



## A Critical Study of the Contradictory Role of Women’s Magazines

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### Abstract

The role of women’s magazines is contradictory. The term contradictory refers to the way in which magazines provide a range of information about how to be a perfect woman, for women of all ages. However, no matter the role of women as portrayed by the magazines, or women’s duties for the family, society, or the understanding of the world, are contradictory in the text.

This paper aims at analyzing the role of contemporary women’s magazines. It focuses on the group of young female magazine readers and emphasises question relating to physical appearance in the magazines. The motivation of this paper is to investigate how women’s magazines affect women’s attention in terms of their body image.

Today, a slender and thinner body has been set as the standard of an ideal body. This achievement seems to be established as a goal for women not only in the West, but also in the East. It is not merely a beauty matter. What is the correlation between a notion of beauty and the global market?

**Key words:** Ideology; Femininity; The Notion of Beauty; Consumption

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### INTRODUCTION

‘Women are most frequently understood as acting in the service of men, as secretaries, cooks, mothers and wives. On the other hand, women’s magazines devote considerable space and energy to asserting the intrinsic and equal values of the feminine sphere. They are also much addicted to visual and verbal images of powerful women in square-shouldered suits carrying briefcases and hailing taxis, leaving their men standing. Women’s magazines contain, within single issues and between different titles, many competing and contradictory notions of femininity’ (Ballaster, 1991, p.22).

The role of women’s magazines is contradictory. The term contradictory refers to the way in which magazines provide a range of information about how to be a perfect woman, for women of all ages. However, no matter the role of women as portrayed by the magazines, or women’s duties for the family, society, or the understanding of the world, are contradictory in the text. Ballaster criticises the fact that

‘Women’s magazines posit a collective and yet multivalent female subjectivity, which they simultaneously address and construct. In so doing, despite the often contradictory nature of this collective subjectivity, there are clear limits and boundaries to the variety of “readings” and “interpretations” available in the text’ (Ballaster, 1991, p.172).

According to Smith, ‘in our culture, the meanings affixed to “being women” are increasingly mediated by social texts, specifically women’s magazines as a commercial medium that orchestrates women’s activities in relation to their bodies’ (Currie, 1997, p.460). In Ferguson’s opinion, ‘women’s magazines do more than suggest all the successful, decent, or beautiful kinds of women that a female can or should be, or that females operate within a framework of social, cultural and economic choice’ (1983, p.8). On the other hand, they create an ideal body image for the readers, which is an unhealthy, unattainable body. Women’s role, as portrayed by the magazines is also contradictory. According to McCracken.

‘Cosmetics, fashion, food preparation, and romance are the predominant themes that prepare girls for their future roles as wives and mothers, when they will be responsible not only for their family’s consumption but for decorating themselves with cosmetics and fashion to secure a man’s love. The underlying theme that sustains this consumption is female inadequacy’ (1993, p.137).

This dissertation aims at analyzing the role of contemporary women’s magazines. It focuses on the group of young female magazine readers and emphasises question relating to physical appearance in the magazines. The motivation of this paper is to investigate how women’s magazines affect women’s attention in terms of their body image. Today, a slender and thinner body has been set as the standard of an ideal body. This achievement seems to be established as a goal for women not only in the West, but also in the East. It is not merely a beauty matter. What is the correlation between a notion of beauty and the global market? According to Chapkis,

‘In large part, the content of the global image is determined by the mechanics of the sell: who creates the images for what products to be marketed through which media controlled by whom? The beauty trade (cosmetics, toiletries, fragrance and fashion) is expanding its market worldwide. And a world market means global marketing’ (1986, p.38).

Chapkis continues explaining that ‘these global advertising campaigns increasingly ignore national differences in determining the products to be marketed and the images used to sell them’ (1986, p.39). Singapore, for instance, is promoting the slender body image through its print media. *Bella*, *Female*, *Herworld*, and *Nuyou* are the most popular women’s magazines in Singapore. The cover girls of these magazines are presenting the same characteristic: a beautiful girl with a skinny body. *Vogue* tells us, ‘a lovely girl is an accident; a beautiful woman is an achievement’ (*Vogue*, 1935). The importance of this paper is to examine the ambition of reading women’s magazines.

A literature review will be provided in Chapter 1. First of all, it will focus on analysing the role of women’s magazines. Secondly, it will provide different scholars’ critical approach to the influence of women’s magazines. By doing so, it will investigate the strategy of women’s magazines in terms of consumption. Thirdly, it will synthesise the results of negative effects of social comparison in terms of magazine reading. Finally, the major concern of research questions will be introduced. Meanwhile, it will formulate questions that need further analysis.

Chapter 2 is built on eight case studies. The purpose of these studies is to analyse the influence of women’s magazines by emphasising the ideal body image that they portray. They are divided into two groups, which are undergraduate and postgraduate. In order to prove that both the East and the West are promoting the same ideal beauty, each group is made up of four students

including two Asians and two Europeans. It will focus on the investigation of social comparison. Each participant will be asked questions based on their own body image in terms of comparing with peers, and magazines’ models. In addition, the studies will show the consequence of comparing and being compared.

Chapter 3 will look at the relationship between ideology and femininity. The chapter will argue that the term femininity is playing a role of restriction. First of all, the definitions of ideology and femininity will be provided. The term ideology will have an emphasis on women’s role and social status in this chapter. Secondly, it will focus on how women’s magazines function in a case of transformation of the theory of femininity to women. Finally, it will examine the connection between reality and magazine editors.

Chapter 4 analyses the notion of beauty. Firstly, the chapter will begin with a discussion of the changing body shape and the ideal body. Secondly, to answer the question why beauty matters, it will focus on the topic of why beauty is so important for a woman. Thirdly, to look at the major reason of reading a magazine, on the one hand, it will demonstrate whether social comparisons bring a more negative effect than positive effect to women. Finally, it will investigate the perfect image and the reality, and it will argue that the images in women’s magazines have undergone the influence of computer software.

Chapter 5 focuses on advertisements and women’s magazines: women’s body in everyday life will be analyzed in the first section. Secondly, it will look at the reason why women are targeted by the advertisers. Thirdly, the investigation of the pleasure of consumption will be introduced. In addition, arguments both for and against advertising will be evaluated. Last but not least, it will interpret further the theory of ideology. It will not only focus on the relationship between ideology and advertisements, but also enter the debate about whether ideology is mental or material.

Chapter 6 explores the relationship between women’s magazines and the female readers: it will look at the pleasure of magazine reading. This chapter will focus on the cover page by emphasising the correlation between the fantasy image and advertisements. In addition, the ideal message and beauty tips are the other two main sections that are concerned about the different levels of pleasure being offered by the magazines.

Chapter 7 is the final chapter of the paper, which will draw out the conclusion of the research questions. By doing so, it will demonstrate women’s attitude in terms of magazines reading and taking responsibility for them. It strongly recommends that women should change their attitude of paying attention to physical appearance. On the other hand, the reformation of women’s magazines should be taken seriously. It suggests that magazine contents should be focusing on the changing progress of women.

## 1. A LITERATURE REVIEW

Women's magazines tell the female readers what an ideal body should be. Women come to understand that there is always a solution for them to achieve the ideal body – consumption. As Groesz points out, 'targeting markets to sell products such as diets, cosmetics, and exercise gear, the media construct a dream world of hopes and high standards that incorporates the glorification of slenderness and weight loss (Kilbourne, 1999; Levine & Smolak, 1996; Pollay, 1986). In so doing, "today's media blurs [sic] the boundaries between glorified fiction and reality" (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999, p.93).

Moreover, as Wilcox and Larid put it, 'in magazines, TV, and movies, women see models who are increasingly and, for most women, unrealistically slender' (2000, p.278). There is nothing wrong in a woman achieving a better look or improving her body image. However, this achievement should be based on her proper size. The fact is that the ideal body portrayed by the media is unattainable. It has affected women's health both psychologically and physiologically.

Women's magazines are problematic. Wilcox and Larid question, 'If watching a movie or reading a magazine makes a woman feel unhappy, why would she continue?' (2000, p.278). They found that,

'The effect on the magazine's readership would seem to be as slimming as the diet claims that often appear on pages opposite the pictures of slender models. And yet, the magazines prosper. One obvious solution to this paradox is that only some women are dissatisfied by the media depictions, while others find them enjoyable or at least indifferent' (Wilcox & Larid, 2000, p.279).

On the other hand, Wilcox and Larid raise a question as to 'which women would be so affected and why' (2000, p.279). They found that,

'When a woman looks at a picture of another woman, two processes might possibly occur. One is identification. By identifying with a slim woman in a picture, a reader might achieve at least a brief moment of pleasure as she imagines that she too is, or could be, as slim and attractive as the model. The other process is social comparison (Richins, 1991). A woman looking at the model might consider how she compared with the model, with the model providing a standard. Considering most models, and most readers, this is likely to be a relatively disheartening comparison (Shaw & Waller, 1995)' (Wilcox & Larid, 2000, p.279).

In the case of the purpose of being attractive, according to Ballaster, 'women compete for male attention and affection, viewing and experiencing each other as rivals' (1991, p.155). It is essential to look at what a body image is. Botta defines body image as 'a multi-dimensional concept that includes the thoughts, feeling, and attitudes related to one's own body (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999)' (2003, p.389). It seems to Botta that an attractive body image is not only based on physical appearance, but also related to other elements mentally.

Moreover, Englis points out that 'a beauty ideal is an overall "look" incorporating both physical features and a variety of products, services, and activities. These can include clothing, cosmetics, hairstyling, tanning salons, leisure activities' (1994, p.50). In Lakoff and Scherr's view, 'beauty was not just a product of wealth, but a commodity in and of itself. In other words, of looking to beauty to find status' (1984, p.80).

Why is an attractive body image so important for a woman? If the answer is only for attracting men's attention and affection, why do men not need to do the same with women? Ballaster simply states, 'magazines are part of an economic system as well as part of an ideological system by which gender difference is given meaning' (1991, pp.9-10). On the one hand, feminist scholar Wendy Chapkis analyzes beauty as a 'politics of appearance.' She stresses that,

'Beauty is not limited to the psychologies and aesthetic sensibilities of individual men and women, but is part of a "global culture machine" that joins advertising, the media, and the cosmetics industry in the construction of normative standards of beauty for women all over the world to attempt to achieve' (Peach, eds, 1998, p.121).

On the other hand, if the majority of women are ordinary, how can someone make a difference and be more outstanding? To answer these questions, first of all it is necessary to look at the relationship between three aspects, which are: women's role, magazines, and society. According to Currie,

'Women's magazines offer a meaning of femininity that is tied to the everyday activities and beliefs of women that bring this meaning into being and thereby sustain it (Smith 1990, p.163). While these texts do not "determine" women's practices, as a social discourse they mediate practices of femininity among both magazine readers and non-readers. In other words, while "gender" is an individual accomplishment – expressing compliance or resistance – it is not carried out in a context of women's making' (1997, pp.460-461).

Secondly, the meaning of being attractive and beautiful is based on product consumption. Women's magazines provide various products, such as cosmetics, to recommend women should try them on in order to be attractive. The way in which magazines try to sell products to their reader is done indirectly. They show readers a range of perfect images of models, superstars, even an ordinary woman. However, the purpose of showing an ordinary woman is to compare the different appearance before putting on make-up and after make-up, for instance. In other words, it is another strategy of selling a product, and the message is clear – you can make a difference like her. According to Johan and Sirgy,

'The image strategy involves building a "personality" for the product or creating an image of the product user (Ogilvy 1963). ... On the other hand, the utilitarian appeal involves informing consumers of one or more key benefits that are perceived to be highly functional or important to target consumers. Rosier and Percy (1987) referred to this as "informational advertising"' (1991, p.23).

