

## **Stereotypes About Men and Masculinity in Cosmopolitan Magazine: A Content Analysis of the "Ask Him Anything" Advice Column**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study explored the culture of male stereotypes in selected articles of Cosmopolitan magazine. A content analysis was conducted on the "Ask Him Anything: Love Advice From Our Guy Guru: Ky Henderson" column, which appears monthly in Cosmopolitan magazine, from January to December 2013. Twelve articles with seventy questions and answers were analyzed to find implicit and explicit statements about men and masculinity. Fifty-one statements were examined for themes, and four prominent themes emerged: (1) Men and their attitudes and behaviours towards women, (2) Sex – General attitudes and specific actions, (3) Jobs and finances, and (4) Comparisons between younger and older men. The theme of men and their attitudes and behaviors towards women held the most statements, suggesting that the readership of this magazine is expected to focus on men's behaviours and attitudes towards them, which may put pressure on the readers to cater to these stereotyped attitudes and behaviours. Catering to presumed stereotypical attitudes and behaviours may create or reinforce unequal power structures and put strains on romantic relationships between men and women. Findings demonstrated that stereotyped statements about men and masculinity were contained within Cosmopolitan magazine. Furthermore, certain masculine traits were described as innate or biologically inherent, revealing a prevailing thought that these stereotypical traits are unchangeable in nature.

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### **Introduction**

"Is it a boy or a girl"? This is often the first question asked about a newborn baby. From birth, human beings are assigned a sex, and this sex determines many aspects of their lives. An individual's sex describes their biology—their primary and secondary sex characteristics, while gender refers to the expectations and roles assigned to a particular sex (Symbaluk & Bereska, 2013). From choosing the colour and style of one's clothing, to differences in the way men and women talk, to the type of activities or hobbies in which they engage, gender roles are very prevalent in individuals' lives (Symbaluk & Bereska, 2013). The sharp distinction between sexes also creates the gender binary, wherein there are only two options: man or woman, often described as 'opposite genders' or 'opposite sexes'. These terms denote major biological differences between men and women. Even though there is a common understanding in popular culture that both sexes are completely different, this understanding is far from the truth. In fact, according to Kimmel and Holler (2011), there are more differences among women and among men than there are between the genders,

thus they are not opposite. However, dominant discourses of sex and gender that purport major differences between men and women are found in many places, including media such as magazines (Kimmel & Holler, 2011).

Popular magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health* contain advice columns where individuals can submit questions to a member of the 'opposite' sex who will answer these questions. Sex, love, and relationships are often the focus. Studies have found that these types of articles are often stereotypical in terms of sex and gender portrayals (Gupta, Zimmerman, & Fruhauf, 2008; Spalding, Zimmerman, Fruhauf, Banning, & Pepin, 2010; Williamsen, 1998). For example, in Spalding et al.'s (2010) qualitative document analysis on relationship advice in top-selling men's magazines, findings indicated that magazines contained messages consistent with stereotypic gender socialization. Prusank (2007), in her study of masculinities in teen magazines, found that the presence of a "guy's perspective" in a magazine reinforced a belief that a boy's worldview is fundamentally different than one of a girl's. This is comparable to the presence of the 'guy guru' in *Cosmopolitan* magazine who answers advice questions, reinforcing the notion that the minds of men are vastly different than women's and must as such be deciphered through a specialized section of the magazine where a male can explain to females why men act the way they do.

