

‘Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who’s the Better of them All?’ Fashion magazines: A Social Tool of Empowerment or Enslavement?



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Abstract: The concept of ‘fashion’ and ‘fashionableness’ is a highly contested one with differing opinion as to what constitutes either, with no clear-cut move made to clarify the correctness of the myriad understanding behind the term. People who are seemingly fashionable or are considered fashionable by members of the community exert pressure on others--a pressure to follow, pressure to keep up or pressure to agree to the standards set by the supposedly fashionable as the bar for things fashionable. In recent times public discourse has looked at the immense pressure fashion has exerted on women in any given society. Be it things as banal as clothes and cosmetics or complex issues such as political ideologies espoused by one; everything in contemporary times is weighed by the fashionably endowed. Many wear their fashion sense as a badge of pride and achievement, much to the discomfort and dismay of those who think and behave otherwise; and no more is this awkwardness as obvious as it is amongst women. Media platforms add to the general sense of the divide among women in society by taking a decided stance in favour of the fashionable women, increasing the angst and anxiety of those women who aren’t. Do fashion magazines add to women’s confusion when it comes to issues of fashion or do fashion magazines help in allaying their fears? Some of these issues will be explored in the present paper.

Keywords: magazines, fashion, femininity, evolution, comparative analysis

I INTRODUCTION

Magazines are a ubiquitous medium. They can be found in most public places where there is a possibility of selling goods and services of everyday use to a prospective buyer. (Rhodes. Leary, 1994). It is hard to miss them since we see them at the newsagents, in supermarket counters, in the hands of daily commuters on buses and trains and the frequent flyers who depend on them for views and perspectives. Magazines have an important role to play in our culture. They are, as almost everyone will readily admit, source of pleasure for millions of readers and that alone gives them a cultural value. (Holmes. Tim, 2007)

Printed weeklies, monthlies and quarterlies make a popular contribution to our multi-lingual-global society. Many would agree that magazines add the much-needed energy in our lives and that a world without magazines would be a dull place indeed.

Fashion magazines are read around the world by a wide range of people. Most are familiar with some of the famous publications like **Vogue**, **ELLE**, **Harper’s Bazaar** and **Glamour**. There are hundreds of fashion magazines in the world today, as varied as the independent ‘smallies’(just emerging new magazines) to the conglomerate owned ‘glossies’(colourful & expensive); with dozens of new fashion magazines being added to the existent ones every year. Over the years, they have gained popularity, a loyal fan following and some of them a cult status because of their ability to introduce new fashion trends, change the reader’s view on fashion and according to the fashion editors, give fashion accessories a different and thrilling twist. From the marketing and promotion point of view fashion magazines have become an important publicity tool for fashion and lifestyle brands, as can be seen with companies like **L’ Oreal**, **D & G**, **Maxfactor**, **Maybeline** and scores of others using the magazine platform avidly among their female clients/consumers for the essential user connect. Fashion magazines enjoy a significant presence in the lives of their readers by keeping them abreast of issues related to fashion, celebrity news, fashion trends and fashion events.

Fashion magazines have a lure of their own that is unique to the fashion world covered by the said magazines. A study on the idea of beauty in fashion magazines, came to the conclusion that women were influenced by the words used in fashion magazines... ‘they do buy into the “beauty myth,” even though many of them are simultaneously conscious of the fact that they are somehow being “manipulated”’. (Moeran, Brian, 2010).

Fashion magazines have been quite successful in maintaining a stronghold over the women readers of the society. Often criticised and jeered for subscribing to them, women have continued to read fashion magazines and make it a part and parcel of their lives

