

Gossip magazines (also known as Tabloids) have a significant impact on everyday discourse about gender norms

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The widely circulated gossip magazines in Hong Kong are a central element of modern life. Gossip magazines with so many images of women and men, and messages about men, women, it is highly unlikely that these ideas would have no impact on shaping our gender norms. In fact, gossip magazines affect our everyday discourse on gender norms and the readers also affect the magazines themselves about the definition of 'gender norm'. Adorno (1991) suggests that the mass media has considerable power over the population. The 'culture industry' keeps the audience blandly entertained, but passive, helping to maintain the status quo by encouraging conformity and diminishing the scope for resistance. Unequal power relations are displayed through advertisement and the idea that women learn to absorb the 'male gaze' reinforces men patriarchy. The concept of beauty is equated with "self improvement" but it suggests a girl's appearance should 'please both boyfriend and boss alike and threaten the authority of neither.'

This report intends to explore various theories on explaining what messages gossip magazines send to audience, possible impact of those messages on 8 individuals that we have interviewed will also be discussed.

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Literature Review

IN HONG KONG:

Lo (2001) cites J. Berger that it is common in Hong Kong gossip magazines that women 'see themselves as men do, but desire themselves as men would like them to be'. Lo thinks that the female model in the front cover and inside the tabloids are in fact only targeting on men- they are the ideal image of women from the men's perspectives. Therefore, it is appropriate to say that female is to be gazed at, and the ones who gaze them are males, not females. Lau (1996) comments this creates the gender norm that 'man gazing women is natural, and women is to be gazed'.

Because the notion of becoming an 'ideal woman' has been taken for granted, women strive to make them 'perfect' to be gazed. Bombardments and markets of beauty products and advertisements result. And these ads constantly construct the minds to female the notion that 'fashion is seasonable', 'modern women needs to catch up with the latest trend', and 'to be appealing to the men, women need constant investment on beauty'. Lau (1996) comments that these advertisements shape the definition of what 'woman' is to the opposite sex and leads to some expectations on gender norms.

In addition, Lo comments that a lot of love story in the tabloids actually reinforces the society expected norms of masculinity and femininity. For example, the reason to date is to look for marriage and livelihood (歸宿). Individualism of women is being neglected, and social relationship is confined to male-female relationship only. As regards the illustration of these love stories, the magazines usually portray young ladies echoing on or obsessing with love. This creates the message that a 'romance' is the most important aspect of life to women. When audience is decoding the message, he/she will think that the meaning of 'love' and 'romance' to women is to have a good male-female relationship.

Lo also thinks that the 'Help Mailbox' column (信箱專欄) in the magazines actually reinforces the patriarchal social world. Usually women's problems with their mates, family, career and themselves will be published in a letter format in this column. However, the answers to their questions are actually 'solutions that have been taken for granted in our society for women to act in this social role'. For instance, they will give advice on 'how to treat your boyfriend better so that you can be with together forever', or 'how do improve/compensate yourself in order to attract more males.' It is obvious that they do not solve the problem of the pressure women faced in the patriarchal society, and how stressful women need to face themselves in both career and family, as well as to re-evaluate the gender role and the image of women in our society. All in all, these columns just offer solutions that reinforce the traditional gender norm of women and some sexist ideologies that persisted in the society.

INTERNATIONALLY:

According to Davies (2005), gender stereotyping will "take away our personal choices in determining our own interests and skills and discourages men from participating in "women's work" (such as flower arranging) and restricts women from choosing roles that are traditionally "male" (such as engineering and football)".

He cites examples of men's gossip magazines like Loaded, FHM, Men's Journal, Maxim, Men's Health, Men's Fitness, Stuff, GQ, and Esquire.