The rigid and popular notion of a gender binary, which affirms that men and women are very different from one another, also reinforces gender stereotypes. Hall (2002) asserts that stereotyping reduces individuals to essential characteristics that are fixed and caused by "Nature". These essentialized traits become both exaggerated and simplified, and other characteristics of men and women that deviate from these traits are seen as unnatural (p. 228-229). Stereotyping determines what is commonly seen as normal or abnormal in terms of male or female expression. In the context of the study of stereotypes in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, stereotyping regulates and puts restraints on male and female behaviour, which can have negative impacts on heterosexual romantic and sexual relationships. According to Knudson-Martin (2013), societal gender inequalities are perpetuated and replicated in the dynamics of heterosexual couples, who may not be explicitly aware of the gendered power dynamics at play in their relationships (p. 6-7). Both biological essentialism, the conflation of sex and gender as synonymous, and the gender binary, which promotes gender stereotypes, may contribute to the gender inequalities that are replicated in heterosexual relationships. If *Cosmopolitan* magazine is found to promote gendered stereotypes, especially in terms of love and sex advice, it may play a role in further replicating unequal power dynamics in romantic and sexual relationships. Thus, an analysis of this magazine in terms of stereotypes is important to undertake.

Although there have been content analyses examining men's stereotypes in popular men's magazines, as well as some examining women's stereotypes in popular women's magazines (Gupta, Zimmerman, & Fruhauf, 2008; Spalding et.

al, 2010; Willemsen, 1998), no previous research that the author is aware of has looked at men's stereotypes in women's magazines. The present study, then, aims to fill a gap in the literature by analyzing the culture of men's stereotypes in an advice column for women called "Ask Him Anything: Love Advice From our Guy Guru, Ky Henderson". This advice column appears monthly in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. A content analysis is deemed appropriate for this study because it allows the researcher to make inferences from communication data, in this instance in the form of a magazine. According to Berg and Lune (2012), content analysis allows for an unobtrusive and cost-effective method of analysis (p. 375). In regards to the present study, it allowed the researcher to view and interpret data in its original form, and view the material in the same format that the readership of *Cosmopolitan* magazine would view it.

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

The purposive sample consisted of 12 advice columns from *Cosmopolitan* magazine. *Cosmopolitan* is a top-selling women's magazine that has been named the world's largest selling magazine for women in 2008 (Gupta, Zimmerman, & Fruhauf, 2008). For its wide-reaching audience and popularity, it was deemed the most appropriate magazine for analysis. This highly influential magazine offers a variety of information for women, spanning from the subjects of celebrities, shopping and the latest clothing, hair and makeup trends, tips and tricks to be more fit and beautiful, work advice, and sex and relationship advice. In most sections of *Cosmopolitan* magazine there is an implied appeal to a heterosexual female audience, thus creating the potential for stereotyped portrayals of men, as they become the target of the love and sex advice. The theme of sex seems to be an especially important topic throughout the magazine. For example, the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine from April 2013 contains headlines such as "The Sex Move That Brings You Closer", "P.S. The Sexiest Thing You Can Do on a Date" and "How to Talk Dirty... Without Sounding Ridiculous!" (*Cosmopolitan*, 2013). Women are consistently receiving stereotyped and stereotyping messages about relationships through *Cosmopolitan* magazine (Gupta, Zimmerman, & Fruhauf, 2008). Building on previous research, this study aims to identify key themes in the stereotyped messages about males in a 'love and sex' advice column written by a male for *Cosmopolitan's* female readership.

### **Sample Selection**

*Cosmopolitan* magazine was available online through the Edmonton Public Library (EPL) from January 1996 to February 2014. For the purpose of this study, a purposive sample of the entire advice column "Ask Him Anything: Love Advice from Our Guy Guru, Ky Henderson" for each issue of the magazine, spanning

from January to December 2013, was used. There were 12 issues used in total. In these 12 issues, there were a total of 70 advice questions and answers examined.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

For every question and answer analyzed in the advice column, explicit and implicit statements about men or masculinity were included. Q&A's that did not have implicit or explicit statements about men or masculinity were not included. From the total of 70 advice Q&A's analyzed, 47 statements about men and masculinity were found.

### **Units of Analysis**

The units of analysis were the explicit and implicit statements (N = 47) found in the 70 Q&A questions that were in the "Ask Him Anything" column, in the 12 issues.

