

Fun and Fearless: Magazine Covers, Feminine Ideologies, and Representations

Claudette A. Baluran
West Visayas State University
claudiabph@yahoo.com

Abstract

Starting with the assumption that media, particularly magazines, serve as a ground that shape the ideological landscape for women representations, this paper explores feminine ideologies and representations of twelve (12) Cosmopolitan Philippines magazine covers from the year 2015. Underlying ideological structures were found not only in the linguistic but symbolic features of the text as well. Employing the methodologies of multimodal critical discourse analysis, the investigation revealed emerging patterns on how women are portrayed and represented in the magazine covers. The “fun and fearless” catchphrase that the magazine has shaped to define the modern Filipina (a) presents them as hypersexualized and practicing adventurous sex, (b) positions them as followers of health and beauty regimens and a glamorous lifestyle that ultimately lead to the affirmation of the opposite sex, and (c) objectifies them through come-hither poses and scantily-clad bodies that emphasize the cleavage, toned abdomens, and legs. The paper likewise considers the possible implications brought about by the perpetuation of these ideological structures.

Keywords: multimodal critical discourse, feminine ideologies, magazine cover, language and media, representation

1.0 Introduction

Traditional views of young Filipinas bring to mind a shy, modestly dressed, and self-effacing woman. As Roces and Roces (2013) would put it, society expects a young woman to conduct herself with decorum and to appear modest and shy, especially among men. She should never flaunt her sexuality, otherwise, she will be labelled as “flirt” and considered sexually “loose”. These days, however, the internet has given way to limitless access to Western thoughts and practices and at such an alarming rate that global trends are immediately

spread and adapted simultaneously. As a result, newer discourses have shown ideologies and practices that mirror the current state of events. Marco (1997) observes that a recent issue for discourse analysis is the reflection of value systems and beliefs reflected in discourse. He further argues that discourse has an ideological nature that can function as an instrument that enacts and perpetuates power relations and processes of discrimination and categorization. In this paper, magazine discourse is viewed as essential not only due to its broad audience reach but also because

of a paucity of research on magazine covers where only a handful of articles in disciplines like art, sociology, and gender studies focus on magazine covers (Johnson, 2002).

Despite a significant corpus of feminist scholarship of similar nature, the study offers views in the Philippine context to underscore the potential effect of magazine discourse to shape and reshape cultural practices. Many magazine covers serve as lenses into how a culture defines how a woman should be in terms of the way they act, dress, and look. Fairclough (1992) stresses that a social theory of discourse implies the consideration of discourse as a “form of social practice” and thus has effects upon social structures, as well as being determined by them, and so contributes to social continuity and social change. Furthermore, Johnson (2002) encourages closer study of magazine covers as both historical artifacts and marketing tools since they provide significant cues about social, political, economic and medical trends.

Language, Media Discourse, and Ideology

Language is a powerful medium to get messages across but its most dominant function lies in its ability to influence and shape people’s construction of reality. The way we experience the world is constructed mainly with the way we use language. As humans, our linguistic capacity allows us to shape, construct, and project our understanding of things around us. Benjamin Lee-Whorf and Edward Sapir’s theory of relativity highlights how language use shows our cognitive interpretation of our experiences, beliefs, and thoughts.

Mass media and popular culture have been previously mentioned as highly influential in shaping and (re)shaping cultural views. In their study of gender ideologies in women magazines portraying women,

Mans and Lauwrens (2013 citing McRobbie (2000), contend that magazines are undoubtedly powerful ideological tools that form and define the world of a woman by depicting and restricting her role within it. Moreover, the process of signification is not restricted to linguistic but also occurs through non-linguistic modalities, including visual channels and that they display meaning-making potentials (Hart, 2014; Machin and Mayr, 2012).

Berlatsky (2013) has pointed out that in the case of *Esquire*, the magazine provides female bodies for men. It is telling men that female bodies are objects to be used for their enjoyment. This is a pretty common message; men in general and in lots of ways are told, day in, day out, that the world is organized for their erotic pleasure.