Research shows that tabloid magazines worldwide such as *Playboy*, *Maxim*, *GQ*, and *Esquire* which portray masculinity and focus on matters such as health, fashion, sex, relationships, and lifestyle, play an important part in defining what it means to be a 'man'. For instance, they define men and masculinity as handsome, white, well-built, well-dressed, and strive for better living style. (Davis: 2005) Edward went on more extreme that these magazines portray how selfish, loutish and inconsiderate 'to a point of infantile smelliness' of masculinity, who likes drinking, football and fucking, and in that order of preference..... (Edward 1995)

Davis reports Barbara Ehrenreich's (1983) observation that Playboy painted an idealistic picture of the well-educated, confirmed bachelor who appreciates the finer things in life: wine, jazz, scotch, art, and women. Playboy's success was built on its celebration of male independence from the domestic responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood.

In addition, these men's magazines tend to relegate women to the background, which in turn sends out the message that women should act in subordinate positions and even sex objects. For instance, Playboy and Maxim are criticized for objectifying women's bodies who may be positioning in the background. However, how women can achieve greater social, political and professional equality is not being talked about.

Furthermore, the men's magazines try to avoid expressing or reporting fears, anxieties and pain of men (such as anxieties about sexual performance, depression, and poor relations with fathers) because these violate their definition of 'masculinity'. (Nixon: 1997). Brown (2000) comments the men's magazines 'depict a fearless, competitive, 'laddish' masculinity, but ignore the emotional, sensitive male, and women are depicted as objects for men's contemplation and enjoyment.'

While it is common in men's popular magazines to focus on providing entertainment and improving one's life by expanding knowledge, hobbies, and activities, women's magazines tend to focus on improving their lifestyle by changing their appearance, especially by losing weight. It is implied through both text and images that being thin means being happier, sexier, and more lovable. For example, the slogan "Get the Body You Really Want" is placed next to the text "How to Get Your Husband to Really Listen" in a women gossip magazine. (Malkin 1999)

Willemsen (1998) comments that the girls' magazine uses a lot of emotion words, yet these signs are not commonly used in the boys' magazines. Rather, the boys' magazine uses a lot of cool, tough words and expressions, and long sentences with complex structures. Linguistically, question marks, elipsis points and exclamation marks are commonly used in girls' magazines which signify hesitation, a question, a way not to make a forceful statement or opinion. Willemsen thinks the punctuation marks in the boys' magazines are just dividers, which make long sentences more intelligible. The differences between the two magazines explain the differences between women's and men's spoken language described Lakoff's (1973) study that women's use of language is characterized by uncertainty and indecisiveness.

Willemsen cites Peirce (1990, 1993) studied the content of *Seventeen's* genre in the United States from the standpoint of socialization, and found out that most articles were about fashion, beauty, food and decorating, and relationships with the opposite sex. Peirce concludes that a girl "learns that her job is to look good, find a boyfriend, and take care of home and hearth" from it. An analysis of five years of fiction stories in two magazines, *Seventeen* and *Teen* found out that the heroine character of the fiction stories are males and they were mostly the one who solved complicated problems.

FROM MAGAZINE DISCOURSE TO EVERYDAY DISCOURSE:

Adorno: Media power

Adorno (1991) suggests that the mass media has considerable power over the population. The 'culture industry' keeps the audience blandly entertained, but passive, helping to maintain the status quo by encouraging conformity and diminishing the scope for resistance. The main concern of Adorno is the passivity which media consumption brings to people's lives. Critical thinking is closed off by mass-produced popular culture.

Gaining wider audience

Jones (1997) cites that discourse analysts had increasingly focused their attention on how advertisements and other public discourse construct what Fairclough (1989) calls the ideal subject and Kress (1985) calls the discursively constructed reading position. Jones reports Fairclough (1992:64) that discourse constructs both 'social identities' and 'social relationships between people'

in the 'subject positions' it makes available. And according to Vestergaard and Schroder (1985), advertisements have the power to shape social rules of behavioural normalcy that reflect and reinforce existing power relations in society. Similar situation applies here when magazine discourse can shape gender norms in our society and become part of our 'selves' and 'identities' which ultimately reinforce our traditional Chinese patriarchal discourse system.