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despite the disapprobation from many quarters. Says Tanya Basu on the on-line news portal *The Atlantic* "Walk by any magazine rack and undoubtedly, you'll walk heralded by fashion tomes like *Vogue*, *Lucky*, *W* and more.... thick bound copies often belittled for their heavy advertising and high photo-to-writing ratio. Inside, you'll find waifish, pouting models wearing ridiculously expensive, deliciously bizarre costumes—not clothes—with headlines that seem pithy and shallow, trend forecasts for the season, celebrities posing in designer gowns, tips on how to best flatter the body... But fashion magazines have evolved. Today, they are just as likely to tackle serious events and the social issues of the day as much as showcase the next feathered, ruffled creation. Fashion has become increasingly accessible since the time that this piece was written—it has broadened its vision beyond society girls drowning in money and become a genre that celebrates "street style," "normcore," and being "basic." Fast fashion (street fashion), while controversial for its practice of reproducing carbon copies of designer duds at a fraction of the cost, using essentially indentured labour in developing countries, has arguably democratized fashion in making the pricey threads featured in the pages of the fashion magazine, the anonymous author ridiculed over a century ago, affordable".

Tanya further adds "Fashion magazines have also had to compete against the Internet just like every other print magazine. But they've extended their power beyond the starry-eyed clothing connoisseur—they're a veritable source of news (see *Refinery29's* deft commentary on events embedded within its fashion blog design), feminism (Joanna Coles of *Seventeen* is altering the magazine's focus on sex into a powerful statement on the sexual issues at the forefront of Millennials), and politics (a subject that has been tiptoed around in this realm but has been a welcome, however limited, aspect of recent issues from the industry leaders)". However, this is merely one version of the discussion. There are people who negate the significance of fashion magazines with enough and more statistics even though the on-line debate portal *Debate.org* has equal number of people being critical of fashion magazines and equal number of people complementary.

In contrast to Tanya's stand is Julia Belluz a fashion follower and blogger who says "Growing up in suburban Toronto, I had a big pink wardrobe in the corner of my bedroom that stood about 8 feet tall. By the time I was 16, the closet was so filled with women's magazines that my parents worried the floorboards would crack under its weight. Back then, I was particularly vulnerable to fashion and teen monthlies targeted at women, like *Seventeen* and *Vogue*. Their glossy pages offered an escape from dreary suburbia, and I couldn't get enough. But when I revisit the health articles in these magazines now, I notice that the overwhelming majority of them are insane, aimed at fearmongering and totally science-free. I regret the time and money I dedicated to these books because of something I now know to be true: They almost never offer evidence-based advice, but instead provide celebrity-centred advice. A friend of mine recently asked whether I thought these magazines were a vast conspiracy to make women dumb because so much of what's in them is frivolous, unhelpful, false, and even harmful. I'm not prone to conspiracy theories, but if I could go back in time, I would have saved my time and money".

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Fashion magazines do have a strong resonance in the lives of women especially in the lives of very young women between the ages of sixteen and twenty five, a time often considered troublesome by most women since this is the period when women are conscious of issues related to self and conscious too of the opinion of other women on their 'self.' While fashion magazines do talk of serious issues like health, career prospects, travel and hospitality, it is generally the trivial and light-hearted stuff that most young women are attracted to.

The contents of fashion magazines often include celebrity interviews with the rich and famous sharing their ideas on fashion and fashion related issues. In recent months the airport look of celebrities has been discussed excessively to the extent that the reader has had his/her fill of the same. Favourite holiday destinations of the connected members of society finds its way in the columns of the fashion magazines. Food, religious festivals, political affiliations and voting patterns of the young- from the trivial to the most significant- every news detail is presented from the 'fashion' perspective. Says Abigail Bashor writing in *HerCampus*, the on-line student magazine of the University of Akron-

"I would wait with bubbling anticipation for the arrival of my *Seventeen* magazine subscriptions. Each month brought the exciting world of fashion, celebrity, and even horoscopes within the grasp of my fingertips, and I would often devour every one of its pages within the day. While my pre-teen self would sometimes disregard the longer, more serious articles for short quizzes and skip over the Health sections out of embarrassment, as I grew older and developed a more confident emotional maturation, I found myself deeply enthralled by the feature pieces *Seventeen* had to offer. From stories on the successes and pressures of life as an adolescent to news headlines that were broken down in a way that someone my age could comprehend, *Seventeen* provided me with something I didn't fully appreciate at the time: a space for engaging a young adult (and typically female) audience in the larger world around them.... In the post-adolescent world of magazines, publications such as *Vogue*, *Marie Claire*, and *Elle* typically dominate readership among millennial women. Topics can range from the latest fashion and beauty trends, to the most recent coverage of the policy changes working their way through local and national government. Long gone are the days in which discussing politics is deemed too taboo for these elite establishments, and much of that has to do with the 2016 election cycle".