### **Setting and Materials**

Coding took place in the researcher's residence and various locations at MacEwan University. Necessary items included printed copies of the "Ask Him Anything: Advice From Our Guy Guru, Ky Henderson" advice column for 12 issues of Cosmopolitan magazine, spanning from January to December 2013, as well as an online account and card with the MacEwan University library for online access to Cosmopolitan magazine.

### **Coding Procedures**

Each Q&A in the "Ask Him Anything" column was examined individually. For each of these Q&A's, it was the ones that included general statements, whether explicit or implicit, about men or masculinity that were focused on. These general statements were then typed up in the order of each question for each month, and examined for depictions and themes about men and masculinity.

### **Design**

Content analysis was used to examine and gather implicit or explicit statements about men and masculinity. A transcribing process was used to summarize these statements.

### **Results**

A total of 70 Q&A's were analyzed, and of these, 47 contained statements about men and masculinity. Specific prevalent themes were also identified within the statements about men and masculinity, including: a focus on sex, jobs and finances, statements about men and their attitudes or behaviours towards women, and statements about younger men in comparison to older men. An "other" category was created for statements about men and masculinity that did

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not fit the dominant categories. Some statements fit into more than one category. This resulted in 51 statements in total that contained some kind of statement related to men or masculinity. Percentages of the statements that fit in each category were aggregated, and sub-categories were created for categories that contained many statements (see Table 1).

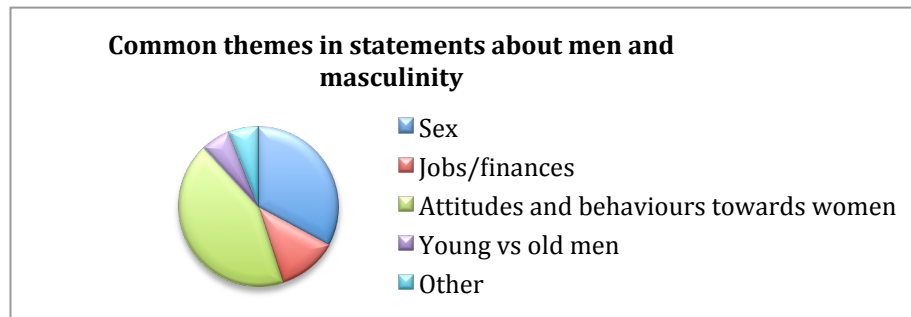
1. Men’s attitudes and behaviours towards women	
a) General attitudes	“... many men love a woman who’s hard to get.”
b) Specific actions	Men ogle attractive women all the time
2. Sex	
a) General attitudes	“Guys pretty much want sex wherever they go...”
b) Specific techniques and positions	Men have threesomes so they can say they’ve done it
c) Sex and women	“Guys fantasize about having all sorts of sex with all sorts of women...”
d) Sex and men’s bodies	Men lack energy after they ejaculate
3. Jobs and finances	“... men derive a ton of their self-worth from their jobs”
4. Comparisons between younger and older men	Young men are stupid
5. Other	Men tend to make jokes when they are under stress

**Table 1: Examples of statements for each theme**

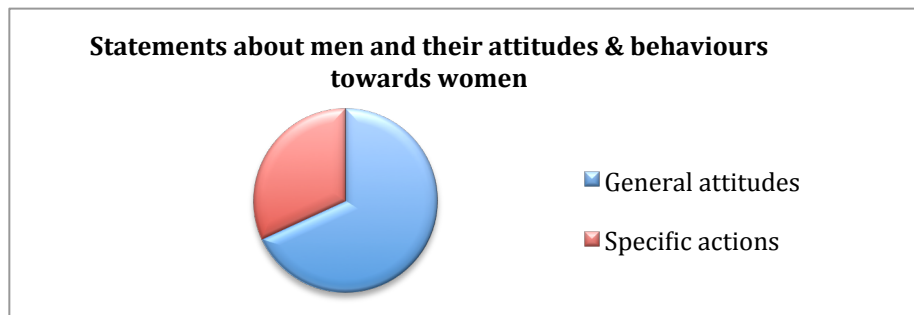
The following paragraphs provide a description of the overall findings for the important themes discovered in the data, including implicit and explicit statements about men and masculinity. Implicit statements were ones where the author of the advice column did not specifically say that men behave a certain way or do specific actions, but the information pertaining to men or masculinity was implied in the text. Explicit statements about men and masculinity were ones where the author specifically stated that men behave, act, or feel a certain way about different incidences or occurrences.