In the study of Gudekli and Celik (2014) the woman in advertisements found in *Cosmopolitan* magazine was presented as a sex symbol and that the practice was normalized. This is observed to happen even in societies where talking of sex is forbidden, shameful and taboo, women are used in the advertisements as a strategy of marketing.

Language and Representation

In studying representation of women in discourse, Marco (1997) discusses Fairclough’s idea that one of the basic tenets of a social theory of discourse is that it is both a mode of representation and action. He further quotes Carrell’s concept which maintains that “discourse contributes to constructing, perpetuating or transforming the dimensions of the social structure where it was generated. In this process of constructive representation, writers take into account the schemata that help the reader decode discourse”.

In the case of images found in covers of magazines, they can be used to say things that cannot be said in language. Employing multimodal analysis to

an image found in an issue of *Cosmopolitan*, Machin and Mayr (2012) point out that an image can be used to foreground an idea to distract readers from the absurdity of the many tips provided. Three crucial ways in which a visual image can be culturally meaningful are looking at how an image is made, what it looks like, and finally, how it is seen (Rose, 2001).

Language and Social Change

Marco's study (1997) provided relevant information about the power relations between men and women in society. Since the study's analysis revealed that the traditional stereotypes by means of which women have for long been described are still persistent, it helps perpetuate the traditional social roles of women in the social structure. The most debated issue as to the representation of women according to Gudekli and Celik (2014) is sexual objectification where the sexual side of the woman remove other parts of her personality.

Changing cultural perspectives on the view of women using the power of discourse is one way to combat stereotypes since, according to Allen and Faigley (1995), how people are located in multiple relations of power and how discourses are related to practices are the critical questions for theorists committed to social change. Although some theorists complacently view culture as merely a series of texts and suggest that scholars can only tell more stories about it, they believe that examining the practices and effects of discourses is crucial; thus, this undertaking.

There have been previous undertakings on how women are constructed in international versions of *Cosmopolitan* magazines but what makes this investigation unique is in that it offers a different perspective by providing the context of the printed issues of *Cosmopolitan* in the Philippines.

2.0 Methodology

The study explored women representations in the monthly covers of *Cosmopolitan* Philippines magazine. Twelve (12) *Cosmopolitan* Philippines magazine covers from the year 2015 were subjected to analysis within the theoretical framework of multimodal critical discourse analysis. The researcher chose to examine the covers of *Cosmopolitan* Philippines since the magazine is a popular women's magazine that targets young females and career women. Its cover is usually graced by female celebrities, presented as the epitome of young, successful women. The magazine presents subtitles that cover topics ranging from health, beauty, fashion, and more popularly, sex.

Investigating feminine representations, the research is guided by the following questions: (1) How are Filipinas represented in the covers of *Cosmopolitan* Philippines magazine?, (2) What feminine ideologies are found in the text?, and (3) How do these ideologies vis-à-vis female representations shape the construction of feminine images?

It has been argued that magazine covers develop ideological constructions. Drawing from this assumption, the study focused its attention on visual and linguistic semiotic resources to critically investigate the interaction among different semiotic resources and meaning making in selected *Cosmopolitan* Philippines magazine covers.

Interpretation of the text was formed within the framework of discourse as social theory and Halliday's social semiotic theory as basis for semiotic resources. After close reading of the texts, a coding sheet was prepared to arrange identified patterns. A multimodal coding system that includes gaze, expression, focus on body parts, pose, weight, and clothing was likewise integrated. The texts were examined for patterns to make sense of meanings and their relationship to other media texts. They were then evaluated vis-à-vis

cultural implications and their relevance in the present context of women in the Philippine setting.

through scantily-clad bodies that emphasize their breasts, toned abdomens, and legs.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Overall, patterns have emerged on how women are portrayed and represented in the covers of *Cosmopolitan* Philippines. The “fun and fearless” catchphrase that the magazine has shaped to define the Filipina presents her as (a) hypersexualized and practicing adventurous sex, (b) beauty and health conscious individuals, and following regimens and a glamorous lifestyle that ultimately lead to the affirmation of the opposite sex, and (c) objectified

Fun and Fearless Equals Hypersexualized

The “fun and fearless” catchphrase that encapsulates *Cosmopolitan’s* ideals of the modern girl/woman has hidden messages evident in the texts espousing adventurous sex and racy poses. In the analysis of the covers, it was found that to be fun and fearless is to be sexually adventurous, to wear sexy and revealing clothing, and to strike racy poses. Table 1 presents textual and symbolic representations that point to this observation.

