

النساء

السعر ٣٠٠٠ ل.ل.

دانيا خطاب
ذهبية الشعر
لبنانية..
امها فرنسية

مذكرات مادونا
حلقة ما قبل الأخيرة
تحدث فيها عن
الشائعات

ورد وشوك

اطول حديث صحفي
مع كوكب الشرق
على ضفاف
البردوني

An example of a cover of a popular Arabic-language women's magazine in Lebanon.

Women's Magazines in Lebanon: A Progressive or a Regressive Force?

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The following is a synopsis of a study (1) undertaken to analyze the images of women portrayed in popular Arabic-language women's magazines in Lebanon. The goal was to assess and interpret the messages (implicit and explicit), being conveyed to women readers by these magazines. The overall purpose of the study was to document the extent to which women's roles were stereotyped in these magazines, and to gauge the cultural "lag" between the manner in which women are represented and the reality of social and economic conditions in post-war Lebanon. The existing data on such conditions clearly indicate that married women and mothers are increasingly involved in the public sphere, a development which entails a significant change in women's position and status in society, as well as alterations in the roles they play in the home setting.

Because women's magazines, unlike most other journals and publications, are specifically targeted at the female half of the population, and furthermore purport to cater to the needs of this segment of society, they are key socializing agents, particularly with respect to their impact on women's consciousness and self-image, as well as women's potential role as agents of change in their homes, communities and society. The sample for this study consisted of 32 Arabic-language monthly and weekly publications available in Lebanon. Out of this sample, a quota sample of 8 magazines was selected for intensive analysis. The study employed the methodology of content analysis as its main research tool, covering a period of four years (1989-1993). For practical reasons, content was categorized according to three separate headings: fiction, non-fiction and advertising.

The survey of the salient scientific literature on the relationship between society and the mass media indicates a dynamic, interdependent interplay between these two factors. This suggests that the image of women disseminated through the media is the result of the interaction of forces which shape social realities, and cannot, therefore, be understood or explained in isolation from the broader socio-economic, political and cultural contexts within which it is produced. The literature also reveals a trend towards a more integrated approach, one which attributes to the media a creative value, *i.e.*, that of producing, reinforcing, and transforming collective social representations and realities.

From this perspective, the study hypothesized that Arabic-language women's magazines in Lebanon did not constitute a vanguard of social development and progress. In their capacity as socializing agents, they instead represent a conservative and often reactionary force which impedes equality, social equity and progress. Their impact upon the processes of social change is negative, rather than positive; they perpetuate out-moded sex role concepts of women, reinforce traditional, patriarchal double standards for men and

women; and ignore the dramatic changes in the economic and even political status of women. The magazines analyzed in this article are, in fact, lagging far behind the actual progress and realities of Arab women.

Content analysis of all eight magazines together, not separately, yielded results which supported the aforementioned hypothesis. The image of women, as portrayed in these magazines, was almost without exception defined by the confines of women's domestic roles and their sexual appeal to men. Women's identity was entirely determined by the presence or absence of a man in her life. The redefinition of sex roles by feminist movements and the actual changes in women's lives in post-war Lebanon, as well as their increasing involvement in the public sphere, were virtually absent from the pages of these magazines.

The question we must ask, then, is this: why do these magazines insist on perpetuating inaccurate stereotypes of women? Our query is answered, in part, by a closer look at the structure of the media industry and by a review of the major findings yielded by this study. First of all, the women's magazine industry in Lebanon is mainly owned and dominated by men. Work is divided along gender lines such that women are most often found occupying jobs with little if any decision-making power. The influential, high-ranking positions are the preserve of men. This visibly male-dominated structure is hardly counteracted by the preponderance of women writers and reporters, not to mention a large number of women editors. The ultimate decisions pertaining to questions of policy and selection of content remains entirely in male hands.

Increased involvement of women in decision-making processes might indeed improve the chances for a more realistic and progressive portrayal of women, but it is certainly not the final answer to a problem which is rooted in cultural conditioning from an early age in Arab society. Images of women and men transmitted by the socialization process place constraints on women's participation in the media work-force, as in all other domains of work. It is only when these concepts change that there will be a change in the image of women projected by women's magazines. Any change in the media's portrayal of women will require a simultaneous change in sex role definitions in the society at large. The day that this change arrives will be the day that the need for women's magazines vanishes from our society.

The overarching visual message of women's magazines emphasizes feminine beauty and seductiveness, as well as youthfulness. In exchange for beauty and youth (both of which are ascribed, not achieved, attributes), women are rewarded with the security that only a man can provide, with status and romance, highlighting the precedence of a woman's appearance over all of her other characteristics. The feminine role models most frequently depicted on the covers of women's magazines surveyed in the sample stressed the importance of beauty, sexual desirability, and youth.