**Statements About Men and Their Attitudes and Behaviours Towards Women:**

The most prevalent type of statement in the Q&A's included a reference to a stereotyped depiction of men's attitudes toward women or a stereotyped behaviour that men engaged in that pertains to women in some way. Twenty-two statements out of the fifty-one in total fit into this category (43%) (see Figure 1). Due to the large prevalence of statements in this category, two sub-categories were formed: (1) general attitudes about women and (2) specific actions that men take towards women. Explicit statements that were included in the general attitudes sub-section included: "... many men love a woman who's hard to get" (February, n 1) and again "[g]uys fantasize about having all sorts of sex with all sorts of women" (February, n 4). The rest were implicit, and some seemed to be flawlessly woven into the answers themselves. For example, in regards to the statement 'Men believe they can strongly influence a woman to have sex with them', the author actually wrote, "Now, it's very likely that initially he'll think he'll be able to turn you into a sex fiend by date three—it's that kind of bravado that allows men to charge into battle during war and approach women in bars during happy hour..." (January, n 2). Many of the statements about men and masculinity in this sample, as well as in the other categories, were somewhat 'hidden' in this way. Figure 2 shows the prevalence of general attitudes and specific actions from the theme "Statements about men and their attitudes & behaviours towards women" (see Figure 2)



**Figure 1: Instances of statements in the 5 main categories**



**Figure 2: Instances of statements in the 2 sub-categories (Theme 1)**

### Sex

Sex was also a prevalent theme throughout the 70 Q&A's. It made up 17 of the 51 statements (33%). These statements were varied in nature, and thus were separated into 4 sub-categories: general statements about sex, specific techniques or positions, sex and women, and sex and men's bodies (see Figure 3). Regarding the sub-categories, 6 statements from the 17 about sex were general statements (35%), 2 statements were about specific techniques and positions (12%), 6 statements were about sex and women (35%), and 3 statements were about sex and men's bodies (18%). Figure 3 demonstrates a chart of the instances of these statements. It is important to note that in the statements about sex and women, it was not always implied that the man's partner was a woman, but due to the nature of Cosmopolitan being a women's magazine and the fact that this advice column is aimed at a female readership, it is implied that the man's partner was a woman. Heterosexual relationships are made to be the norm in this magazine, as well as in North American society as a whole, thus it is implicitly stated that sexual and romantic relationships in this magazine are heteronormative, unless said otherwise. The explicit statements made about men's attitudes towards sex were: "Guys pretty much want sex wherever they go..." (January, n 1), and "guys fantasize about having all sorts of sex with all sorts of women..." (February, n 4). The other statements about sex were implicit. Two implicit statements that were found consisted of 'men value sexual activity' (March, n 6), and 'all men enjoy watching pornography (October, n 1).