Cultivation Theory

The theory, developed by George Gerbner, suggests that the more time one exposes to the world portrayed by television (a form of mass media), the more likely one is to perceive the social reality as the portrayal on television. Accordingly, Gerbner has examined the difference that amount of viewing makes in people's images, expectations, assumptions and behaviour. Since the early 1970s, the range of topics for cultivation analysis has greatly expanded. Gerbner comments that the mass media cultivate attitudes and values which are existed in a culture, and the media maintain and propagate these values among the members of this culture. The same situation applies to the everyday discourse on gender norms shaped by gossip magazines in which individuals accept the patriarchal 'culture' existed in our society that male should be dominant, assertive and strong, and female should be weak, indecisive and helpless.

Symbolic Interaction

The idea of symbolic interaction believes there is a power on 'symbols'. People give 'symbols' meaning and the 'symbols' affect our behaviour and mediate our social interaction. Baron (2002) cites Faules and Alexander (1978) that communication is a symbolic behaviour that results in various degrees of shared meanings and values between participants. Therefore, advertisers succeeds in positioning their products through propagating in magazines to different genders by taking advantage of how audience perceive the 'symbols' (the product, the model, the celebrity and the word) in their advertising.

Interview Results

We have done qualitative research interviews with two professors from City University, and six informants aged between 20-30 from different social backgrounds, occupations, income and sex were being interviewed.

Informants & background	Results
Dr. Francis Lee (Male) Assistant Professor, Department of English & Communication, CityU	<p>He gave examples tabloid magazines in Hong Kong as Next Weekly(壹周刊), East Weekly(東周刊) and Sudden Weekly (忽然一周) which contains content about rumours but not formal news articles .He thinks it is appropriate to say that these magazines have readers from young people, because they are more 'accessible'.</p> <p>He thinks these magazines will portray gender norms in a certain manner because they need 'sexual elements' to boost sales. Profit making is their rationale of running the business. So, it is obvious to find female being portrayed as a sex object in the front cover of the magazines, and with 'sexist' heading.</p> <p>He thinks it is hard to say whether all young people will accept these contents or not. But he thinks there is a tendency in portraying femininity and masculinity in our culture already.</p> <p>He thinks that tabloids reinforce the culture of gender norms because the consumers of these magazines actually have the preconception of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' before they read them.</p> <p>So, as regards on who constructs the norm, he thinks that it is the 'norms' exists in Hong Kong society already, and the magazines reinforce people's ideology on gender roles.</p>