On the one hand, a magazine is effective in many ways. Costello notes that, 'it was not just the advertisement ... magazine articles focused the ladies' attention to the need to keep their FQ (Femininity Quotient) high' (as cited in Wolf, 1990, p.46). Wolf also criticises the fact that 'women are deeply affected by what their magazines tell them (or what they believe they tell them) because they are all women have as a window on their own mass sensibility' (Wolf, 1990, pp.49-50). Many scholars have shown the strong position of the role of women's magazines. Ballaster criticises the fact that,

'Women's magazines, like other cultural forms targeted primarily at women, focus firmly on that which is socially defined as "women's world" – the domestic, the familiar or the intimate, sexual and personal. Each magazine privileges a particular mix of women's experiences, and presents them not only as if they were women's only interest, but also as if they were interests shared by all women' (1991, p.129).

Some previous studies found that the negative effect on body dissatisfaction is mainly due to social comparison. According to Botta, 'nearly 400 high school and college students from an urban area in the Midwest were surveyed to test the extent to which reading fashion, sports, and health/fitness magazines is related to body image and eating disturbances, including the added dimension of muscularity. Results indicate that magazine reading, social comparisons, and critical body image processing are important predictors of body image and eating disturbances for adolescent boys' and girls' (2003, p.389).

Moreover, Tiggemann and McGill found that 'exposure to either body part or full body images led to increased negative mood and body dissatisfaction, while the amount of comparison processing was affected by both image type and instructional set. Importantly, regression analyses showed that the effects of image type on mood and body dissatisfaction were mediated by the amount of social comparison reported. It was concluded that the processing in which women engage in response to media images is an important contributor to negative effects' (2004, p.23).

Furthermore, studies were conducted by Renee Engeln-Maddox regarding the exploration of how college women respond to the print advertisements featuring images and female models. The results of these studies suggest that 'making negative outcome, upward social comparisons in response to such images is significantly associated with greater internalization of the thin ideal and decreased satisfaction with one's own appearance' (2005, p.1114)

There is too much attention in women's magazines in terms of negative effects on women's life. In order to avoid a biased position in this dissertation, the research questions do not merely focus on analysing the role of women's magazines, but more importantly, women's attitude will be taken into account. Are women the only victims? Why are only women influenced? If women's magazines are playing a role of providing negative effects

to women, why do women not reject reading them? On the contrary, women are continually reading them. A male editor of a women's magazine has argued that 'magazines do not create insecurity in women' (McCracken, 1993, pp.137-138). A male editor of a prominent women's magazine argues that,

'If women's anxieties are there, shouldn't their magazines try to help? We're not creating anxieties. We're reacting to them.' ... Most women's magazines help to develop insecurities and anxieties in women by constantly repeated themes in features and advertising. While magazines are not always the initial cause of anxiety, they often encourage and exacerbate these feelings, and suggest that increased consumption is the remedy' (McCracken, pp.137-138).

However, it seems to Luke that 'girls are the passive victims of a hegemonic culture of femininity and that culture is repacked, sanitized, and sold to her through her consumption of "girls" magazines' (1996, p.148). If Luke's point of view were an answer of these questions, it would repeat the same question as to why women continue reading. Nobody can be forced to buy a women's magazine if she does not want to. Why do women feel that they have to achieve the ideal image? Who may benefit from a beautiful face? In John Berger's famous book *Ways of Seeing*, he emphasises a painting *The Judgement of Paris* by Rubens in which 'Paris awards the apple to the woman he finds most beautiful. Thus beauty becomes competitive. (Today The Judgment of Paris has become the Beauty Contest.) Those who are not judged beautiful are not beautiful. Those who are, are given the prize' (1972, p.52). If women are independent in terms of economics, for instance, is it necessary to compete in order to get an apple from men?

In the case of femininity, who makes it a restriction? Why must a woman be feminine? It seems to Black that 'young women believe, therefore, that they can "have it all", and that this entails career, economic independence, property owning, sexual freedom, and investment in a feminine appearance' (2004, pp.63-64). In other words, do women make themselves into the trap? Certain scholars such as Inness claim that,

'Women's magazines offer fantasy that fosters in their readers a desire for a state of being that can never be achieved. In their pursuit of the spectre of perfect femininity, women are encouraged to buy both the products that the magazines promote and the magazines themselves' (2004, p.127).

It is arguable whether or not women are playing a passive role. Generally speaking, it depends on differences in culture and society. However, as women become more and more independent, it is important to interpret areas of how women react to the messages and images from a magazine. This dissertation will analyse these questions in the following chapters. The methodology of this dissertation will be based on eight case studies. The concern of these studies is to identify areas of dissuasion in the literature.

## 2. CASE STUDIES

### The Current Studies

The aim of this study is to analyse, first of all, the notion of beauty. Today, both the East and the West are promoting the same ideal female image: a slender and thinner body. A country such as Singapore, which represents the East, is selling this ideal image through the local popular women's magazines. For example, the cover model that appears in *Bella*, *Female*, *Herworld*, *Shape*, and *Nuyou* shows the same characteristic: thinness. On the other hand, the UK is considered as another representation of the notion of beauty in the West, which is advertising the same body image. In general, it is too wide to say that a slender body is a global ideal body. However, it is obvious to see that a number of women in the East and West are pursuing a slender body. The second aim of this study is to examine the relationship between a women's magazine and its female readers. It emphasises the role of women's magazines and the reaction to a slender body. The importance of this study is to investigate the reason why female magazine readers are influenced so much by a thin body. Why is a slender body so important for a woman? On the other hand, the question is whether or not women's magazines play a part in making women feeling guilty about their body and putting too much effort into physical appearance.

### Method

#### Overview

The study focused on eight female readers of women's magazines. These participants come from different countries. They are currently undergraduate students and postgraduate students at the University of Sussex, in the United Kingdom. Participants were divided into two groups – undergraduate and postgraduate. Each group contains four students including two Asians and two Europeans. The study was conducted by individual interviews. There were three sections in the interview. In the first section, each participant was asked to complete a survey form regarding how they read women's magazines, and their relationship with these magazines.

In the second section, each participant was shown one of the most popular women's magazines in the West: *Cosmopolitan*. Meanwhile, the participant was asked to spend one minute leafing through it. There is no specific requirement for the selection of *Cosmopolitan*. In this study, a UK version of the June 2006 issue of *Cosmopolitan* was selected. The participant was asked to give an overall impression of this magazine. By doing so, each of them was required to answer some questions in terms of the female images in the magazine.

In the last section, the participant was shown five cover pages of the most popular women's magazines from Singapore. In this section, the participant needed to compare the similarities and differences between

*Cosmopolitan*, which represents the West, and magazines from Singapore, which represent the East. Due to the study taking place in the UK; participants could only be shown the cover pages of magazines from Singapore. In this case, they were only required to compare the cover pages of *Cosmopolitan* as well.

### Materials – Undergraduate Group

#### Case 1

Mina comes from Taiwan. She quite likes reading women's magazines. Normally, she reads them once a month when she is in Taiwan. *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan* are her favourite magazines. The section that she normally reads first is fashion trend. Mina claims that 'it's good to see all kinds of new products coming up. However, I am only interested in images, never read text.' When she was asked whether she is satisfied with her body, she gave her answer: no, immediately. As for Mina, she feels that her boobs are not plump enough, and her legs are too fat. Even though she has a female idol, she has never compared herself with the idol. Moreover, she has never compared her own body image with models in a magazine. Mina agrees that these models are presenting the ideal body image. She wishes she could have the same figure as them. However, she understands that it is impossible to achieve that size. Mina gave her definition of an ideal body image, which is skinny, long legs, with a pretty and small face. She has used products advertised in a magazine, such as cosmetics and perfume. When she was asked whether the products are effective, her answer is: depends.

In the second section, Mina's overall impression of *Cosmopolitan* is many advertisements. The cover girl is skinny, tall, and sexy. Moreover, there are lots of sexual topics in this Western magazine. In addition, topics on celebrities, which emphasizes products that they use, appear quite frequently. Mina thinks, the models in the magazine are perfect but they seem not very realistic. 'Among 1000 women, for instance, there are probably only two of them who can have the same figure as these models.' As a reader, Mina points out that there is nothing wrong in using a model, who has a perfect body, to present a new fashion trend. Mina states that 'the role of a magazine is to make the readers feel happy. If I found a magazine that uses a short, fat, and ugly woman to show the fashion, I don't think there is anyone who would like to buy it. On the other hand, I don't think I will continue reading this magazine. ... Girls like imagination, as they think that they may have the same effect as the model if she puts on new clothes, that's why they may buy a product.' Mina also agrees that women pay more attention to physical appearance than men do. However, she claims that men also care about their appearance, like buying new clothes, dyeing hair, and taking care of skin. In Mina's view, women's magazines function as a tool, which promotes new products of cosmetics and fashion.

Mina's impression of magazines from Singapore is more or less the same as of *Cosmopolitan*. 'They look similar. These magazines seem to come from the same publishing company, the distinction is only the usage of language. The similarities of magazines from Singapore and the UK version of *Cosmopolitan* are that both use a celebrity as a cover image, and have some topics on super-star interviews. The differences are more varied: 'In Taiwan, women's magazines provide more information about food and restaurants, which is not usual in the UK magazines.'

Mina compares herself with her peers quite often. Especially, when girls are getting together, 'we talk about clothes, compare who is thinner, for example. We also discuss the notion of beauty. In general, our notion of beauty is more or less the same.' Mina said that she has been criticised by her male friends when in Taiwan. 'I was told like my boobs are too small, my arms are too strong, my legs are too fat, and my skin is not smooth at all.' Mina feels quite depressed with her body image. However, she does not think that to achieve the ideal body is essential, as it seems impossible to attain.

### Case 2

Alison is British (Scottish). Usually, she reads women's magazines once a fortnight. *Flamour* is her favourite magazine. However, magazines do not really play a part in her life, as she has never bought one for herself. She sometimes reads one if her flatmate buys it. As for Alison, the function of a magazine is merely for killing time. She likes reading articles on topical issues and advice pages; on the other hand, she is not interested in new and real life sections. Alison says, 'I don't think women's magazines are important for me. I might buy one if I have a distant journey.' Alison agrees that magazines bring her some entertainment and she enjoys reading them. When she was asked questions in terms of body image, she says that she has full confidence with her own body. Furthermore, she claims that there is nothing wrong with women achieving a better body image. However, the situation is not only for those who need to improve, even if some of them are quite perfect; they are still struggling and depressed with their body. In that case, a positive achievement may become a psychological illness. Alison says, 'I don't have any female idol. I won't compare myself with any model, as I don't think they present an ideal body image. It is not necessary for me to achieve a figure like them. This is simply because I don't think there is any part of my body that needs to change.' She defines an ideal body image as one that should not be overweight but not too skinny. In addition, to have a happy face with confidence is quite important. She thinks that the products she has bought so far from a magazine are useful. She has tried some skin and cosmetic products.