Table 1. Textual and Symbolic Representations of Hypersexualized Women

Sexually Adventurous	Sexy/Revealing clothing	Racy Poses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 sexy zones you musn’t neglect • Have the best sex ever! readers reveal their most orgasmic tips • So-hot summer sex in 20 places outside the bedroom • Girl on top, the key to your next big “O” • Sex in the a.m. start your day with a bang • Ready, set, O! orgasms 101 all you need to know • Get a sex life upgrade...cheat on your man...with your man! • Ruff sex doggie style 101 • Oh my goodness! 20 moves to make him worship you • Sex for one, hot tips for some good vibrations! • Sex the halls! ‘tis the season when naughty means nice! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one-piece and two-piece swimwear • lacy/lingerie type of clothing • short blouses that show the midsection and/or emphasizes the shoulders • very short, lacy skirts • clingy long gowns and cocktail dresses with racy cutouts and designs emphasizing the breast, waist, hips and overall body shape 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • come-hither stare • chin tilted downward • full/open/seductive smile • open legs while wearing a miniskirt • hips thrust sideward to create a curvy silhouette • legs jutting out of thigh-high slit • body is positioned slightly sideward to emphasize the cleavage, hips and buttocks

What constitutes “fun” warrants serious consideration. The magazine advocates that to be fun and fearless, Filipino girls/women should embrace their sexuality. This is evident in the sexually suggestive texts on the covers of the magazine. Aside from these, the covers espouse adventurous sexual behavior.

Readers of *Cosmopolitan*, or simply *Cosmo*, are also aware that the magazine features in its inside pages sexual adventures that promote promiscuity among female students, office workers, career women, and married women. The magazine normalizes adventurous sex so that young readers are led to believe that this is acceptable behavior.

In the March cover (Figure 1) for example, the celebrity model wears a skimpy two-piece bikini that leaves little to the imagination. The pose strategically emphasizes a toned abdomen and exposes plenty of cleavage. More than the pose and manner of dressing, the issue features its usual staple of “sex talks” with the text jumping right out at the reader. For example, a subtitle reads:

“So-hot summer sex in 20 places outside the bedroom” (Cosmopolitan Philippines, March 2015)

The text features representation of the Filipino *Cosmo* girl as an adventurous, wild, and sexual individual ready to try sex outside the constraints of the bedroom. She is defined as unpredictable and spontaneous when it comes to sex and thus pleasing her man. Hypersexuality is taken further as to play pretend promiscuity by cheating with a partner.

“Get a sex life upgrade...cheat on your man...with your man!” (Cosmopolitan

Philippines, July 2015)

Or, using the Holidays as an excuse to play ‘naughty’ since the season justifies breaking from the norm of a ‘good girl’.

“Sex the halls! ‘Tis the season when naughty means nice!” (Cosmopolitan Philippines, December, 2015)

Hypersexualized representation of women is a staple discourse of the magazine. *Cosmo* is touted as a woman’s magazine that promotes beauty, wellness, and fashion but the captions deviate from this collective description as it obviously promotes and glamorizes risky sexual behavior. Furthermore, heterosexual sex being the magazine’s end-goal, its main article usually details how women should fulfill their men’s sexual desires. Out of the twelve (12) *Cosmo* Philippines cover being investigated, eleven (11) explicitly capitalize on sex to increase magazine sales and place women within a semantic context as an object of sexual desire.

Moreover, this ideology is strengthened by models wearing one-piece and two piece swimwear that leaves little to the imagination, lingerie type of clothing, short blouses that show the midsection and/or emphasizes the shoulders, very short, lacy skirts, clingy long gowns and cocktail dresses with racy cutouts and designs emphasizing the breast, waist, hips and overall body shape. *Cosmo* seems to send a message that this type of clothing is more feminine and would surely attract the attention of their male partners. This representation advocates that wearing these types of clothes are the penultimate yardstick of the feminine woman—the kind that males prefer and are attracted to. The idea silences women who

may practice other forms of femininity by having a different clothing preference and finding comfort in wearing pants and jeans. Indeed, Hatton and Trautner's (2011) investigation have cited a number of studies that include style of clothing to be important markers of sexualization.