	<p>He comments that the most gossip magazines have stereotypes on masculinity/male being the ones who have power, For example, Mr. Lau Nun Hung (劉鑾雄).</p> <p>He thinks that these magazines are just telling/repeating stories that resembles to our society underlying assumptions on gender norms. So, gossip magazines just fit the prototype into the stories and repeat the masculine/femininity identity.</p> <p>Because the aim of gossip magazines is to make profit, it is hard to see professional women appearing in there because this is a 'change' of gender norm.</p> <p>As for media effects, he cites that when reading media text, we will bring in our personal background.</p> <p>However, it is true to say that media effects won't affect everyone because individuals with better educational level will have better interpretation level.</p>
<p>Dr. Anne Peirson-Smith (Female) Instructor, Department of English & Communication, CityU</p>	<p>She cites examples of gossip magazines in the UK are Hello and Okay. And these magazines are 'culturally-loaded' in which it gives the British the myth of idealised lifestyle and to be 'young' and 'fresh'.</p> <p>She will define 'significant impacts' as whether the issue is frequently talked about, and becomes our everyday discourse in our family and social group.</p> <p>She cites that these magazines often equate women's success to beauty. And happiness comes from both beauty and success. She thinks magazines discourse has become our everyday discourse because it has established a para-social relationship.</p> <p>By para-social relationship, she means that a relationship is developed between the public and the celebrity though we don't know the celebrity himself/herself. We will assume we know them (such as his/her personality) based on reading the gossip magazines. So worldview can be madeup, for example by the PR person of the entertainment company.</p> <p>Anne comments that these magazines construct an idealised 'beauty' of women by equating slim, having white face, trendy dresses are beautiful. She gives the example that in the Oscars that reporters comment on how good/bad female celebrity look, and this becomes our everyday discourse in conversation.</p> <p>For masculinity, Prince Charles is a typical example of what is 'gentleman' and 'manner', while Princess Diana signifies 'wealth', 'luxury' and 'beauty'.</p> <p>She talks about 'changing role' and points out that David Beckham is concerned about his skin and face. It is reported in the gossip magazines like Hello and Okay, and thus it has an impact of giving out information about the change of gender norms.</p> <p>Violation of gender norms will bring about everyday discourse through tabloid as the medium. Anne gives an example that 'What happens when you know that your idol like Robbie Williams is gay or has external affairs?' and the 'Michael Jackson's case' to show public awareness increases when these issues brought up in the tabloids.</p> <p>She thinks that to a certain extent, these gossip magazines target on a particular social class of people, for example the lower educated class in the UK. The magazines have the power to influence on how individual dress, aspire and behave.</p>
<p>Mary (Female)</p>	<p>Local gossip magazines read- Monday, East Touch, Easy Finder, and Sudden Magazine.</p> <p>Foreign fashion and beauty magazines read- Elle, Marie Clarie etc.</p>

<p>Year 2 Sociology Student, HKU</p> <p>Part time job: private tutor</p> <p>Monthly income: \$5000</p> <p>Lived in America for 10 years</p>	<p>Why read? Common ground when chatting with friends.</p> <p>According to the research by her department, Mary said 80% teenagers read pictures first and only about 40% readers go to the texts after they glanced through the pictures. Also, more than half readers believe what the magazines claimed. It reflects readers are not critical and judicious to the gossips.</p> <p>Mary agreed that magazine readers will apply the knowledge they got in gossip magazine in their daily life. For example, her male classmates always tease females' breast as '肉彈' (meat balls) or '碌柚'.</p> <p>She agreed that is a kind of humiliation to females.</p> <p>She said the conversation style of HK teenagers incline to gossip more than discussion, and the topics are usually entertainment news. That's why gossip magazines are so popular in Hong Kong.</p> <p>Sometime, her male friends will act some scenes that gossip magazines claims. She found it is impossible to remain ignorant to the gossip magazine if she wanted to maintain common topics.</p> <p>Mary agreed that gossip magazine influences on gender norms heavily to the public especially the teenagers.</p>
<p>Eddie (Male)</p> <p>21 years old</p> <p>HKPU Year 2 Business student</p> <p>Working in HK Jockey Club as part time Telebet Services Assistant</p> <p>Salary: \$3000 per month</p>	<p>He reads a lot of Japanese magazines like Men's Non-no and Smart. He likes to wear like Japanese so he needs to read those magazines to keep up with the latest Japanese fashion. He read those magazines for his fashion sense and style. He reads them about twice a month.</p> <p>On the other hand, he also reads local magazines like Jet, Milk, Monday and East Touch. As they are not that expensive like Japanese magazines so he usually bought one or two magazines a week.</p> <p>He is accustomed to read both Japanese and local magazines at the same time thus problems occurs. There was a time when Japanese magazines boost that carrying a tote bag is a trend for no matter guys or girls. So Eddie bought one too and carried it when he was in high school. However, no one especially guys in his class liked his bag and even laugh at him for his 'girlish' bag.</p> <p>Eddie understands that tote bags are always girl's choice in HK but in Japan it is different. It is a unsex item and of course he would only choose those tote bag who doesn't looks girlish or cute. After a while, under the peer pressure, Eddie finally gave up carrying that bag and starts to carry a backpack which is most guys' choice in HK. So the gender norms in HK affect his ways of buying and deciding.</p> <p>Besides, he reads the local magazines to learn the latest slang here. When he is with his guys' friends, he will usually use more foul language to show that he is a topical 'man' and he will use slang like 'pock chop'(豬排) and '索' to describe a girl who is fat, ugly or beautiful. Those words very seldom used by girls. It was used by male to show their masculine side around people. He learnt most of them from local gossip magazines.</p> <p>He thinks media really affects us a lot in the gender norms like how we talk and act to be a girl or a guy. It even made some actions become a norm for what is right to do for girls or guys in our society.</p>
<p>Daniel (Male)</p> <p>20 years old</p> <p>HKU Computer Engineering</p>	<p>He likes to read local entertainment magazines and magazines of electronic products such as Milk, PCM, e-zone and Friday to get more common topics with his friends, he chooses to read entertainment magazines since they cover from entertainment news and the latest trend of fashion. The information may help him to be more trendy and sociable.</p> <p>He puts most of the focus on the latest trend of what to buy and secondly</p>