According to Alice Bolin in the mid-20th century, the editors of women's magazines, including Diana Vreeland and Helen Gurley

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Brown (both having worked for *Vogue*), were powerful and creative figures who reimagined what it meant to be a woman in the public sphere, wielding influence in publishing, fashion, and every corner of culture. Opines Alice “Vreeland, in particular, is probably the dreamiest and most visionary editor ever to work in fashion, creating spreads and layouts for *Vogue* that were colourful, graphic, simple, and full of movement — that look, in fact, exactly how *Vogue*'s layouts still look today”.

So whether it is catering to the women readers in exclusivity or creating a platform for the women readers to articulate, fashion magazines have a strong sense of functionality at all times. This was and still is evident from the role fashion magazines impose on women to don, through their impactful content. As early as the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century and later, fashion magazines told women readers what to do and in this case it was to abide by some strange patriarchal fixations of femininity-to please the menfolk in the family. A woman's duty was still to dress for a man, and her role was to reflect the social standing of the family through her clothing, which was of course paid for by the man (Scroll.in, 2018).

A fashion magazine still serves its own unique mission to the world nonetheless despite its shameless way of blending a bunch of advertisements into the magazine pages. Hamish Bowles, the European editor-at-large of American *Vogue*, nailed the mission statement of fashion magazines at the subsequent HBO fashion documentary, *In Vogue: The Editor's Eye* (2012) “Essentially, what you're doing is collaborating with a photographer to create an image that reflects the fashion you're trying to capture and also hold a mirror up to the zeitgeist of the moment.” Fashion magazines are about capturing the cultural moments through the study of fashion pieces. Zeitgeist representations are important because they show us the essentials of the issues happening at the moment. Fashion images are bold and beautiful—their power lies in these qualities. The boldness leaves an imprint in people's mind like no other. It is never trite to remind ourselves of the power of beauty again in the hectic modern lives we all live (*Bare*, 2015).

Writing for fashion magazines requires a special skill- a certain something that is neither only fluff nor boringly esoteric, but a heady combination of both. A creative flair and innovative skill may help in producing masterpieces and also in creating an everlasting impression on the reader's mind. The quality of the content and style are equally important. Be it in the far flung shores of Paris or closer home in India, women's fashion magazines have very similar intent and purpose- keep the women readers engaged and benefited. Though fashion magazines have had a late start in India they haven't been around lotus eating. There has been an upsurge in the relevance and scaling of fashion magazines in India the past twenty odd years which only seems to be getting better with time. What began as a slow trickle post Liberalisation, Privatisation, Globalisation (LPG) has taken on grand positions. **Femina** and **Women's Era** are two of the oldest magazines of India that have covered fashion and made their presence felt for quite some time now. Add to these are **Savvy**, **Grazie**, **Brand Fashion**, **Official** and **Lifestyle** that have in recent years caught the imagination of the fashion conscious women of India. Like their western counterparts Indian fashion magazines deal with similar topics; fashion as related to home, health, travel, bridal wear, clothes for special and everyday occasions, celebrity dressing/fashion, food-fashion (the popular food trend/diets). Not surprisingly fashion magazines like *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Maxim (India)*, *Verve*, *Elle (India)* which began their journey in India some twenty odd years ago have been extremely successful in winning over the Indian woman reader. With the passage of time, in India too there has been a chorus of questions raised on the efficacy of women's fashion magazines and their role in the lives of women-whether supportive or otherwise.