In the second section, Alison has the same impression as Mina, as there are lots of advertisements in *Cosmopolitan*. 'The magazine offers advice and self-

help pages, which is interesting. However, it seems focus too much on relationships between boyfriend and girlfriend. As for me, I don't really agree with what they say sometimes. I would just ignore these sections or even throw them away.' To turn to the body image in the magazine, in Alison's opinion, these models are stereotypical. 'They are not realistic as they are all models and skinny. I don't think many people can look like them, even though there might be some.' Alison gives a critical comparison between women and men in terms of physical appearance. 'I won't deny that women pay more attention to physical appearance than men do. A woman judges another woman critically. For example, self-confidence problem, clothes, and how well they take care of themselves. Men also look at pretty girls but they are not so observant. Women notice small details as well.' For Alison, women's magazines play a role of influencing people's idea about what is fashionable.

Alison's first impression of magazines from Singapore is the same as with the West in terms of the cover girl. 'These girls are not wearing too many clothes. They are very thin. The contents are similar too, as there are lots of beauty tips. I am not quite sure who these girls are because they are from Singapore. In the West, it's normal to use a celebrity as the cover image.' Alison compares herself with friends; however, this comparison is based on a positive aspect. 'It's normal for girls to compare with each other. We compare with style; for instance, this style may be suitable for her but not me. We can improve ourselves through the comparison.' In the case of ideal body image, Alison repeats that the magazines' models are not perfect. 'It depends on different tastes of beauty. As for me, I like sport, so that my ideal body is sporty and healthy. It is not necessary for me to achieve it because I am happy with my body.'

### Case 3

Cathy is from China. Like other undergraduate students, she reads women's magazines when she is free. Normally, Cathy reads them twice a week. Her favourite magazine is *Elle*. 'I would buy a magazine as it is good for relaxing. It also offers me ideas of design, as the course I am doing is product design. As for me, I like reading the latest fashion style and cooking section before I read through the entire magazine. However, I have never paid attention to the feedback section.' Cathy enjoys reading a magazine. When she was asked questions in terms of body image, she puts this way: 'I am not satisfied with my body except my hair. I have one female idol. Even though I understand that it is impossible for me to have the same figure as her, I still compare myself with her. It's human nature to compare with others. I also compare myself with other models when I read a magazine. In my view, they are somehow close to my picture of an ideal body.' Cathy's ideal body should be skinny, with long and straight hair, height 170 centimetres, with 55 kilograms weight. In the

case of consumption, Cathy has tried some products, such as bags, accessories, skin care, and snacks, which are advertised in a magazine. She thinks that these products are effective for her.

In the second section of the interview, Cathy's first impression of the *Cosmopolitan* is a normal fashion magazine. However, it seems to have more sexual topics than a usual one. She does not agree that the models in *Cosmopolitan* or any other magazine are perfect. As she comments, 'I don't think they are perfect. They are not as attractive as I expect. My definition of attractive is unforgettable. The term unforgettable is based on different aspects. For example, which kind of clothes she wears. On the other hand, to look healthy is quite important; as certain images here are not showing that the model is healthy even she is beautiful. I won't deny that skinny can be considered as a sort of health. However, dark colour skin and good smile is my definition of health.' Cathy agrees that women pay more attention to physical appearance than men do. According to Cathy, 'men's physical appearances are not as important as women's. A successful career can cover the entire number of shortcomings that a man has. In other words, even though a man does not have an attractive appearance, he still obtains another person's appreciation and expectation if he has a good position. In the case of women, to possess an attractive appearance is equal with a man who has successful achievements. People's judgement of a woman is based on her appearance. This is a crucial reason why women have to pay more attention to appearance.' Women's magazines play a role in providing information about fashion, movies, and television programmes.

In the last section, Cathy's impression of magazines from Singapore is based on culture distinction. 'I would say they come from Asia but it's quite difficult to distinguish exactly which country they are from. The layout design is similar with the Western women's magazines; as they all put a female image on the cover page. In addition, the models are skinny too.' It seems to Cathy that it is not easy to find any difference between the magazines from the East and the West. Even though each model has a different face, they are presenting the same style of look. As for Cathy, to achieve an ideal body is necessary. As she stresses, 'it's extremely important to have an attractive appearance, as a perfect body offers us a good job and a Mr. Right.'

#### Case 4

Heather is British. She has a habit of buying women's magazines. She reads them once a week. *Reveal* is her favourite magazine. She reads a magazine from the first page. However, she does not quite like the section of health and diet advice. In addition, she feels that there are too many topics on celebrity gossip. Entertainment is a major reason for Heather to buy a magazine. Like the other undergraduate students, Heather enjoys reading

a magazine. When she was asked whether she has any dissatisfaction with her body, she says, 'no, I am satisfied with my body. I don't think there is any thing that needs to be improved. I don't have any female idol but I do compare myself with models when I am reading a magazine. The reason is simply that I think they are quite perfect. I want to have a figure like them. ... As for me, my figure is not much different from these models, so that it won't be difficult for me to achieve the same size as them.' Heather's definition of an ideal body is an 'hourglass' figure. Heather has bought certain products, such as hair dyes and make-up that were advertised in a magazine. She agrees that these products are useful.

After leafing through *Cosmopolitan*, Heather thinks that cosmetics and fashion are always published as big topics in a women's magazine. Moreover, it seems to her that topics on relationships, focused on men, are too much. 'I don't like the idea of focusing too much on relationships, especially on men. Is it important to have such kinds of advice on how to keep a man, or do something special for them?' By and large, she agrees that women pay more attention to physical appearance than men do. As she puts it, 'lots of products, advertising, and television give people an impression that they should look like them. Magazines make women feel guilty about their appearance. If women don't buy those products, it means you have never tried hard for your appearance. On the one hand, for some women, from a psychological perspective, to possess a beautiful face is for getting a man.' According to Heather, the role of women's magazines is to provide information and entertainment.

In the final section of the interview, Heather found something special from a Singapore magazine's cover. She says, 'they are quite similar to the British magazines. However, certain titles they use are quite positive. Even though their purpose is same as the British magazines, which aim at selling a product, I like this idea as they encourage women rather than make women feel guilty or dislike their body.' Heather thinks that the way in which British women's magazines persuade women to look better is quite negative. In the case of comparison, Heather agrees that people come to notice their shortcomings through comparing with each other, which is a method of improvement. However, she has never had a discussion with her peers in terms of the notion of beauty. Even though Heather is satisfied with her body at the moment, she says that she was struggling with her body for four months before. In her opinion, it is essential to achieve an ideal body as a perfect figure brings her confidence and makes her feel happy.

#### Materials – Postgraduate Group

##### Case 5

Five years ago, Beth stopped buying any women's magazine. She is British. 'I stopped reading them after I

read lots of material on feminism. Women's magazines are evil.' However, Beth does not deny that she enjoyed reading them before. 'I was interested in catwalk reviews, designer interviews, and sex stories. On the other hand, I didn't like reading personal stories, beauty tips or make-up advice. Basically, I am satisfied with myself. It would be better if I didn't have eye bags.' Beth has a female idol. She compares herself with her idol and some models. She thinks these models are ideal: 'I think their figures are perfect. My figure is quite close to them, that's why it is possible for me to have the same figure as them. An ideal body must be thin but not looking underweight, good skin, and healthy, athletic.' Beth has used hair products. She thinks they are useful.

Beth's impression of *Cosmopolitan* is typical. She says, 'it's the same with other magazines – nothing surprising. It's directed at heterosexual women. ... The models are pretty and attractive. But I don't think they are perfect as they are just normal real people.' In the case of different levels of paying attention to physical appearance, Beth agrees that women pay more attention than men. 'Women are targeted by advertising more than men are. Traditionally, women have to look attractive. However, men have also started caring about their appearance, as they have to get a woman. Today, women are becoming more and more independent; they don't rely on men as they did before.' Beth criticises women's magazines for giving women what is important in life, which are the wrong priorities. She says, 'they make women think that their appearance is the most important thing, women need these products to make them look attractive. In addition, they need a man in their life.'

Beth compares the similarities and differences between magazines from Singapore and the UK version of *Cosmopolitan*. Her conclusion is that these magazines are quite similar in terms of the cover images, which use either a celebrity or a super-model as the cover image. It seems to Beth that it is not easy to find any difference between these magazines. In the case of comparison, Beth has experience of comparing herself with her peers, as she claims that it is natural to compare. 'Our comparison is not merely based on physical appearance, but also everything. Furthermore, it's interesting to discuss about what the notion of beauty should be. I have been told what an ideal body should be by magazine and advertising. However, I don't agree with it as I think a more curvaceous figure is more attractive. The skinny body image is society's point of view but not mine.' For Beth, it is not important to achieve whatever an ideal body is, because she has full confidence in herself. She adds, 'I don't need it as I don't need to attract a man.'

#### Case 6

Haruyo comes from Japan. She has never bought a magazine since starting her MA in the UK. 'I read them when I was in Japan. The contents of Japanese and

European women's magazines are quite different. I don't have a favourite magazine in the UK. However, I enjoyed reading those magazines that focus on office ladies when I was in Japan. I didn't buy them frequently. Normally, I start reading from the beginning to the end but not in detail. I am interested in topics on cosmetics and the 'before and after' section, which is a kind of comparison before make-up, for instance, and how the person looks after make-up. In my view, it seems not a good idea to have those naked men's pictures in a women's magazine. In Japan, people may give me a funny look if I read this kind of magazine in a train.' Basically, Haruyo is quite satisfied with her body except her hips. She does not have a female idol. She says, 'I don't compare myself with a model or superstar, as I don't really agree that all of them are perfect. However, I do wish to have the same figure as certain models.' Haruyo skipped the question of defining an ideal body. She has tried a product of skin care through the advice from a magazine, which was not useful.

Haruyo's first impression of *Cosmopolitan* is that topics on sex account for a large portion of the entire magazine. On the other hand, there is only a little information about fashion. She agrees that some models in this *Cosmopolitan* are perfect. However, some of them seem too skinny, as she claims that a healthy body should not be too thin. According to Haruyo, men pay the same level of attention to physical appearance as women do. As she says, 'a strong figure represents health. Men do care about their appearance as they might need to attract the opposite sex. Today, products of skin care are not only targeted at women, but also men. It's a fact that men are starting to pay attention to their physical appearance.' As for Haruyo, the functions of a women's magazine are entertainment, providing information that she does not know, and sharing beauty tips with her friends, for instance, about cosmetics.

Haruyo thinks that the magazines from Singapore are quite similar to those of the UK version of *Cosmopolitan*. 'The cover girls in both magazines are wearing sexy clothes. They are beautiful and very slim. ... I think the publishers have the same taste in beauty. Even though they are from different nationalities, you can see they are actually quite similar in a way by showing the same kind of figure.' As for Haruyo, it is human nature for people to compare themselves with each other, no matter whether they are women or men. She puts, 'I compare myself with someone who looks similar to me in terms of body image. This comparison is based on an overall impression. I don't compare each portion of my figure, for example, hands or legs.' She agrees that the notion of beauty is an interesting topic of discussion with friends. Haruyo is stressed about her body in case of gaining weight. She feels that it is important to keep her body a standard size, as she would have more confidence and satisfaction with a perfect body.