The standard *Cosmo* poses include seductive, flirty, come-hither stares, chin tilted downward, full/open/ seductive smile, open legs while wearing a miniskirt, hips thrust sideward to create a curvy silhouette, legs jutting out of a thigh-high slit, and body positioned slightly sideward to emphasize the cleavage, hips, and buttocks.

This inappropriate presentation is substantiated by an online news article written by Steigrad (2015) where she reported that Dawn Hawkins, executive director of the National Center on Sexual Exploitation based in Washington, cited a poll, which surveyed about 1,000 people if they thought the magazine's covers were "inappropriate for viewers of all ages." About 65 percent agreed. Furthermore, Hawkins stated: "We hope that covering it sends the message to shoppers that

Cosmo is not a women's friendly magazine, but that it really is pushing women to accept the pornified and sexually violent culture around us."

Furthermore, results in this study are supported by the investigation of Gudekli and Celik (2014) which reveal that media and advertisements in particular normalize women as sexual objects.

Pleasing Males: Affirmation of Self-Worth

For the *Cosmopolitan* woman, all roads lead to "men". From the right hair, the right type of regimen to achieve perfect skin, to relationship roles and the type of clothing or fashion to wear, *Cosmopolitan* has all the right answers that offer a prescriptive set of norms girls and women are encouraged to follow. But for whom does this effort to change into someone beautiful appeal to? Affirmation of a woman's self-worth seems to ultimately lead to pleasing the opposite sex as discursively presented in the magazines. Table 2 presents textual and symbolic representations relating to prescriptions leading to the affirmation of a woman's self-worth.

Table 2. Prescriptions for Affirmation of Self Worth

Body/Face/Hair	Relationship Role	Clothing/Fashion
Textual Suggestions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your 7-day flatter belly plan Ganda mo lang, girl! Flaunt your "flaws", build your booty, are you ggss? Look slimmer & sexier Get buff before you binge Get sculpted like an athlete 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Love Issue, Love habits to strengthen your bond #IHateHer is your ex's new GF turning you into a mean girl? What to text him next, your Cosmo digital flirting manual Is it time to give him the ultimatum? Or can it backfire? Is your new BF your ex-BF? Is there hope for your on-off relationship? When your BF's Ex is a tough act to follow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your New Year's fashion beauty & life solutions (not resolutions!) Get a 15-minute life makeover Cosmo lingerie special Look bangin' at the beach (sexy beauty & fashion looks this summer) Look hot on the go (Your ultimate fashion & beauty packing list) Hellow, your royal hotness-makeup to show your tan, the bomba-stic body workout Budget beauty & style, how to stay fit on the cheap You mid-year makeover special! Detox your diet, closet, body, & mind! Look hot! In a flash! Day-to-night hair magic from gym to drinks: quick-change fashion #BalikAlindog, sexy-edgy makeup, vampy work-to-werk it looks shortcuts to great skirt Wear it well! The best colors for your color, get an OOTD ready bod, sexy-dewy makeup Holiday hotness, rockin' hair & makeup, outfits for every party, run! Your couch-to-5K plan!
Presented by Models <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poreless skin Fair skin White teeth Skinny to slender body frame Long, flowy, thick hair Ample breast Toned abdomen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He cheated. Or you did. Now what? rock your love life Ask these questions before you move in with him 7 signs your guy's bad news, red flag alert! Do you want to get married for the right reasons? Don't be that couple! (you know: clingy!, cheesy, too-PDA, drama king & queen!) 	