The evolution of a distinctive visual identity within the local fashion design industry that responds to Indian tastes, traditions and crafts, along with the presence of international fashion brands in India, have not only led to a shift in the sartorial landscape, they have also had an impact on the image and representation of fashion. The influx of global media brands like *Vogue*, *Elle* and *GQ* have contributed to the way fashion magazines are accepted, adapted, designed and imagined in India today. (Sandhu, 2000)

The role fashion magazines play in shaping stylistic tastes, body and beauty ideals through images and text has been visually examined by academics (Barthes, Hollande and Entwistle) providing a strong theoretical framework for “reading” such visual constructions of fashion ability. Despite being regarded by many historians and critics as “ephemeral and exiguous forms of cultural production” (Jobbing, 1999) the ability of fashion magazines and fashion photograph to present and through this representation further shape a collective socially prescribed ideal of both clothing and the body cannot be overlooked. (Sandhu, 2000)

To quote Entwistle, “Through the juxtaposition of images and texts, fashion magazines add meaning to certain styles of clothing, making them an example of the way in which fashion as an abstract idea and aesthetic discourse- and ‘fashion’-as the actual clothing, connects with everyday dress”. (Sandhu, 2000)

III METHODOLOGY

The present study looks at pre-existing material on the issue of fashion magazines and their relevance and significance in the lives of women readers who subscribe to the contents espoused in the columns of such platforms. Referred to as secondary sources of data, pre-existing material afford not first-hand information through the researcher's personal experience but more by way of interpretation, analysis, or commentary, a vital aspect of research. Secondary sources of data thus present research findings, analysis, and the evaluation of other researcher's works. Books, journal articles, other research material such as research projects, dissertations, research papers/projects all become material for study. Over the years secondary sources of data have become popular since they add to the general efficiency- less time taken, avoidance of unnecessary duplication of work and also cost effective. The

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Uses and Gratification theory (Katz and Blumler, 1974) provides the necessary theoretical grounding required for the study.

IV. ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION

Seen from the perspective of the Uses and Gratification theory as proposed by Katz and Blumler, the entire discussion on fashion magazines and their significance in the lives of the consumer/reader becomes that much more obvious. The Uses and Gratification theory explains how and why people use media for their need and gratification, which in-turn opens up the discussion on the significance of media content in the lives of the readers, in this case fashion magazines and women readers.

Women readers who consume fashion magazines do so to satisfy any one of the following needs- affective needs, which includes all kinds of emotions, pleasure and other moods; personal integrative needs related to one's self-esteem. Women consume media (fashion magazines) to reassure or enhance their status, gain credibility and stabilize their position in society. By subscribing to the philosophy or opinion espoused by the magazine the women readers get satisfaction.

Many women readers of fashion magazines see themselves reflected in the columns of the magazine, since the style of most fashion writer is to locate the story from the point of view of the reader. Examples are many where articles in fashion magazines begin with headlines that present an idea or viewpoint from the perspective of the singular reader as in 'What will make **you** more attractive this summer'? Or 'Do **you** want to know the secrets of good skin'? Or 'Do **you** want to get rid of your excess weight the easy way'? Such questions though posed as a rhetoric are often directed towards the individual woman reader. The 'You' is the reader who is being singled out as someone special by the fashion magazine and so the woman reader begins to feel special and takes the content more seriously than she would otherwise.

Very commonly discussed topics and recurrent themes in fashion magazines for women are about body images, weight issues, skin care, attractive looks, the right way to dress, the right way to present oneself for a particular occasion, the right way to appear for a job interview and the right way to meet prospective partners. This is loosely the pattern adopted by fashion magazine editors to attract their women readers with relatively minor changes made by differing magazine platforms.

Over the years other stock columns have also been introduced that find a place in the hearts of their loyal female clientele. The agony aunt column or the re-worked version of the same but called differently to suit the modern progressive women; which essentially serves the same purpose of being a sounding board to anxious women with personal issues that require the closeness that can be provided by a columnist (linguistic tools of the personal pronoun YOU being used liberally), while being totally anonymous and dispassionate in a neutral way. For many women, avoiding socially awkward situations is an important lesson to be learnt and this is dealt with expertly by most fashion magazines adeptly through celebrity interviews, who advice the woman on the street about things to do and things to avoid. In these days of putting one's best foot forward one welcomes fashion advice when it comes to handling some of the umpteen social situations in one's life, that may range from organising a child's birthday party, gifting solutions to the boss, how not to offend hosts when making a quick getaway from their party, to the right message to give to a grieving friend, the best holiday ideas and how to recycle old clothes. The gamut of solutions provided by fashion magazines are commendable and vast.