### Case 7

Stefania is a Greek. She buys magazines but not frequently. Her favourite magazine is *Vogue*. Like other interviewees, Stefania reads a magazine when she is bored. The section she normally reads first is fashion advice and horoscopes. On the other hand, she does not quite like looking at the photos. Stefania is an exception as she does not enjoy reading a women's magazine. In the case of body satisfaction, she is not satisfied with her body, especially her legs. She says, 'I would like them to be slimmer.' She has one female idol. As she puts it, 'as for me, models in a magazine are perfect as they let me know what an ideal body should be. I compare myself with them sometimes. Honestly, it's impossible for me to have the same figure as them.' Stefania's definition of beauty is that one must be slim. It would be better also to have some muscles. In the case of consumer products, she has tried some skin care ones, such as crèmes, but they are not effective.

Stefania's impression of *Cosmopolitan* is of artificiality. She agrees that the models here look perfect; however, as she says, 'I don't think they all look like that in reality. They are beautiful because they put on layers and layers of make-up. Can you imagine how they might look like without make-up?' Stefania's opinion is based on a friend of hers who is a model, so that she has experience to understand what a real model looks like in reality. In terms of physical appearance, she agrees that women pay more attention to it than men do. 'Women think they have to. I think it's human to do things to look nice. Especially, from what women see in a magazine or television, they get an idea of what a perfect woman should look like, that's why they try to look like them.' As for Stefania, women's magazines do not play a part in her life. 'They are stupid. These magazines create the impression, which women think that they can look like. In fact, women are not only unable to achieve that image, but also start feeling insecure. That's contradictory.'

On the other hand, Stefania's impression of the Singaporean magazines is, 'they are different women but they have the same style. They are beautiful and have a perfect body again.' As she continues comparing, 'the Asian women have a different type of beauty as they are not European. However, they look similar to the European ones in terms of how they pose their body. The only difference with these cover girls is that they are not dressing as little as the Europeans.' In the case of comparison, even though Stefania is not satisfied with her body, she feels fine when she compares herself with her peers. 'We also discuss the notion of beauty. Especially, when we see a beautiful girl in ads, or magazines. We don't have the same taste in beauty. However, it seems to me that if the same type of girl keeps appearing in magazines, I will be persuaded that this is a presentation of an ideal body.' Stefania says that she has never been

pleased with her body. On the other hand, she says, 'I don't want to become a model. To achieve a better body is to please myself not anybody else.'

### Case 8

Angel is Chinese. Even though she buys magazines quite often, she does not have a favourite women's magazine. Angel says, 'I read them every two weeks. They are good for killing time, especially when I am on a train. My favourite section is fashion advice. I have ideas on how to dress up nicely through it. For example, which style is suitable for me, which colours I should avoid using.' Angel enjoys reading a women's magazine. By and large, Angel is satisfied with her body. However, she claims that it would be perfect if her breasts were bigger. She does not have a female idol, so that she has never compared herself with any superstar or model. Angel agrees that the models in a magazine are presenting the ideal body. As for her, it is not difficult to achieve the same body as those models. Her definition of an ideal body is simply as a perfect match. She has tried perfume that was advertised in a magazine; however, she is not satisfied with it.

Angel finds that there are lots of images in the *Cosmopolitan*. She says, 'the layout design of it is quite good. Certain contents are useful for me. For instance, advice on how to match clothes and information on new products.' Angel agrees that the models are perfect as they have nice figures and pretty faces. Especially, some of them look sweet. They are presenting different types of beauty. In the case of different levels of attention to physical appearance between women and men, Angel says, 'I think it's normal for women to pay more attention. Men put more effort into their career, and put it into first place in their life, but women are different. The biggest issue for a woman is to be beautiful.' As for her, women's magazines provide fashion tips, which is one of the major functions for the readers.

Comparing those Singaporean magazines with the European one, Angel found that there is not much different between the two cultures. She says, 'from my point of view these girls are for men. They are attractive in terms of sex. If I were a man, I would pay more attention to girls like them.' In Angel's opinion, comparison with peers is important as people can improve themselves through comparison. The term 'comparison' should not be based only on physical appearance, but also other aspects, such as a successful job, or life style. 'I also discuss with my friends what an ideal body should be. It's nice to hear opinion from different perspectives. During the discussion with others, I can ask for advice and learn something new from others. This is important for everybody.' As for Angel, she has never been stressed with her body image. She points out that it is quite crucial to achieve a perfect body. 'Men are more attracted by a perfect figure than a beautiful face. In other words, a good impression can be given through a perfect figure.'

## Result

The study finds that 87.5% of participants enjoy reading a women's magazine. However, women's magazines do not play an essential role in these participants' lives. For them, the main function of a women's magazine is merely for killing time. In the case of the notion of beauty, 100% of participants agree that a slender body is important. On the one hand, 100% of participants point out that both the East and the West are promoting the same ideal body image, which is a slender and thin body. Even though 25% of participants do not agree that magazine models are presenting the ideal body, 87.5% of participants wish to have the same figure as those models. The participants who believe that they are able to achieve the ideal body account for 37.5%. Only 12.5% of participants disagree that women pay more attention to physical appearance than men do. In this case, there are five major reasons why women pay more attention than men. First of all, women are targeted by advertising more than men are. Secondly, to be attractive is one of the biggest issues for a woman. Thirdly, women adjust each other by physical appearance. Fourthly, possessing an attractive appearance can make it easier to get a job. Last but not least, the power of the media (e.g. magazines and television) makes women more careful about their appearance. In the case of peer comparison, 100% of participants admit that they have compared themselves with other females. Only 25% of participants have never been depressed with their body image. Finally, 62.5% of participants consider that to achieve the ideal body is important. 12.5% of participants point out that the level of importance is in the middle. Another 25% of participants stress that it is not essential.

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## 3. IDEOLOGY AND FEMININITY

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### The Connection Between Ideology, Femininity, and Women's Magazines

'The struggle for girls and women, then (whether they are feminist or not), over the gendered meanings, representations, and ideologies in popular cultural forms is nothing less than a struggle to understand and hopefully transform the historical contradictions of becoming feminine within the contexts of conflicting sets of power relations' (Roman and Christian-Smith, 1988, p.4).

The concept of ideology is an illusion. It is a concept with a long-term debate. As Williams sees it, 'ideology is a difficult concept to deal with because of the strong, negative association the term has for many people' (2003, p.146). In the investigation between ideology and women's magazines, it can be understood as a sort of rule, set up by the magazines, an ideal body image, for instance. This rule is called ideology. Femininity is the main content of the ideology that refers to the women's magazines. Women's image is restricted by this rule, which is femininity. Ferguson points out that 'as a social institution, women's magazines play a part in shaping

the characteristics of femininity, because they themselves are part of, and contribute to, the culture of society as a whole' (1983, p.6). Moreover, according to Ballaster, 'Anything can co-exist with anything on the pages of the magazine (and does). The identification of 'contradiction', therefore, fails to embarrass either editors, writers or readers. Indeed, the form of the magazine – open-ended, heterogeneous, fragmented – seems particularly appropriate to those whose object is the representation of femininity. Femininity is itself contradictory (as feminists have long recognised), but women live with the contradictions' (1991, p.7).

On the one hand, women's magazines are important as they play an indispensable role as a professor, teaching women how to obey the rule. They only have female students, as male students do not play a part in the terms of femininity. Black criticises the term 'femininity' as an imposition for women, saying that ' "Everybody knows" that there are men and women, and divisions between bodies are drawn on to support this toxic view. The imposition of femininity upon women is achieved through what Bourdieu terms symbolic violence' (2004, p.67). In addition, Winship distinguishes the difference between being men and women. As he states,

'Men do not have or need magazines for "A Man's World"; it is their world, out there, beyond the shelves: the culture of the workplace, of politics and public life, the world of business, property and technology, there they are all "boys" together. Women have no culture and world out there other than the one which is controlled and mediated by men' (1987, p.6).

Winship's concern is decoded with Ballaster's opinion. Ballaster considers that 'women's concern, according to most magazines, is with personal and emotional relationships, primarily with husbands or partners, but also with children, family and friends. The work of maintaining healthy personal relationships is women's work' (1991, p.137). If husbands or partners, children, family and friends are the main concern of a woman, how about a woman herself? In other words, there is no space for a woman to think about herself, she is the one who belongs to others. Moreover, Millum points out that,

'To be male is to be in some way normal, to be female is to be different, to depart from the norm, to be abnormal. Therefore a woman is more conscious of being a woman than a man is of being a man, hence also the endless debate on what it means to be a woman, woman's roles, the place of woman in today's world, and so on' (1975, p.71).

In the context of femininity, Skeggs argues that 'using the concept of femininity to apply to all women is to misuse a historically specific representation. It was produced in power relations, in the interests of particular groups, invested in by other groups and it cannot therefore ... be applied to all women' (as cited in Black, 2004, p.183).

### Definition of Ideology

It is important to look at the definitions of ideology and femininity before undertaking further research into their

relationship. First of all, what does 'ideology' mean? The term has been understood with different meanings, according to the specific category that it refers to. Hall considers ideology is 'a site of struggle for completing definitions of reality, and ideological power is the power to signify events in a certain way' (1993, p.69). In addition, Van Dijk defines it as 'a system of wrong, false, distorted or otherwise misguided beliefs, typically associated with our social or political opponents' (as cited in Williams, 2003, p.146). However, Althusser has a different point of view to Van Dijk: He does not agree that ideology is a false belief. Rather, he considers ideology is 'something that structured people's "lived experience"' (Williams, 2003, p.148). As he explains,

'Ideology has real consequences for people; it plays a part in their everyday lives. It is not just about ideas or a mental state but something tangible and material in that it is carried out by groups and individuals, and inscribed in the practices and rituals of various institutions or apparatuses' (Williams, 2003, p.148).

### **Definition of Femininity and How Magazines Define Women**

In the case of femininity, Ballaster defines it as 'the sum of the individual woman's practical skills, whether efficiency in running a home, or competence in the office' (1991, p.139). If femininity is a skill, why do only women have to have it? There are not only women existing in a home or an office. Men should have the same ability to maintain an efficient skill in both home and office. In the relation with ideology, Ballaster points out that 'the ideology of femininity works to mystify relations of exploitation and oppression between men and women, to legitimate male domination. ... The interests of capitalism are served by the oppression of women through ideology' (1991, p.20). In the case of women, how do the magazines define women? Ferguson claims that

'By means of their titles, cover photographs, subject matter and advertisements women's magazines define themselves as a distinctive form of specialist periodical: their primary distinction is a biological one, based upon female sex. This has implications for how the gender characteristics of females are acquired, and how the position of women in society is defined' (1983, p.6).

### **Transformation of Femininity**

On the other hand, how do women's magazines function in a case of transformation of the theory of femininity to women? First of all, it is necessary to look at the fundamental function of women's magazines. According to Winship, they are one of the specific media that are 'for women, about women and very often by women' (Currie, 1997, p.455). Moreover, Ballaster considers that 'the women's magazine, at least in its contemporary mass-market form, can be understood as a form of authentic 'popular' culture produced by women solely in women's interest' (1991, p.16). Secondly, in Winship's opinion, 'feminists identified ideological constructions that work to define women's understandings of their experiences in ways that guarantee the reproduction of patriarchal

definitions of the social world' (Currie, 1997, p.455). As Winship points out, 'what is represented in women's magazines is not an accurate portrayal of the gender relations that characterize readers' everyday lives but an imaginary relation of women to be relations of patriarchal subordination' (Currie, 1997, p.455). Finally, according to Currie's information,

'Through the 1980s, feminist sociologists characterized the advertisements, feature articles, and stories appearing in women's magazines as vehicles of women's socialization into subordinate roles. Following sex role theory, much of this work takes the view that women, as readers of social texts, internalize messages that represent the "scripts" of femininity' (1997, p.456).