The covers under investigation were rife with directives to change oneself as constant suggestions of make-up tips and a makeover to "transform" the reader (which is more likely female) interlace the monthly covers. These prescriptive

impressions on how a woman should secure an attractive look, downgrades her to a decorative role. To be attractive, she has to maintain a clear, flowing and youthful complexion, have fair skin, long, and flowy locks that advertise her vitality as

seen in the February cover (Figure 2). The magazine sends a message that young girls and women have to maintain this status quo. Otherwise, they would have a hard time attracting the attention of the opposite sex in a sea of other Cosmo girls and women. To illustrate, for example, the subtitle "*Your 7-day flatter belly plan*" (March 2015 issue) presents the ideology of the perfect body where a toned abdomen is highly valued and seems to be the marker not only for health but what is deemed to be physically attractive. This is likewise reiterated in the August 2015 issue containing the subtitle "*Look slimmer & sexier*" and the October 2015 issue which suggests the same construct in the subtitle "*Get buff before you binge*".

On a symbolic level, Cosmo presents models with virtually poreless and fair skin; white teeth; skinny to slender body frame; flat and toned abdomen; long, flowy, thick hair; and ample breasts. These presentations ultimately spell the ideological standard for beauty among females and send a message that to be accepted, they have to change themselves. Linguistic and semiotic choices seem to suggest that physical beauty should be the ultimate goal of a woman to become desirable for the opposite sex. To be beautiful is to shun what beauty one is born with in exchange of what is culturally accepted. Media most certainly has a hand in shaping these cultural ideologies.

When it comes to relationship roles, Filipino women are represented as the ones who have to navigate the relationship with a set of Do's and Don'ts. They have to exert an effort to exhibit a mild demeanor and are responsible in keeping the flame alive, so to speak. In the February 2015 issue, the subtitle "*The Love Issue, Love habits to strengthen your bond*" suggests that women subscribe to

certain prescriptions to make their relationship with the opposite sex work. The burden is imposed on them to keep the romance alive.

A parallel subtitle suggests that women have to make the right move to get what they want. This may seem empowering but it places women in the position of being more responsible for the success of her relationship with a man.

"What to text him next, your Cosmo digital flirting manual" (Cosmopolitan Philippines, April 2015)

Although on the surface there is nothing wrong with wanting to have a better relationship, of particular interest is the way a woman is portrayed as a mean girl when she gets jealous of an ex-girlfriend.

"#IHateHer is your ex's new GF turning you into a mean girl?" (Cosmopolitan Philippines, April 2015)

This behavior is regarded to cast a shadow on the relationship and is to be avoided but this insinuation silences the woman. It discursively trivializes feelings of anger and invalidates an emotion that is a normal part of man's response to external stimulants. Being told not to become a mean or jealous girlfriend leaves a woman with little option but to take care not to complain or encroach on a touchy subject lest the man becomes displeased. This representation equally positions the Filipino woman as the one responsible in creating a pleasant relationship climate for the opposite sex.

The Breast-Abs-Legs Combo: Perfecting Objectification

Cosmo has a standard pattern for the looks and poses of their cover models. The models usually sport full and long locks that signify youth, health, and vitality. More than that, their “assets” which the opposite sex considers to be an interesting subject for the “male gaze” are the breasts, the waist or abdomen (abs), and the legs. The magazine seems to have perfected this formula, as evidenced by the *Cosmo* branding using what the researcher calls the “breast-abs-legs” combo.

Although *Cosmo* is targeted to appeal to young and middle-aged women, they are sold side by side with other health and fitness, fashion, and men’s magazines so that there is a high likelihood that they are visually accessible among males and even children. In many parts of the world, the magazine is ubiquitous in checkout counters. In the process of buying male magazines, men inadvertently get exposed to these covers too and may be subconsciously influenced by their exposure to get attracted to these features and look for these ideals in their girlfriends, partners, or wives. Figure 3 visually provides a representation of what constitutes these ideals for Filipino women: long flowy hair, washboard abs, a slender physique, perfect skin, and so on.

What is alarming here is the perpetuation not only of the ideological beauty the magazine suggests but also the sexualized presentation that leads to objectification of women. Women who see the cover may likewise accept the subliminal message that the only way for men to get attracted to them is to aim for this ideal beauty since similar images are proliferated in other men’s and women’s magazines. The danger deepens when they act

on this belief and find themselves falling victim to botched cosmetic procedures, unsafe whitening pills, fad diets that wreak havoc on one’s health, and other drastic measures to reach their ideal state. Maslow (2015) discussed that research has found that women have negative feelings towards their own appearance since they are inclined to compare themselves to the beautiful women in advertising.