There are the occasional attempts to be different in their quest to be adventurous and innovative, since in recent times to be different is the need of the hour in order to cater to an over demanding, easily distracted audience. Says Katherine Krause, editor of *Dossier*, one of the best of the young fashion magazines available today "Fashion is a particularly difficult niche to break into ... Because it's so covered, and there's only so much fashion out there, honestly, I mean, we try to be an anti-establishment voice, and we try to feature artists and designers who aren't getting tons of attention. But it's always a challenge to make it original". From the point of view of both the fashion magazine as well as the women reader of the said magazine, it behoves well if the content pleases and satisfies the intrinsic need of the reader/consumer. So, what do women get out of fashion magazines- information and facts that are useful, entertaining, educational and even emotionally satisfying? Says Fiona Smith writing for the *Huffington Post* "I like to look at the meticulously styled photographs with the intensity of a five-year-old drawing in a colouring book. I am also a genuine fan of the writing featured in *Vanity Fair*. When reading these periodicals and blogs, one cannot ignore the overwhelming presence of women in the industry. As a young woman, it is truly encouraging to read the work of strong women." There is a strong indication that the content of fashion magazines is found empowering by women readers since many women echo Fiona Smith's opinion, in that, many seem to find the content pleasing, status enhancing and adding to their general quality of life.

There is of course a flip side to such consumption. Many media professionals, academics and researchers however have a contradictory view on the reading of fashion magazines by women. One of the most common refrain heard in public domain is the issue of wrong body image encouraged by fashion magazines and the excessive consumerist greed that is espoused. Acknowledging the negative side to fashion magazines Fiona Smith adds "Women are objectified and taught to self-objectify. Why should I comply with someone else's standard of beauty and why is beauty held on a pedestal as the most sought-after value anyway? If we live in the shadow of an arbitrary standard of beauty that many women cannot comply to, this manifests in the form of increased competition and, in some cases, unhealthy habits... The downright worship of materialism in certain magazines is soul-crushing. They pitch the intangible: the promise of happiness. This incessant focus on materialism is often funnelled toward female clientele."

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Such criticisms are not unjustified since the need to look a certain way often makes women take extreme steps by way of unhealthy diets, extreme dependency on cosmetics and undergoing uncalled for surgical procedures that are often fatal. Celebrity obsession with beauty and physical perfection have led to actors both male and female (largely female), suffering untold misery at the hands of unscrupulous beauty experts often deified by popular fashion magazines without verification. The umpteen advertisements for beautiful skin, instant weight loss for the dream figure of 'zero size', glossy hair and shiny teeth are a testament to the unhealthy importance given to beauty in media platforms. Magazines thrive on such advertisements, with ethical considerations given scant attention. Further there is a general feeling that fashion magazines often make women become selfish and self-obsessed, almost to the point of being considered narcissistic. According to a research study "Women who viewed fashion magazines preferred to weigh less, were less satisfied with their bodies, were more frustrated about their weight, were more preoccupied with the desire to be thin and were more afraid of getting fat than were their peers who viewed news magazines". (Turner, et al, 1997). Such facts are further corroborated with similar research (Fashion Vs Health, Hope University) that reveal that exposure to popular fashion magazines that contain messages focused on beauty and fashion (*Elle*, *Vogue*, and *InStyle*) has been correlated with negative moods and higher body dissatisfaction in women (Swiatkowski, Paulina, 2016). Rather than liberating women with enlightening fact and information, women's fashion magazines often lead to women belittling other women on grounds of not living up to preconceived standards of beauty as maintained by the said magazines.

The competitiveness among women seemingly reaches epic proportions resulting often in unbecoming social behaviour and in some rare cases deep seated psychosis. Jennifer Aubrey is a communications researcher at the University of Missouri at Columbia who says "Fashion magazines can have a negative effect on women's self-esteem, research has shown that clearly. All those slim models with perfect make-up can provoke some unhealthy behaviours - like women starving themselves to become what they think society considers 'beautiful'. The bottom line seems to be that all those pictures objectifying women don't really do ANYBODY any good! Just something to think about the next time you're standing at the magazine rack."