<p>student</p> <p>Hobbies: Hanging out with friends, playing computer games</p>	<p>some professional people being interviewed each week.</p> <p>He admits that he usually applies the news he knew from the magazines as topics for chatting with his friends, such as gossip news, clothing and solving some kinds of problems.</p> <p>Also, his buying pattern is affected by the magazines. For example, if he thinks the male models are so smart in a particular advertisement, he will try to buy those on his body to follow in such a way.</p> <p>Besides, a lot of models present a very cool image in the advertisements. So he thinks that there is a general idea that being cool represent smartness. "Male should be cool." seems to make males very attractive. He accepts this idea.</p> <p>He says that sometimes he would follow what the content said in an involuntary way. Although no one tells him whether it is right or wrong, he continues to follow in such a way.</p>
<p>Samantha</p> <p>(Female)</p> <p>23 years old</p> <p>CityU Business and accounting student</p> <p>\$4000 per month as salary</p> <p>Hobbies: Going to beaches, hanging out with friends, reading all kinds of magazines</p>	<p>Similar to other teenage girls, she likes to read the magazines in fashion, travelling and sometimes the entertaining magazines. She likes reading the fashion magazines is because she sometimes work as a back stage assistant in a fashion show, so she always keeps herself in a most updated trend She gets common topics for socialisation between her friends through these magazines.</p> <p>Same as other readers, when she has been reading the same type of magazines especially that focuses on models, she eventually considers that 'slim' is a symbol of beauty. Very obvious evidence is that she has never seen a model that is 'fat'. Since she reckons that slim is a symbol of beauty, to become a charming girl, the first requirement is to look slim so she always claims that she is too fat. This is what she gets from the model magazines.</p> <p>From the entertaining magazines, she has another point of towards the male models. Since the magazines always show the life of them and kept giving their negative image to the readers. As a result, she thinks most of the male models cannot maintain a stable relationship. That's why handsome and good looking guys eventually lose their advantages in dating girls.</p>
<p>Andrew</p> <p>(Nickname)</p> <p>Male</p> <p>30 years old</p>	<p>He enjoys reading Next magazine because of attractive images intriguing title. The article is informative and covers news, private life of celebrities, pop-stars and many others. It is an easy to read magazine and he doesn't think the magazines help me establish my identity.</p> <p>He thinks that tabloids are effective to shape gender norms because they are written in a 'very easy to consume' genre. Stories, especially stories based on gossips, and in the genre of gossips. Narratives are a lot easier to access than political arguments in hard news of main stream newspapers. These tabloid stories come with pictures and glossy graphics, usually with near-pornographic overtones. Again this is attractive and appealing. Readers prefer narratives to discursive arguments for a good read. Tabloid writers can embed their ideology in their gossip narratives.</p> <p>So, he thinks that tabloid writers manage to crystallise and keep alive the dialogue on the public consciousness of the latest development in social issues, including gender issues and norms. He thinks that we live by norms, and of course we will be interested in the latest discussion and evolution of these norms, even if they are already being stereotyped and sensationalized. We have come to accept that this is just the way tabloid genres read, and we get used to it.</p> <p>In a way, he says that every time the tabloid writers write on their next gossip story, they keep alive the public dialogue on the latest twists in the developments of our social norms, including gender norms. By this, he means tabloid writers make their discourse readily available, with mass distribution</p>