To return to Winship's description of 'for women, about women and very often by women', women's magazines cannot be understood merely from the surface that they are entertainment. Rather, what may happen to a woman is that her knowledge or understanding of the world is somehow misleading through the magazines' definition of what a woman should be. Again, women's magazines are problematic.

'Women's books and magazines are an important source of images of femininity. They provide models or standards of ideal women by which "real" women measure themselves ... Also, like romance novels, many of the fictional stories in women's magazines portray women as helpless victims at the mercy (and pleasure) of male sexual power and domination' (Peach, eds, 1998, p.122).

On the one hand, Macdonald points out that 'for the social leaning theorist, femininity and masculinity are first recognized, and then imitated in the child's own behaviour. Factors such as schooling, play, family life, and the media are seen as significant influences' (1995, p.17). Furthermore, McRobbie argues that 'adolescence, as an ideological construction, is given meaning and made comprehensible through magazine topics such as "problems," "romance," and "jealousy"' (Currie, 1997, pp.455-456). In other words, women come to understand the distinction between being a female and a male from adolescence. However, these understandings are based on the one-sided statement of the magazines' editors. In McCracken's opinion,

'Readers are not force-fed a constellation of negative images that naturalize male dominance; rather, women's magazines exert a cultural leadership to shape consensus in which highly pleasurable codes work to naturalize social relations of power. This ostensibly common agreement about what constitutes the feminine is only achieved through a discursive struggle in which words, photos, and sometimes olfactory signs wage a semiotic battle against the everyday world which, by its mere presence, often fights back as an existential corrective to the magazine's ideal images' (1993, p.3).

If women's understanding of the world, or the distinction between men and women, are re-structured by women's magazines' advertisements, feature articles, and stories, or femininity is such a restriction just as ideology is a false belief, what is the reality? It seems to Althusser that

'Although ideology is generated from the deep logical structures of the mode of production, it is produced and manifested through human subjects. Whereas the analyses of ideology we have met so far take it that the human subject is a 'given' upon which ideology acts to brainwash, hoodwink, or mislead through the presentation of spurious appearances as reality' (Ballaster, eds, 1991, p.3).

### Reality and Femininity

To turn to the role of women's magazines, it seems to McCracken that 'magazines are part of a field of discourses, each of which is struggling to become the obvious or common-sense way of viewing reality; and within individual magazines and their constituent parts, competing discourses struggle as well' (1993, p.69). What do discourses mean to us? Foucault defines discourses as 'the incarceration of "criminals", the treatment and designation of "the mad"' (Ballaster, 1991, p.25). Women's role in reality can be understood through the extension of discourses. Ballaster stresses that women's roles, under the definition of femininity, are 'housewife, nurse, professional invalid, and prostitute' (1991, p.25). In the case of gender difference, Ballaster puts in this way,

'If reality is constructed or, at least, known through discourses, then there is no reason to take class division as the primary and determining social division. We can acknowledge, then, that the structuring discourse of gender (and other differences such as race) is every bit as powerful as the discourse of class' (1991, p.24).

In addition, Barrett criticises the fact that 'the ideology of women's inferiority is seen as a manipulation of reality that serves men's interests, and women's own collusion in oppression is explained as a variety of false consciousness' (1980, p.85). It is a stereotype. Women seem helpless in the eyes of men, or from the women's magazines' point of view. They cannot survive without men's attention. What happens to this is only due to the sexual difference. Are men's interest women's duties? Why do women have to obey the rule of femininity, or the falseness of ideology?

In the connection between reality and magazine editors, Ferguson states that 'through the selective perception and interpretation of the wider world from the viewpoint of the "women's angle", the editors of these sacred oracles sustain a social "reality" that is "forever feminine" '. He explains that 'this process invokes a shared and common culture, one which is bounded by the customary and expected categories of female interests and experience' (1983, p.185). Again, in the women's magazines' view, reality is forever feminine, so that the content of a magazine is nothing else but all about femininity, it is a restriction.

The notion of beauty will be investigated in the following chapter. By doing so, a further discussion of the connection between femininity and physical appearance will be argued.

## 4. THE NOTION OF BEAUTY

'The disparity between the standards for appearance established by the beauty myth, and the inability of most real women to conform to these standards, no matter how hard they try, contributes to how self-esteem. For the effort to be thin is seldom successful. Only 5 percent of women will ever have the figures of fashion models, and only 2 percent of them naturally. For most women, such gaunt appearances are an unattainable – and unhealthy – way of being' (Peach, eds, 1998, p.175).

The ideal body image portrayed by the women's magazines is an unattainable, unreal, and unhealthy image. According to Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, and Ahrens (1992) 'the ideal female body, as represented by media images, is currently between 13% and 19% below expected weight for women' (Engeln-Maddox, 2005, p.1115). By showing a range of images of super-models, super-stars and celebrities, women's magazines are promoting the same ideal body, which is a slender and thinner body. Tiggemann and McGill claim that

'The mass media, due to their pervasiveness and reach, are probably the single most powerful transmitters of sociocultural ideals. Certainly formal content analyses of the visual media (fashion magazines, television advertising, and programming) document a preponderance of young, tall, and extremely thin women who epitomize the current beauty ideal (Malkin, Wornian, & Chisler, 1999; Fouts & Burggraf, 1999, 2000)' (2004, p.24).

Berger says that 'we only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice' (1972, p.8). Women's choices are limited and restricted by the magazines. They are not provided with other images of ideal except a slender body. So that whatever they see is the same. As time has passed, this thin body has become an ideal. As women have never been shown plump women to present something positive in a magazine, women believe that a slender body is a standard. In Berger's words, 'the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe' (1972, p.8). Women's magazines seem to care about women, through their beauty tips, advice and articles, so that women feel there is always a solution for them to achieve a body like that. However, the major concern of the women's magazines is to sell products. Ferguson claims that

'The ritual aspects of the perfecting process are demonstrated by the "step-by-step" instructions, the day-to-day diets, leading the initiates towards physical images and ideals which are as culturally and commercially determined as ever they are biologically given' (1983, p.59).

### The Changing of Body Shape and the Ideal Body

According to Guillen and Barr, 'models' body shapes were less curvaceous than those in magazines for adults women and that the hip/waist ratio decreased from 1970 to 1990, meaning that models' bodies had become thinner over time' (Martin & Gentry, 1997, p.20). Moreover, Grimshaw is concerned about the two kinds of body shape, which were presented by Marilyn Monroe in the 1950s and Twiggy in the 1990s. As Grimshaw puts it,

'The content of the ideals of beauty and the perfect body are not arbitrary. It is true that these ideals change; thus neither the curvaceous Marilyn Monroe figure of the 1950s nor the stick-thin image of Twiggy represent the dominant ideal of the female body in the 1990s. Nevertheless it remains the case that not any body will do, and that the generalized tyranny of fashion and body shape is articulated differently for different groups' (1999, p.93).

In the case of an ideal body, Ballaster points out that 'women are still, by and large, perceived in terms of closeness to or distance from culturally specific notions of feminine beauty. An important role for the magazine, therefore, lies in encouraging women to aspire and strive towards meeting this ideal' (1991, pp.150-151). In addition, Grimshaw claims that 'the connections between aerobics and body shape involve a notion of an "ideal body", and most particularly a body which is not "fat"' (1999, p.94).

Today, both the East and the West are promoting the same ideal image. Even though there are ranges of distinction, such as history, culture, life-style, it is obvious to see that both sides' women's magazines are presenting the same body size. The result of the case studies in Chapter 2 shows that each participant agrees that what the cover pages show are different faces with the same body. The only distinction is that cover girls in the East possess an Eastern-looking face. On the one hand, cover girls in the West have a Western-looking face.

### Why Beauty Matters?

'Approximating beauty can be essential to a woman's chances for power, respect and attention. Recognizing this, women have quite sensibly directed great energy toward evaluating and improving their appearance' (Chapkis, 1986, p.14). If the standard of beauty is unattainable, why are women still struggling with it? To answer the question, it is essential to look at the definition of beauty. Calkins defines beauty as 'to be introduced into a material object, ... to enhance them in the eyes of the purchaser. The appeal of efficiency alone is nearly ended. Beauty is the natural and logical next step. It is in the air' (as cited in Ewen, 1988, p.46). In other words, beauty is utterly visionary.

In Ferguson's opinion, beauty is ' "taken for granted" as both means and end within the female world, and physical appearance is a highly normative cult message' (1983, p.58). Lakoff and Scherr consider beauty has a relation with fashion, and they define beauty as fashion. They explain, 'it is determined to meet people's specific needs at a particular time and place. ... Since what is beautiful at any time and place is determined by the vagaries of fashion, it is unpredictable and not based on any sort of universal aesthetic' (1984, p.29).

On the other hand, it contradicts reality and the ideal body image. Mulvey agrees that 'most women feel, or have felt, uncomfortable, uneasy and insecure about how

they look – 'the long love affair/despair between image and self image' (as cited in Edholm, 1992, p.154). Furthermore, according to Fredrickson and Roberts, 'because females are socialized to see themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated, they are most likely to feel shame and anxiety for not appearing perfect' (Groesz, 2002, p.2). Why is beauty important for a woman? Is it merely a problem of women? Do men need to be handsome? Lakoff and Scherr compare the different level of importance between men and women:

'To have power, one needs to possess something that someone else wants, or needs. For a man, it can be wealth or influence or knowledge; for a woman, it has always been beauty (or someone else's accumulated wealth or strength, of which she is merely the receptacle, to allow it to be put into someone else's hands' (1984, pp.18-19).

In addition, Edholm points out that

'For most women, particular young women, self is very centrally bound up with appearance; it is difficult to be entirely disinterested. Connected to this is the way in which women are characterized as vain, preoccupied with appearance, with how they and other women look, and as judgemental and jealous of other women's looks' (1992, p.154).

### Social Comparison

Social comparison can be seen as one of the major reasons for magazine reading. According to Groesz, 'the thin ideal is conveyed and reinforced by many social influences, including family, peer, schools, athletics, business, and health care professionals (Levine & Smolak, 1996, 1998; Smolak & Levine, 1996; Thompson & Stice, 2001). However, the loudest and most aggressive purveyors of images and narratives of ideal slender beauty are the mass media' (2002, p.2). Groesz's point of view can be understood this way. First of all, it is human nature to have a comparison with each other, no matter male or female. Secondly, as women pay more attention to physical appearance than men do, according to Martin and Gentry, 'girls tend to view their bodies as "object," and their physical beauty determines how they and others judge their overall value' (1997, p.20). They try to find a solution that will make them be more attractive and outstanding, so that they look for the magazines' help. Finally, as magazines provide a range of information on appearance, women are given advice on how to be attractive. This is a relationship between magazines and women. A further analysis of readership will be provided in chapter 6. In Lakoff and Scherr's opinion, 'the media encourage us to make snap judgements on the basis of superficial physical characteristics, since that is what they offer us' (1984, p.134).