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An examination of the classification categories used to analyze the magazines' content indicates the preponderance of "soft" news over "hard" news. "Soft" news refers to material that does not require any specialized knowledge, appeals to the emotions, and focuses on the private domain. "Hard" news, on the other hand, consists of material requiring specialized knowledge which appeals to the faculty of reason and which focuses on the public sphere. By confining their content to such soft topics as society news, fashion, child care, interior design, beauty, romance and cooking, women's magazines have divided the world into mutually exclusive male and female domains: women's place is in the home and man's place is at work. By suggesting that women are personally, rather than professionally oriented, these magazines denigrate women's true capacities and activities and thus limit their role in society.

Content Analysis: Fiction

Like the images on the covers of women's magazines, fiction demonstrated a distinct bias in favor of young and attractive women. The typical heroine was a physically beautiful young woman (20-29 years of age), whose goals revolved around marriage and romance (57 percent of the sample). The emphasis on housewife/mother roles for women, *versus* occupational, professional roles for men, was revealed in the following patterns: fewer males were portrayed as husbands than females were as wives (15 percent as opposed to 50 percent). Women usually appeared as mothers (61 percent of sample), whereas men appeared as fathers in only 22 percent of the cases. This reveals that the writers (who, incidentally, were predominantly women, *i.e.*, 81 percent of all fiction writers surveyed) consider marriage and parenthood to be more crucial in a woman's life than in a man's life. A "spinster's" failure to marry was more important to the story line than her career and professional accomplishments.

In her interactions with men, the average female character invariably demonstrated passivity and subservience to men, whereas in her relationship with other female characters, she appeared ingenious, creative and forceful. Passivity appeared to be female personality trait only in her relationship to men. Although femininity is not described explicitly in terms of passivity, the description of masculinity in terms of action, independence and authority implies that passivity is the corresponding feminine quality. Thus, not only are double standards applied to male and female behavior, but women have to assume the additional burden of a "double" personality: her real one, which emerges in her interactions with other women, and her assumed one, which appears in her interactions with the significant males in her life.

Fictional content in Arabic-language women's magazines does not reflect the dramatic changes in Lebanese women's status during the last decade, a period which witnessed a marked increase in women's education and employment. In the fiction, working women (usually spinsters) are often portrayed as "unfeminine". The happy housewife and the single young woman who is secure in her beauty represented the dominant image of successful women in fiction. Consequently, marriage and motherhood were depicted as the ultimate goals and the only activities which could assure happiness, meaning and fulfillment.

Further empirical research is required to determine the extent to which such stereotypical portrayals of women's roles influence women's self-esteem, life choices, and expectations. On the basis of the research results presented above, however, it is clear that fiction in women's magazines perpetuate inaccurate images of women by focusing solely on physical appearance, seductiveness, passivity, and by describing women in terms of their marital status.

Content Analysis: Non-Fiction

Overall findings of this survey indicate that non-fiction articles suffer from the same cultural lag evidenced by the fictional articles. The role models offered by women's magazines, their reflection of social realities and their ideological positions regarding changing roles of women, all point in this direction.

With respect to articles on women's employment, few articles deal with this important topic, and those that do demonstrate ambivalence about the concept of working women. Employment of single women, those having very few household responsibilities, is accepted and even encouraged, after all, such activities provide young women with golden opportunities to meet eligible young men. Employment of married women, on the other hand, is condoned only if it does not interfere with her primary duties as wife and mother. Household chores (cleaning, cooking, laundry, decorating) are always the responsibility of women. Sharing of such duties with a husband is not recommended, as these activities would be very degrading for a man to perform. His responsibilities are providing for the family and being the intermediary between the private realm of the home and the public world of work. Volunteer work is encouraged as an acceptable outlet for married women, as is part-time employment. Dire economic aspects are seldom highlighted, important though they may be to most women in post-war Lebanon.

Job descriptions for women are usually romanticized. A "capable" woman is one who can take any and all added responsibilities in her stride. Combining the demands of home and office is made to appear simple. Such glamorization ignores the real hardships that ordinary working women confront on a daily basis. Thus, readers may suffer guilt feelings if they are not able to assume immense responsibilities without any problems. Cultural expectations in this regard are unrealistically high and thus place undue physical and psychological strains on the working wife and mother.

Occasional profiles of successful women in non-traditional occupations are overshadowed by an emphasis on the traditional role of woman as wife and mother, and by the scale of priorities presented by the magazine, whether implicitly or explicitly. A woman's first and foremost responsibility is her children, her husband and her home. Career and work outside the home comes in a distant third or fourth on this list of priorities.

The study also revealed an intriguing paradox: a double emphasis on woman as sainted wife and mother and woman as beautiful seductress. What these two seemingly contradictory images have in common is this: both stress that woman's ultimate goal is to please a man.

