to be 'sexually exhausted' as a result of masturbation than sex with another person implies that young men are sex obsessed; in turn this implies that women are not, because the joke would arguably not have the same effect if the student subject was female.

The jokes and other forms of humour discussed here function to produce negative, essentialist definitions of masculine behaviour and gendered practices, and they all contribute to the creation and maintenance of a

heteronormative discourse. Of course, it should be noted that readers of women's magazines will interpret the texts in different ways: we are not all 'cultural dupes' and are able to manipulate or resist meanings. However, I argue that the reader is guided towards these ideological frameworks via a number of linguistic strategies.

5 Conclusion

The jokes constitute extremely limiting, sexist representations of both masculinity and femininity, which draw on gender stereotypes and heteronormative practices. They cannot be challenged, because the inference of meaning relies on the readers' acceptance of the presuppositions involved. The fact that negative representations are couched in humour has the effect of 'disguising' or 'distancing' their sexist sentiments, in much the same way that irony functions to distance the female-directed sexism identified in 'lads mags' (Jackson et al 2001; Benwell 2003). It is also likely that the reason such overt sexism is permitted in these articles is that the target readers of the gossip magazines are predominantly middle aged, working class women, who might be influenced by earlier feminist values that consider male-directed sexism as a way of de-valorizing female-directed sexism. While a discourse of "us" versus "them" played an important role in instantiating the female solidarity imperative to the development of feminist liberation movements during the 1960s and 1970s, it should be recognised by the producers of women's magazines that in the age of the third wave, it is no longer useful practice to subvert female subjugation with similar derogatory treatment of men: this only serves to exacerbate the gap between women and men in society, and, perhaps most alarmingly, undermines the achievements of feminism in the first place, by validating acts of discrimination based on gender identity.

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Notes

¹ Information about target demographics was gleaned from media packs on magazine publishers' websites. Where this information was not available online, staff were contacted from the magazines concerned.