It has nothing to have an ambition of being attractive. Social comparison can be understood as a sort of improvement, as people come to understand more about themselves through comparing. However, recent researches show that social comparison brings more negative effects than positive effects. Engeln-Maddox claims that

'Negative outcome social comparisons were much more frequent than positive outcome comparisons. ... There was also some evidence that these positive outcome comparisons were negatively associated with negative outcome comparisons, and positively associated with counter arguing. Thus, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that comparisons with these types of images are not uncommon and are often harmful' (2005, p.1131).

In addition, Tiggemann and McGill point out that 'when women compare themselves to an image presented in the media, this almost invariably represents an upward social comparison by which they find themselves lacking, thus leading to negative mood and body dissatisfaction' (2004, p.26). Moreover, Stice and Shaw found that 'exposure to ultra-thin models in advertisements and magazine pictures produced depression, stress, guilt, shame, insecurity, and body dissatisfaction in female college students' (1997, p.21).

In contrast, Martin and Gentry disagree with the idea of social comparisons having a negative effect on women, and they claim that comparisons can be seen as encouragement.

'After female college students viewed "ideal-body commercials," they felt thinner than they "normally" do: "The young women may have imagined themselves in the ideal body presented by the advertising. They may have bought the ideal female body sold by the advertising"' (Myers and Biocca). Therefore, when self-improvement is the primary motive for comparison, self-perceptions of physical attractiveness should temporarily rise in anticipation of an improvement because the comparisons with advertising models are inspiring rather than threatening' (1997, p.22).

Generally speaking, social comparison can be understood as two aspects. In the case of negative effects, as the majority of women are ordinary, it is not a rational action for an ordinary woman to compare herself with a super model. It would be nonsense and would make a plan to no avail. On the other hand, in the case of positive effects, women can improve their own physical appearance through comparing themselves with somebody who has a similar body image. This comparison is based on a similar body image. In Engeln-Maddox's opinion, 'if one's goal is to obtain an accurate (even if painful) evaluation of one's own appearance, comparison to a dissimilar other (in this case, the media ideal) is quite rational' (2005, p.1116).

### **The Perfect Image and the Reality**

'Female desire is courted with the promise of future perfection, by the lure of achieving ideals – ideal legs, ideal hair, ideal homes, ideal sponge cakes, ideal relationship. The ideals on offer don't actually exist except as the end product of photographic techniques or as elaborate fantasies. But these ideals are held out to women – all the time' (Coward, 1984, p.13).

Generally speaking, it is human nature to dream of having an ideal body, ideal home, ideal car, etc. The idea is simply like a child who has a dream of the future. It

can be understood as a hope as well. However, a question should be asked before putting an effort to achieve the ideal, which is: What percentage of the ideal, whether it is a body or a home, can be achieved? Putting it simply, how far is it between the ideal body, home, or car, etc. and reality? In Ewen's opinion, 'the image offered a representation of reality more compelling than reality itself, and – perhaps – even threw the very definition of reality into question' (1988, p.25).

A so-called perfect image in a magazine does not mean that is really perfect. Today, the development of technology changes things from impossible to possible. Especially, computer software is a most powerful medium that covers up all the imperfection of a face, for instance. Jones and Buckingham suggest that 'the best way to control for physical attractiveness is to use computer software to manipulate the thinness of the target images' (2005, p.1166). Women's imagination is enlightened through the perfect images of the women's magazines. They believe that it is the reality. Oliver Wendell Holmes comments that,

'The power of the disembodied image is that it can free itself from the encumbrances posed by material reality and still lay claim to that reality. At the same time that the image appeals to transcendent desires, it locates those desires within a visual grammar which is palpable, which looks real, which invites identification by the spectator, and which people tend to trust' (Ewen, 1988, p.90).

Even though people come to understand that those images may undergo certain special effects of Photoshop, for instance, women may not only believe that these images are real, but also think that these images are achievable. In the case of photography, Ewen stresses that 'photography's powerful ability to mediate style is rooted in its simultaneous affinity to reality and fantasy' (1988, p.90). He puts in this way:

'Commercial photography – in advertisements, fashion magazines, catalogues – offers a vision of perfection which, though lifeless and object-oriented, provides us with models of appearance. For the still camera, the most photogenic subject is one that freezes well, one that can be ripped out of time, suspended, motionless. The ideal photographic model is one who is able to suggest action while standing still, who can imply inner substance or attitude through remote and superficial means. The idealized human becomes the plastic human, able to maintain a perpetual smile, not one whose beauty required a lingering familiarity, an intimacy' (1988, p.85).

Furthermore, Coward criticises the ideal image as artificial. He claims that 'there are only a very limited number of models who make it to the billboards, and the techniques of photography are all geared towards creating the illusion of this perfect body' (1984, p.45). In addition, Ewen stresses that 'photography gave substance to the idea that images could be the conclusive expression of reality on the one hand, and exist autonomously of that reality on the other' (1988, p.25). In Everard's opinion, the camera is a pliant medium, because 'it can emphasize qualities of delicacy, elegance of line, mystery and glamour, and yet

retain the persistent atmosphere of reality. Cameraland is the land of dreams come true' (as as cited in Ewen, 1988, p.90). It cannot be denied that photography is a record of what has happened in the reality, or evidence to certify that the existence of something; however, this kind of recording is highly dependent on what the photographer wishes to show. In the case of women's magazines, the photographer is employed to have a perfect image made. This image is to persuade women to be like that, and, on the other hand, it is to sell products. According to James B –, who is a photographic stylist,

'I create the image that people want to see. It's up to me to fake people out. ... Basically you lie to people. You create ... a picture and then they adapt to that picture. You can bring people up in taste level, you can bring them down in taste level, just by what you create, what you put into it. ... And it's just pulling together elements which work with whatever you're trying to sell' (as as cited in Ewen, 1988, p.90-91).

To sum up, the notion of beauty is based on various aspects. It is changed according to different periods of time. The relationship of whether the notion of beauty is set first, or is created by the magazines, is arguable. No matter what the answer would be, women's magazines do play a main role in terms of creation and being supportive. The next chapter will interpret the correlation between women's magazines and advertising.

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## 5. ADVERTISING AND WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

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### The Body in Everyday Life

'In addition to the general market factors affecting the definition of beauty that a given magazine promotes, each publication operates under a particular set of infrastructural factors that shape its beauty advice. The effects of purchased advertising on the advice given in the editorial sections are visible to anyone who studies the magazine closely, but only rarely do the magazines themselves publicly admit to the practice' (McCracken, 1993, p.57).

The circulation of consumption is trap. To understand the role of women's magazines in terms of selling products, one should start from the fundamental function of the magazine itself. No matter the notion of beauty, or the changeable fashion trend, women's magazines are employed by wire pulling, in order to spray out information about the latest trends. Lefebvre questions:

'Has not this society, glutted with aestheticism, already integrated former romanticisms, surrealism, existentialism and even Marxism to a point? It has, indeed, through trade, in the form of commodities. That which yesterday was reviled today becomes cultural consumer-goods, and consumption thus engulfs what was intended to give meaning and direction' (as as cited in Hebdige, 1979, p.92)

The main function of women's magazines is to sell products, no matter reviled or ridiculous. In Ferguson's

opinion, 'they are created in response to editors' perceptions of the female role – "what women want" – and the imperatives of the market place – "what will sell" ' (1983, p.10). Ferguson explains that 'women's magazines still define norms for what their followers should think, say, do, wear, cook, read, explore, ignore or care about' (1983, p.189). It sounds debatable whether or not women are playing a passive role in terms of consumption. Nobody can be forced to buy something if he/her does not want it. However, Ferguson comments that

'Every woman can choose the 'kind' of woman she wishes to be. They imply her choice is constrained only by her preferences from amongst the range of images offered to her. This freedom to choose extends to all areas of her life. Appearance, home, work or partner all express the 'kind' of woman she is, or aspires to be: 'the Cosmo girl', 'the Good Housekeeping wife', or 'the Woman woman' (1983, p.189).

Today, women are told by the magazines that a slender body is a standard of beauty, because magazines are employed by the diet companies, which are promoting diet products such as diet food. So that there are ranges of diet food advertisements appearing in a magazine. In other words, women's magazines are only the tools for spreading information, they are commodities that sell commodities. In Ballaster's words, 'it is at the same time a medium for the sale of commodities to an identifiable market group, women, and itself a commodity, a product sold in the capitalist market place for profit' (Ballaster, eds, 1991, p.2).

On the one hand, by showing page after page of advertising of the same scheme of products, women believe that that is one solution for them to achieve the standard of beauty. The way in which women's magazines try to sell products is indirect. First of all, they present lots of super models, super-stars, and celebrities' images in front of women. Women may see these images as an ideal, or an achievement that every woman should have the same figure as that. Secondly, magazines say, 'try it if you want to be like that'. They may not say it directly; however, women come to understand that it is a fact. Magazines are patient. They provide advice and direction for women. It can be seen quite often that most pages of advice have inserted advertisements of certain brand products. If a woman says she has a problem with her hair, for example, magazines will try to comfort her first, and after that she will be strongly recommended to buy a product which is good for her. Finally, she buys that product which the magazine has advised. The selling strategies of women's magazines are varied. As a woman, each part of her body is targeted by the advertisers. In Coward's opinion,

'Each area requires potions, moisturizers, conditioners, night creams, creams to cover up blemishes. Moisturize, display, clean off, rejuvenate – we could well be at it all day, preparing the face to meet the faces that we meet. This is not only the strict grip of the cultural ideal; it is also the multiplication of areas of the body accessible to marketing' (1984, pp.80-81)

Advertising is everywhere. In the case of the ideal body image, Edholm points out that 'the contemporary western world is saturated with images of women – in advertisements, magazines, on television, film and in the press. The images are every day – in the street, in our homes, where we work, where we consume' (1992, p.155). Actually, the fact is that the ideal body images not only appear in each corner of Western society, but also in the East. The situation is more or less the same, in which women are brainwashed by the advertising and the ideal images that appear everywhere, every minute. In other words, women are recognised as consumers by women's magazines. According to McCracken,

'The most lucrative magazines in the category, *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue*, have immense ad volumes. As we will see, both offer readers unique escapes from everyday life, fantasies that ultimately reaffirm dominant moral values and women's role in consumerism. ... Through an oppositional structure that links positive beauty ideals to images of female inadequacy, women learn both their expected social role and their duties as consumers' (1993, p.137).

### Women Are the Target Consumers

'The key role of women as the primary purchasers of goods and services in the consumer society is the material explanation for the continued existence of this genre of mass culture. ... Magazines foster a reifying image of woman as shopper in order to attract advertisers' (1993, p.4).

The previous chapter has analysed social comparison as one major reason for magazine reading. By and large, women compare themselves with other women by focusing on physical appearance more frequently than men. On the other hand, it seems to Coward that 'women's relation to their own self-image is much more likely to be dominated by discontent' (1984, p.79). Due to these reasons, women are targeted by advertisers and women's magazines. In Chapter 2, the case studies have showed that each participant enjoys reading a magazine. They have a similar point of view, which they are provided with ranges of cosmetics, fashion, and make-up information via magazines. It seems to Coward that 'everywhere, female desire is sought, bought, packaged and consumed' (1984, p.13). Advertisers do not have to be psychologists, it is obvious to understand what women want, or need. So that women are sold by what they are looking for. According to Pesis,

'Women's growing interest in beauty products coincided with their new sense of identity as consumers. Women had long bought and bartered goods, but around 1900 a new, self-conscious notion of the woman consumer emerged. Women's magazines and advertisers inducted their female readers into a world of brand-name products and smart shopping, while department stores created a feminine paradise of abundance, pleasure and service' (as as cited in Black, 2004, pp.26-27).