	and access, and keep alive the issues that they want to address and keep them alive and alive, partly by reading our habits and current interests, and responding quickly to our desires for what interest us with their next gossip articles.
Sue (Nickname) Female 26 years old	<p>She likes Cosmopolitan because she can get the latest news on cosmetics and facial products. The magazine provides an imaginary space of self-indulgence where she can play at being a different, more glamorous version of herself. She enjoys the images of gorgeous, naked or half-dressed young women. Good articles on tried and tested beauty products, good tips on where to dine.</p> <p>She comments that tabloid story writers have a good pulse on the collective consciousness on issues of concern and interest, including social norms, gender norms, political correctness versus incorrectness, etc. She thinks these writers have to be effective in tapping the latest popular interests on hot issues, or else they will not sell. They know how to seize the moment, for example the gossips that captures our imagination, our desire to know about celebrity lives, and scandals. So even if there are no major political, economic, or social events of importance or huge proportions, they can still bank on the latest current gossips based on rumours, and weave a good tale based on what they would like to address in terms of social norms.</p>

Main points of persuasion in debate presentation

Main Arguments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tabloids have a significant impact to our everyday discourse on gender norms. They have an impact only, but they cannot control the public. Also the impact becomes significant because of wide public participation and consumption of the tabloids, together with the up-to-date content and layout design of the tabloids. • Traditional values of 'men should work outside, and women should work inside' has been taken for granted in patriarchal society, the tabloid reinforces the ideology by having advertisings and reports related to these issues. For example, women gets rewarded after helping her husband preparing dinner by cooking something good when he comes back home. This creates the stereotype that women/femininity can satisfy the men/masculinity. • Tabloid magazines shape the definition of beauty to femininity by constructing the ideology that being slim is beautiful, to slim up is normal and can enhance self-confidence. Same standard applies to height, hair and skin. • In the gossip magazines, females are portrayed as naive, virginal, submissive creatures in need of male protection, adoration, and direction. Women become the sex symbols or as objects to satiate male sexual desire. Besides being used as sex symbols, females are also often associated with negative qualities as such infidelity and materialism. • Images: Women's and men's bodies are represented differently. Women lie
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	<p>down in seductive clothing, caressing a liquor bottle, or they hide themselves timidly near the male. They bend their bodies at a ludicrous angle, or they look as helpless. In contrast, men stand up, they look competent, and they look purposeful→ Inequality, enhance discrimination, delimitating women's strength, and create a blind reality of masculinity and femininity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The result of this gender norm constructed by the media is that it affects the career opportunities of individuals and a barrier/social pressure of one to create/act something against his/her gender norms. Also, humiliation results when boys who look like girls are called sissies and even faggots (language which is used in the tabloids). • Therefore, though many individual may be androgynous, boys with feminine characteristics are forced to conform the social norm of masculinity to avoid being humiliated.
Counter arguments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People can learn gender roles through education, church and family. Tabloids are only a medium. It has a limited impact if the number of readers in these magazines decline due to censorship, knowledge of citizens and age difference. • Reception theory: People can refuse accepting the message/codes from tabloids. But, according to the two step-flow theory, one can still be influenced by tabloids even he/she stops reading or buying it. For example, when he/she goes to the newsstand and by social peers. • People's perception from the gossip magazines may differ with developmental stages, such as age, experiences, socio-economic background and ethnicity.

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