The ideal woman, according to men, is a woman who combines these two aspects in one.

This definition of the female role reflects the position of women in the traditional, male-biased, male-dominated patriarchal structure of Lebanese society. Clearly, women's magazines are complacent about communicating and continuing this unrealistic and inaccurate definition. The short-comings of Lebanon's social structure are never critically examined. If a woman fails to find fulfillment in domesticity and subservience to a man, it is not society that is lacking, it is she who is inadequate in some way. Women's failure to find fulfillment in their traditional roles is attributed to the individual woman and conflicts are reduced to personal circumstances. That they may be the result of wider economic, social and political conditions is never even considered.

The portrayal of women in non-fictional articles contradicts women's growing participation in the labor force, as well as feminist views concerning the images of women which such magazines project. The trivialization of women's lives and experiences at the hands of women's magazines is further manifested by the lack of "hard" news stories concerning issues which touch women's lives, such as abortion, double standards of behavior, sexual harassment, rape, gender discrimination, and economic injustice and exploitation.

Content Analysis: Advertising

Like fictional and non-fictional articles in women's magazines, advertising also presents a very narrow view of women. In most ads, women are confined to traditional roles, *i.e.*, wife and mother or physically alluring temptress. Women are also utilized in advertising as objects and instruments of persuasion to sell products to consumers by appealing to the two dimensions of their idealized and stereotyped role: housewife/mother and sex object/seductress. Female oriented advertisements appeal to woman's fear of being rejected by a man, and thus, left to live alone. In exchange for the beauty promised by the advertised products, women are assured security in love and marriage.

Statistically, advertisements for beauty products and beauty-related services outnumbered advertisements for domestic products. The decrease in the number of advertisements of domestic products as a positive sign is nullified by the increase of ads for beauty products. This statistical reality reflects the fact that advertisers are more committed to exploiting women's fears and insecurities to sell their products than they are with the overall socio-economic conditions of women. Advertisers only embrace change for the purpose of increased efficiency in promoting sales and it is only in this light that changes in the way women are portrayed are to be interpreted. Proof of this is the absence of the working woman, the older woman, and the less attractive woman from advertising images. Because of their economic dependence on advertising, women's magazines appear to promote images of women which encourage conformity to the norms of femininity established by the male-dominated socio-economic system. Thus, advertising in women's magazines constitutes a regressive force obstructing the liberation and progress of women, and hence, their improved socio-economic status.

Conclusions

Content-analysis of the portrayal of women in women's magazines in Lebanon yielded highly consistent results with respect to the image of women projected therein. The overall conclusion is that women's magazines present narrow images of women which are inaccurate and distorted when seen in the context of the actual social, economic and cultural conditions of women's lives in contemporary Lebanon. The magazines present a highly stereotyped and unrealistic image of women, which has its counterpart in an equally stereotypical image of man. Stereotyping is apparent in the pronounced emphasis on female physical appearance and the description of women, whatever their occupation, in terms of their marital status and their relationship with men. Stereotyping is also evident in the dichotomous division of personal traits and attributes into feminine and masculine qualities, the implication being that women exhibiting masculine traits of independence, initiative, and assertiveness are unfeminine and therefore disliked by men, the supposed central concern of their lives.

Discrimination against the older, less attractive, unmarried professional woman is blatant. The hidden message seems to be that "ordinary" women should be on their guard at all times, because they have to compete with some powerful fantasy images of physically perfect models. The image of the independent, ordinary working woman is virtually absent; thus, the contributions of these women as providers for their families and sustainers of their societies are easily overlooked.

Unlike other categories of magazines, women's magazines are sex-typed. They address a disempowered group: women. Implicit in women's magazines is the message that women are helpless; they need to be taught how to deal with the condition of being female and how to survive in a world made for men and by men. By rendering such "services" to women, women's magazines rationalize and justify women's subordination to men, going so far as to romanticize it by providing glamorous standards and expectations which few, if any, women can meet. The images presented in these magazines, and the messages implicit within them, reinforce women's disadvantaged status in the prevailing social and economic order.

By comparing the image of women portrayed in these magazines to the actual social realities confronting most Lebanese women, we notice a distinct cultural lag. The feminist movement has been more than just a passing concern for over half a century now, but women's magazines have yet to place the principles of feminism on their agenda. Women's new and ever-evolving status and roles have yet to permeate and transform the content and *raison d'être* of these magazines. In sum, women's Arabic-language magazines in Lebanon distort, rather than mirror, women's reality.

Footnotes

(1) This study was conducted by Drs. Bassima S. Eid and Laila G. Kaddoura, professors in the Faculty of Information and Documentation, Lebanese University.