### The Pleasure of Consumption

According to Ballaster, 'the pleasure of consumption and that of the fantasy of possibilities of infinite consumption

is central to the success of the magazine form and we cannot afford simply to reject it as cultural brainwashing' (1991, p.15). On the one hand, Coward considers that 'everywhere women are offered pleasure. Pleasure if we lose weight, pleasure if we prepare a beautiful meal, pleasure if we follow a natural instinct, pleasure if we acquire something new – a new body, a new house, a new outfit, a new relationship' (1984, p.13). All these pleasure cannot exist without consumption. In Lakoff and Scherr's opinion, 'beauty is worth just what it costs' (1984, p.160). Women's pleasure is a sort of desire. The question 'what do women want?' has been asked many times. However, it is hard to answer it because of the changeable criteria of the 'want'.

First of all, it is important to look at the definition of desire: what does it mean to people? The term 'desire' sounds negative, because it is not merely a request but a request that seems not easy to achieve, or really to exist in reality. Bennett et al. question whether 'the capacity to desire is what makes us human' (2005, p.76). Generally speaking, again, it is human nature to have desire. This idea simply reflects the analysis of the fact that everybody has a dream of the future. Life is dark without hope. In the words of Bennett et al., 'desire is both ineffable and at the heart of how we understand ourselves' (2005, p.76). In the case of advertising, it seems to Bennett et al. that

'The advertising industry promises that every desire can be satisfied. Of course the satiation of desire is not quite that simple. The fulfilment of one set of desires often only brings on more desire. As many have argued (Williams, 1980; Williamson, 1995), capitalism is premised on a cycle of satisfying desire and creating new desires. Paradoxically, this aspirational economy runs on the implicit knowledge that human desire outstrips the range of commodities on offer. While consumer culture translates human desire (for love, happiness, and a good life) into commodity objects, we know we want (something) more' (2005, pp.76-77).

Bennett et al. are concerned about the on-going new desire, which can be understood as a strategy of advertisers – the endless desire, which requires unceasing consumption. In Calkins' words, "'this new influence on articles of barter and sale is largely used to make people dissatisfied with what they have of the old order, still good and useful and efficient, but lacking in the newest touch' (as as cited in Ewen, 1988, p.46). Advertisers will not deny that the previous products are not good. However, consumers are persuaded that the new one must be more efficient than the previous one, which are good but not enough. Secondly, Bennett et al. point out, 'the idea that desire is a negative experience (we cannot get what we desire or, worse, we desire that which we cannot have) has been most widely promulgated by Sigmund Freud' (2005, p.77). Finally, by the promising of advertising, Lakoff and Scherr point out that 'in our time beauty can be tailor-made to fit our ideal and with money enough, we can surely have "beauty." ... The day may soon be here when upon seeing a beautiful face we will not exclaim "how

beautiful!" but rather ask "how much?" (1984, p.114). In addition, Ewen comments that consumption is one of the most available routes to satisfaction. As he puts it,

'While the preponderant work structures of consumer capitalism often bear the fruits of frustration, the images of consumerism continually acknowledge the desire for freedom, the freedom to desire. Within this circle, style becomes a compensation for the substance that mass-produces and markets it' (1988, p.103).

### Pro and Anti Advertising

Even though the debate of whether or not advertising is beneficial is not intensive, it might be interesting to evaluate the different perspectives of the issue. Bodinetz explains.

'I don't think you can just point the finger and blame advertising, because advertising never leads. But admittedly it is very quick to sense what is happening on the streets or around the world and to jump on a bandwagon. Of course while it is true that advertising never sets the pace, it cannot escape its share of the responsibility for confirming the view that to "join the club" you've got to look like this, smell like this, speak like this and dress like this.'

It has nothing wrong with advertising. The problem is whether or not the products that are advertised in a women's magazine are merely for improving women's life, or something which is considered as empty talk. If women's desire is partly from the promising from advertising or magazines, it may need to call for a more critical approach. Chapkis criticises the relationship between media and advertising as problematic. He stresses that 'the media have always relied heavily on advertising. Now, though, the relationship is so intimate that one corporation may own both the magazine advertising a product and the company producing it' (1986, p.12). Furthermore, Williamson criticises the fact that

'We are told something about a product, and asked to buy it. The information that we are given is frequently untrue, and even when it is true, we are often being persuaded to buy products which are unnecessary; products manufactured at the cost of damaging the environment and sold to make a profit at the expense of the people who made them' (1978, p.17).

In addition, Bagdikian commenting on the media, says that 'the major media and giant corporations have always been allies; they are now a single entity' (as cited in Chapkis, 1986, p.12). In the case of women's images in advertisements, Peach points out those women's images are passive in advertisements. It shows that women's social status is subordinate and dominated by men. In addition, she explains that

'Feminists have observed how images of women are used to sell products by making them appear more desirable. Advertisements have shifted over time from portraying women as primarily interested in housework and child rearing to representations of women as interested primarily in enhancing their female beauty' (1998, p.121).

### Ideology and Advertising

It is arguable that whether ideology is mental or material in the case of advertising, in general, the term 'ideology' refers to a sort of direction, which guides people to come to understand the world. In Smith's opinion,

'The concept of ideology provides us with a thread through the maze different from our more familiar notions of "culture," for it directs us to look for and at the actual practical organization of the production of images, ideas, symbols, concepts, vocabularies, as means for us to think about our world' (1987, p.54).

However, this guidance may not be correct all the time. The previous chapter has analysed the relationship between ideology and femininity. In this chapter, the term 'ideology' will be in relation to advertising, in an investigation of ideology in the material world. If ideology is guidance that leads people to come to understand the world, it should not have a relationship with material as it is only a mental direction. However, according to Michele Barrett, 'ideology – as the work of constructing meaning – cannot be divorced from its material conditions in a given historical period' (as cited in Allen, 1992, p.37). In other words, every historical period is constructed by the material conditions in terms of setting a new ideology to direct people's understanding of the new century's coming. In the relationship between advertisements and ideology, Williamson says that

'We see that the form of advertisements is a part of ideology, and involves a false assumption which is the root of all ideology, namely that because things are as they are (in this case, because certain things are shown as connected in ads, placed together etc.), this state of affairs is somehow natural, and must 'make sense' simply because it exists' (1978, p.29).

Moreover, Williamson explains that 'ideology is the meaning made necessary by the conditions of society while helping to perpetuate those conditions' (1978, p.13). Furthermore, Barrett supports that ideology comes with material conditions are an inevitable reproof. As he points out that 'to be caught artlessly counterpoising "material conditions" and "ideology" is an embarrassing error – "but surely ideology is material" will be the inevitable reproof' (1980, p.89).

In the case of women's magazines, women are directed by ideology in terms of femininity. On the other hand, by creating an ideal body for women, ideology comes with material conditions. It is a system of consumption circulation. First of all, according to women's magazines and the promises of advertisers, an ideal body image is achievable. Secondly, for any woman who wishes to achieve it, consumption is the only way to make things happen. Finally, women may not have any change but women's magazines and advertisers have made their profit. If ideology does not come with material conditions, where do advertisers' profits come from? In addition, if ideology is changeable, who makes the decision for

re-constructing ideology? Obviously, the answer is advertisers. It is a restriction, which controls women's minds in terms of consumption, and reaction to the ideal body image. However, Eagleton disagrees with the idea of material ideology. As he remarks,

'There is no possible sense in which meanings and values can be said to be "material", other than in the most sloppily metaphorical use of the term... If meanings are material, then the term "materialism" naturally ceases to be intelligible. Since there is nothing which the concept excludes, it ceases to have values' (as cited in Barrett, 1980, p.90).

It might make sense that meaning cannot be said to be material. However, it depends on which situation that material is referred to. In the case of women's magazines and advertising, the meaning of femininity, the meaning of being a woman, the meaning of being an ideal woman, every aspect is related with material. On the other hand, the term 'value' is obviously connected with material. It could be too generalized to say that ideology is only a term which refers to a mental world.

## 6. THE PLEASURE OF READING

'As women's magazines are widely read, they have ample opportunity to convince millions that the views expressed by the magazines are just, fair, and truthful. The magazines depict a monolithic perspective on the world, presenting their contents as "the truth", leading readers to believe that these texts present a mimetic view of the world; the magazines do not suggest that there is a world full of people with different perspectives' (Inness, 2004, p.126).

In Chapter 2, the eight case studies have shown that each participant enjoys reading women's magazines. Even though some of them have rejected reading women's magazines, the participant read them before and agrees that she was provided with a certain level of pleasure. It is a fact that women's magazines do play a part in offering pleasure to their readers. However, participants stressed that women's magazines are not essential in their life. The main role that women's magazines are playing is only entertainment. Some participants claim that these magazines are good for killing time. To sum up, reading women's magazines can be considered as a way of experiencing pleasure, for the majority of women. In Wolf's opinion,

'The magazines provide actual services, listing help lines, offering readers' polls, giving women tools for budgeting and financial information. These combine to make the magazine seem to be more than a magazine: they make it appear to be a mix of extended family, benefit agency, political party and guild. They make it look like an interest group with the reader's best interest at heart' (1990, p.56).

To investigate the role of women's magazines and the level of pleasure that they offer to the reader are the main concern of this chapter. There is no denying that they are popular in terms of the multiple functions. Women are provided with the latest fashion trends, cosmetics

information, and beauty tips, which are the most attractive sections for most women. In addition, entertainment such as introduction of movies, television programmes, a question and answer section, by emphasising different topics, for instance, sex, career, etc., are partly making a magazine interesting for the readers. These are the basic contents of a magazine. However, besides these topics, women's magazines offer a wide range of advertisements to the readers. In McCracken's opinion,

'While viewing the magazines, the woman herself participates in the construction of the idealized images; she performs a kind of pleasurable work by combining fantasy with respect to advertisements, ... Whether a perfect face, dress, meal, or furniture arrangement, these symbols appear all the more attainable because they urge the viewer to link the fantasy to her everyday life' (1993, p.13).

Women are encouraged to try different products for their needs. Women's magazines, combining entertainment and consumption into no more than 400 pages, are a medium that accompanies women in the process of growing up. To understand the success of women's magazines, it is necessary to analyse them from different aspects.

### The Cover Images

'The visual, verbal, and sometimes olfactory signifiers in these magazines offer women multiple layers of signifieds; along with the pleasure come messages that encourage insecurities, heighten gender stereotypes, and urge reifying definitions of the self through consumer goods' (McCracken, 1993, pp.8-9).

Most of the cover pages present a female image. The cover image is one of the most important parts of a magazine. An attractive cover page can be used to influence a reader's purchase. It seems to Frost that 'women consume images of women; they are bombarded with them but they also seek them out. Countless women buy women's magazines, almost invariably with a picture of a woman – dressed-up, made-up and looking good – on the cover' (1999:129). Moreover, McCracken considers that 'the front cover is the most important advertisement in any magazine. ... More crucial than the labels of most products, covers must attract audiences not only in order to sell the magazine, but so that the latter can succeed in its important function of selling other commodities' (1993, p.14). It is human nature to look for something attractive. Women are encouraged to pay further attention to other topics that are inside the magazines. It will not be easy for a woman to continue reading what happen inside if the cover page is not attractive. This is the duty of the cover page. Frost comments that

'The idea that women not only take pleasure in looking at women, but use these images to take pleasure in engaging with their own appearances perhaps offers some substance to the possibility of an enjoyable, allowable and creative engagement with the only self we can see' (1999, p.130).