V. CONCLUSION

Don't Change to fit the fashion, Change the fashion to fit you-Toni Murphy, Stylist

After a careful perusal of the data available on fashion magazines, some indications can be had as to the kind of presence fashion magazines enjoy in the minds of women readers. What is clear is the fact that most industry professionals and experts from the fashion domain have considerable positive opinions regarding fashion magazines. That they are a source of information and entertainment, provider of solutions to everyday lifestyle related problems, status enhancers and ego boosters, comes across adequately. Bloggers, writers for fashion magazines, student researchers and journal article writers make a definite case favouring the consumption of fashion magazine content. However, there are equal number of writers and researchers who quell the show of enthusiasm towards fashion magazine content.

There are many experts who feel that fashion and fashion related content can be a great commodity to the user, that the said content can be liberating for many. However, they also feel deeply about the negative fall-out of consuming such content, to quote a blogger, critical of fashion magazines "fashion can be a great thing in the lives of women, however the way that it has been exploited as being very important, especially in the lives of young women, has really begun to destroy women's self-confidence. Fashion begins to leak into what women believe about themselves as their self-image. Fashion cannot be the focal point of women's attention, otherwise it will continue to damage self-esteem." (Debate.org)

Counsellors and health care professionals in education institutions say that young girls who have just enrolled into college are more susceptible to 'fashion taunts' (insults aimed at the personal grooming standards of a person) and this leads to young girls depending upon fashion magazines in order to bring a turn-around in their personality and looks and there-by a change in the attitude and opinion of their detractors. With time it is felt that the girls start depending excessively on fashion magazines for providing solutions to each and every problem of theirs rather than connecting with friends and seeking them out for resolving such issues. Those concerned about the media's negative impact on body image, self-esteem, food, dieting and eating disorders need to consider a number of different interventions such as health communication campaigns, entertainment education, media advocacy and media literacy training... Such interventions need to be evaluated with respect to the media's portrayal of the idealized and unattainable images of beauty that young people are exposed to and its impact on disordered eating behaviours and eating disorders. (Anne M Morris and Debra K Katzman, 2003) Further, from the many articles sourced out, it is clear that fashion content is seen as a trivial matter, to be consumed with temper and control and in the right spirit lest it subsumes the reader into unwarranted obsession with the 'self'. There are enough and more examples in public domain to present the extreme forms of self-adulation brought about by excessive fashion consciousness. Of late, many women in the entertainment industry, who invariably are the subject for fashion magazines, have openly criticised fashion magazines for being too exacting on women to live up to certain standards of beauty; and this has thankfully brought a turn-around in the magazines too. A noticeable change has been the attempt by some fashion magazines in recent years is to be a little more realistic in their quest to attract women readers with content related to fashion, knowing full well that browbeating the target audience in the long run may do more harm than good.

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A good example of women turning themselves totally off fashion magazines is a reality, as can be seen here, where Gio a contributor to an online fashion news portal **Beautywithbrains** writes in the column titled *Self Image* "What bothers me the most is that these mags promote a very unhealthy, fake and unattainable image of beauty. Women come in all shapes and sizes and they are all beautiful, yet on these magazines, all of the models, celebs and even normal people are very skinny, wrinkle-free and without any flaws at all. And even though these people don't look like that at all in real life, mags just 'photo-shop' the photos away until a beautiful and healthy woman stops resembling a human being to look like a stupid plastic doll... we can't change the way the media thinks. We can however, change the way we think. We can educate ourselves and our children not to fall for these traps. We can learn to use our critical minds to distinguish the reality from the fake images and claims we're bombarded with every day and we can stop buying such magazines."(Beautywithbrains, 2015)

To conclude, fashion magazines are platforms of information and entertainment that are largely aimed at the women consumers. Women consumers should be discerning readers and take the content presented in the columns of the fashion magazines with the right amount of light-heartedness and seriousness lest they become too dependent on the said content and are at the receiving end of the demerits of fashion magazines. After-all one realises soon enough that there's more to one's self than looks and one should learn to rely on one's brains and personalities instead.

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