All twelve (12) covers of *Cosmo* Philippines exhibit provocative images of models with revealing clothes—two-piece bikinis shown in Figure 3, gowns that emphasize the cleavage and legs, and revealing cut-outs that showcase the waist. Coupled with come-hither poses primed for sex and raunchy subtitles, the images clearly articulate objectification of women. This observation resounds with the studies cited by Montiel (2014): women are usually stereotyped as sexual objects or even as mere body parts. Some examples show that: female nudity in magazine advertisements increased significantly around the world between 1983 and 1993). In consequence, female sexuality is represented not as the sexual liberation of women but as the availability of women for male consumption.

In their study of objectification of both men and women in *Rolling Stone* magazine, Hatton and Trautner (2011) emphasized the importance of the result of their findings because research has shown that sexualized images may legitimize or exacerbate violence against women and girls, sexual harassment, and anti-women attitudes among men; increase rates of body dissatisfaction and/or eating disorders among men, women, and girls; increase teen sexual activity; and decrease women and men’s sexual satisfaction.

4.0 Conclusion

Three (3) main patterns emerged from the multimodal analysis of feminine representation in *Cosmopolitan* Philippines.

First, modern women are hypersexualized and represented as “fun and fearless” with sex normalized in all aspects of the magazine covers. Worse, adventurous sex and promiscuity are glamorized as part of being a fun and fearless woman. In the covers, models wear sexy and revealing clothing, and strike racy poses. Linguistic choices support this prevailing construction with titles like “*So-hot summer sex in 20 places outside the bedroom and Sex the halls! ‘Tis the season when naughty means nice!*”. The magazine likewise provides instructions on how to fulfill men’s desires, positioning women’s role as provider of sexual satisfaction for men.

Second, affirmation of self-worth is placed on the male’s response to a woman’s attractiveness characterized by the type of clothing she wears and the fashionable lifestyle she follows. The magazine has established a dyadic opposition for women: either she follows the trend by making herself attractive and achieves male affirmation or she can opt to retain her natural gifts and lose standing in men’s favor. In addition, although *Cosmo* suggests cheaper alternatives on fashion and beauty makeovers, a sense of consumerism pervades the whole presentation. Women are presented with products that promise instant beauty, instant attractiveness, and instant appeal.

Lastly, there is a perpetuation not only of the ideological beauty the magazine espouses but also of the sexualized presentation that leads to objectification of women. Body parts that highlight their sexuality are covered less, establishing a visual feast for both male and female readers. They

are represented as primed for sexual consumption.

Thus, this study reinforces Hall’s theory that the media engage in practices that define reality. As a result, this ideology becomes “commonsense,” or “natural” to portray women in this light (Croteau and Hoynes, 2014).

The ideological construction of what defines the feminine beauty presents with it perils brought about by false ideologies. Women use the images and texts they see in the covers as the yardstick of perfection to become accepted and admired. In the covers, feminine ideologies are framed through linguistic choices that perpetuate ideological constructions of how women should behave. These representations warrant serious considerations since they may cultivate normalization and perpetuations of idealized sexuality, physical attributes, gender roles, and relationships.

The ideological implications of doctored photos in the covers suggest that the glamorous, flawless, hypersexualized bodies and beauty that media portray as reality are not real. Croteau and Hoynes (2014) advocate that in dealing with media, “the terrain of common sense and the natural must be continually reinforced”.

The unknowing normal majority are unaware of the practice that goes behind photoshoots that last for hours to prepare and take a team of make-up artists and stylists to create the ideal beauty that appears “natural” and “normal” in magazines. Sadly, text consumers, particularly women, are not aware of this. They only see the finished product on a platter of glamorized images and texts. This only serves to frustrate and body-shame normal and average women who try to achieve the perfection presented by media and the notion that the only way to be called beautiful and to be affirmed by the opposite sex is to be unrealistically beautiful.

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