In other words, do women compare their image of themselves with the cover girl immediately when they

pick a magazine up? What happens is that the cover images are always a real person, which is the obvious distinction between women's magazines and other magazines. It is impossible for anyone to compare themselves with someone who is only a mannequin, for instance. In McCracken's view, 'if readers are constantly reassured about their own value when reading *Cosmopolitan*, as Radway suggests occurs when women read romance fiction, it is at the level of an imaginary investment of one's real world' (1993, p.7). However, in the case of body image, if the gap between the cover girl and the woman's own body image is that huge, do women feel more dissatisfaction with her? In this case, where is the pleasure? As McCracken explains,

'Ideal images of the future self encountered on the front cover are multiplied and reinforced in feature after feature. Free to indulge in a narcissism based on fantasy, one can, for a moment, forget one's actual appearance in the mirror, replacing that memory with the magazine's concrete examples of ideal beauty. Ostensibly, these images are positive projections of the future self, for few would buy these publications were they overtly to present negative images' (1993, p.135).

On the other hand, how do women ensure that the cover girl is perfect only through a presentation of the face? It is a normal layout for a cover page to show only the face, or half body of the model. As Millum puts it, 'the face is used as a symbol of the whole person: people, convicts and celebrities, and recognized not by their whole physical selves, but by one small part of their bodies' (1975, p.57). In Winship's opinion,

'The cover image shouts that this women's world of personal life and feminine expressivity is one worth bothering about, engendering a feel for the reader that such pursuits are successful, and moreover bring happiness: the model smiles. Idealistic as all this is (some would say oppressive), it is less a denial of the "real world" than an affirmation of how much women and feminine concerns are neglected in that "real world"' (1987, p.12).

### The Ideal Message

'Men are exposed to male fashion models but do not see them as role models. Why do women react so strongly to nothing, really – images, scraps of paper? Is their identity so weak? Why do they feel they must treat "models" – mannequins – as if they were "models" – paradigms? Why do women react to the "ideal", whatever form she takes at the moment, as if she were a non-negotiable commandment' (Wolf, 1990, p.42)?

Wolf's point of view is the fundamental distinction of gender's attitude in magazines reading. However, it shows that women's role and social status are still under male domination. To turn to the perspective of social comparison, as for most women, to possess an attractive face is much important than anything else. Lakoff and Scherr comment that 'the power of beauty is the power of the weak' (1984, p.20). Because the magazines provide a range of beauty tips to women, women are offered

pleasure, as the magazines provide what they need. Women may not see these mannequins as a threat; on the contrary, they could be seen as a sort of encouragement, no matter whether attainable or not. In addition, women believe that they have to achieve a body like that, as they do not think this is considered as a weak identity, they just look at it as a standard for every woman to meet.

### The Beauty Tips

All the beauty tips are working for advertisements. Women are advised that they should put on make-up in order to look better. However, the beauty tips are contradictory. Lakoff and Scherr note that 'It was a paradoxical assignment: teaching women to make up so as not to look made-up, selling artifice as naturalness, selling as alluring a product that wasn't supposed to be seen' (1984, p.101). What is the purpose for women to put on make-up if it should be invisible? On the other hand, in the case of plastic surgery, women's magazines contribute heavily by playing a contradictory role again.

'Information boxes evaluate different forms of treatment and warn about unqualified practitioners. ... These features remind us that the magazine is our trusted friend, independently exploring what is good for us. Turn to the back pages, though, and advertisements for clinics offering cosmetic surgery or liposuction predominate' (Macdonald, 1995, p.208).

Macdonald's point highlights the contradictory role of women's magazines. Magazines' editors seem to have an ability see through their readers. On the one hand, they show different examples of how people have unsuccessful plastic surgery done. On the other hand, readers can find that there are numbers of advertisements of plastic surgery behind the main contents pages. For example, there is an article of a recent *Cosmopolitan*<sup>1</sup>, titled 'Cowboy Cosmetic Surgeons Exposed' published under the category of *Cosmo* which puts you in the know. It is about a tragedy of women who have undergone failed plastic surgeries of breasts enlargement. By showing pictures of the painful consequence of the operation, the magazines strongly recommend that patients should look for other solutions when surgery goes wrong. It suggests that patients should return to their surgeon first of all. Secondly, go to the GP. Finally, find a new, reputable surgeon. The question here is who are the ones who are reputable? Soon, the magazine will find one for you from their advertisements.

Again, women's magazines are problematic. This is a typical example of how women's magazines are playing a role of contradiction. On the one hand, they criticise the unprofessional surgeon, on the other hand, they advertise surgeons. If a woman intends to have plastic surgery by looking at the advertisements in a magazine, in the end she has a failed operation done. Who should take responsibility for her? Generally speaking, it is woman's choice to undergo a plastic surgery. However, in the

<sup>1</sup>*Cosmopolitan*, June 2006, pp. 97-100, British edition.

case of women's magazines, what they are doing is to pretend that they are concerned about women. Women may believe that magazines are protecting them without thinking about their own profit. In addition, as women read the real story exposed by the magazine, it strengthens women's belief in the magazines. In the case of women, are they the victims of failed plastic surgery? To answer this question, it is essential to turn to the definition of the notion of beauty. According to Bordo,

‘...the degree of women's misery and unhappiness about their bodies is a problem with which it is crucial that feminists engage. But it is also a problem to offer a critique premised on too simple a notion of being “happy with one's body”. This tends to deny the ways in which bodies are always problematic on one way or another, and issues concerning shape or appearance always have to be negotiated in some way, whatever the cultural context’ (Grimshaw, 1999, p.99).

Furthermore, Bartky notes that there is a ‘constant processes of “normalization” involved in what is presented as a free choice to “make the most of yourself”, whether it be through fashion and beauty, exercise, or cosmetic surgery’ (Grimshaw, 1999, p.94). To avoid biased opinion, it cannot be taken for granted that women are the only victims. Kathy Davis finds that ‘women seek cosmetic surgery, first and foremost, not because they are dupes of the beauty system, but because they want a “normal” appearance. Invention enables them to achieve a better and more accepting relationship to their bodies’ (Peach, eds, 1998, p.177). However, if an attainable body image is a normal appearance for women, women's magazines should share a high level of responsibility for the tragedy. Firstly, women's magazines set up an ideal body image for women. Even though it could be a normal image from the magazines' point of view, in fact this ideal image is problematic as only a few women can achieve it. Secondly, women are offered different solutions for attaining the ideal, such as consuming products, or undergoing plastic surgery. Finally, women are the only decision makers: if they are not concerned too much about their physical appearance, the tragedy may not happen.

To sum up, it is no denying that women are offered a certain level of pleasure for reading a magazine. However, Any concludes that ‘unlike researchers, ordinary readers were characterized as being “duped” by the text’ (as cited in Currie, 1997, p.457). In other words, women should be more critical when reading a magazine.

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## CONCLUSION

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To conclude whether women's magazines are playing a role of contradictory will be demonstrated from different aspects. It must be clear that the success of women's magazines cannot come true without readers' support. To turn to Wilcox and Laird's question that ‘if watching a movie or reading a magazine makes a woman feel unhappy, why would she continue?’ (2000, p.278). The

answer is women do not feel unhappy during the process of reading a magazine. However, the unhappiness and dissatisfaction of the body may happen after reading the magazine. Moreover, if social comparison is considered as a major reason for reading a magazine, it is too biased to criticise the women's magazines as problematic. As Berger comments, ‘Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only the relations of men to women, but the relation of women to themselves’ (as cited in Wolf, 1990, p.42). In addition, women are not only watching themselves, but also other women. Social comparisons arise at the same time. Are women the passive victims in terms of being restricted by various aspects of the magazines? Smith stresses that

‘Women aren't just the passive products of socialization; they are active; they create themselves. At the same time, their self-creation, their work, the uses of their skills, are coordinated with the market for clothes, make-up, shoes, accessories, etc., through print, film, etc. This dialectic between the active and creative subject and the organization of her activity in and by texts coordinating it with the market is captured here using the concept of a textually-mediated discourse’ (1988, p.39).

## The Slender Body

Macdonald points out that ‘anecdotal evidence indicates also that many men prefer their female partners not to be too thin, and masculinist references to breast size and ideally proportioned figures persist in the popular media’ (1995, p.198). If the purpose of women who wish to achieve the ideal body image is merely for attracting men's attention, Macdonald's studies may not be correct. However, it could be true that the ideal image, which is created by the women's magazines, may not be the ideal for men, as this so-called ideal is not the reality. Women's magazines have to obey the advertisers' orders. Since magazines are employed by advertisers and make a profit via advertisements, they have to follow the rule. Women should examine men's definition of beauty before taking a further step of being slim.

## The Powerful Medium

Mica Nava argues that ‘little attention has been paid to the way in which the relative status and power of women had paradoxically been enhanced by consumer society's providing women with new areas of authority and experience....It is important to recognise this space as a source of power and pleasure for women and not to dismiss the mass consumption of products (such as women's magazines) as devices engaged in brainwashing, manipulation, and the creation of false need’ (Luke, 1996, p.151).

However, to turn to Smith's opinion that women are not passive but active. They are the decision makers in terms of what kind of women they wish to be. Even though they might be brainwashed by the magazines, for instance, they should show more critical thinking instead of following blindly. On the other hand, women should

not give too much attention to physical appearance. In fact, this situation will only show that women are lacking in self-confidence and still waiting for men's concentration. It might be obvious that women's magazines are powerful in terms of promoting the ideal image and selling products. The case studies have shown that every participant has experience of consuming the products advertised in the magazine. However, it does not mean that these products are false needs.

### Women's Attitude

Today, women have become more and more independent. They no longer belong to anyone but themselves. As Macdonald puts it, 'long used to acting as mothers, working women, friends, housewives or daughters, women now have access to a wider range of representations of themselves than ever before' (1995, p.5). Why do women have to be attractive? It must be reasonable if being attractive brings more self-confidence to a woman in order to feel good with herself. However, to feel good with herself does not mean to attract men's attention.

It must be a regrettable fact if women consider themselves only as a sign of men. Instead of physical appearance, women should pay more attention to self-improvement by focusing on extending their vision, knowledge and skills. Nobody will respect someone who only has a beautiful face and an ideal body. As photographer Cecil Beaton comments, the fashion models are someone 'who survived just as long as their faces showed no sign of character' (as cited in Macdonald, 1995, p.106). Their value is merely based on the life of the face. In Macdonald's words, 'it is often assumed that older women are excluded from advertising, fashion or pornographic representation principally because their bodies are no longer aesthetically pleasing' (1995, p.106).

### Magazines' Reformation

In the case of women's magazines, it is necessary to look at the changing of women in today's society. It seems to them that women are still playing the same role as before, which is dominated by men, such as economics and politics. Women have the same education opportunities as men. Moreover, women play a part on the stage of politics. Why do magazines not stop what they are promoting at the moment, and just look at women around the world. Otherwise, the result of these magazines is disappearing. Because women's magazines are stereotypical, the case studies show the fact that a certain participant has rejected reading women's magazines. Magazines' contents should cover more about the changing progress of women. They should play a role of encouragement rather than making women disappointed with themselves in terms of dissatisfaction with their body image.

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