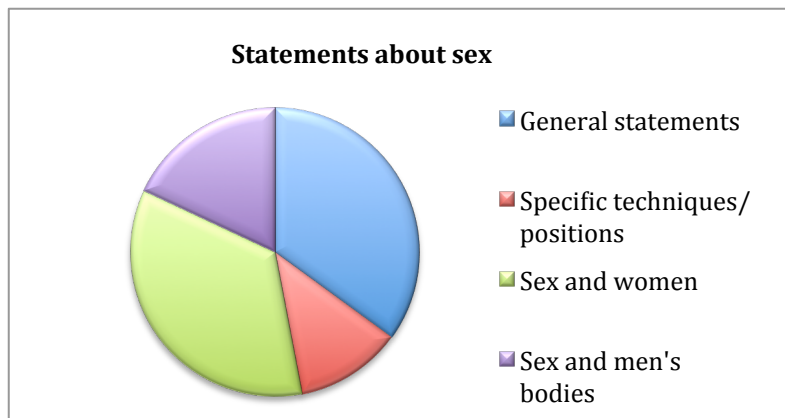


Figure 3: Instances of statements in the 4 sex sub-categories

### Jobs and Finances

There were 6 statements out of 51 that were directly related to finances (12%). As the incidence of statements relating to jobs and finances was significantly smaller than the incidence of statements about men's behaviours and actions towards women or sex, no sub-categories were created. Two explicit statements were found in this section: "... men derive a ton of their self-worth from their

jobs" (February, n 3), and "asking for financial help [is] a tough thing for many guys to do" (April, n 4). The other four statements were implicit.

### **Younger vs. Older Men**

Few statements were made comparing younger men and older men, but the researcher included them as their stereotypical nature was apparent. There were 3 statements of this nature (6%). None of these statements were explicit, but they were still apparent in the text. For example, the statement 'Young or immature men are not able to engage in deep thought' was taken from the sentence "Depending on how old and/or mature he is, your boyfriend may not even be able to think about what he's having for dinner tonight" (March, n 7). The author of the column uses a tone in this sentence stating that men who are young or immature are unable to think in complex ways.

### **Other**

There were 3 statements (6%) that did not fit into any of the other outlined categories but still contained important statements about men and masculinity. One statement was 'Men tend to make jokes when they are under stress' (February, n 2). The other two statements were within the same Q&A, and were about how men tend to act with their mother (March, n 9).

Overall, what made up the bulk of the statements were: statements about men and their attitudes and behaviours towards women, and statements about sex.

### **Discussion**

This qualitative analysis of the monthly feature "Ask Him Anything: Love Advice From Our Guy Guru, Ky Henderson" in *Cosmopolitan* magazine found stereotyped statements about men and masculinity. The generalizations about men were many, and a number of them conformed to the usual stereotypes about men one sees in Canada. According to Symbaluk and Bereska (2013), masculinity is equated with specific traits such as aggression and dominance, as well as independence, athleticism, and self-reliance, in common discourses of Canadian society. Kivel (1999) adds that other aspects of masculinity include the actions of hiding one's emotions, not making mistakes, appearing to be tough and aggressive, being in control, often engaging in sexual activity, and being financially responsible and successful. Many of these stereotypes were prevalent in the statements about men and masculinity found within the chosen *Cosmopolitan* articles. As mentioned in the results, the two major themes found within the statements were (1) men and their behaviours and actions towards women, and (2) sex. Some of the statements about men and masculinity included clear and stereotypical themes of aggression, independence, and self-reliance. It came as a surprise to the researcher that sex was not the most common theme found, because sex seems to be a main focus in *Cosmopolitan*



magazine as a whole. The researcher also did not expect to find such a high number of statements about men and their attitudes and behaviours towards women, and expected to see many more instances of statements about jobs and finances than the data revealed.

A specific way that the *Cosmopolitan* articles promoted stereotypes about men was by claiming that certain male attributes were biologically inherent. This was very interesting, since it promoted the discourse of major biological differences between men and women in terms of their attitudes and behaviours. An example of this was: "... a guy's desire to pursue a woman is just as relevant today as it was in caveman times because men are hardwired to do it. Research backs this up." (June, n 5). As expected in an informal periodical, there was no citation for this supposed research, making this statement lack credibility. This statement also reinforces biological essentialism regarding gender roles and stereotypes. A second statement that was shocking and held broader societal implications due to its implied theme of sexual aggression was that men believe they can strongly influence women to have sex with them (January, n 2). This statement may hold truth because, as American research on sexual behaviour demonstrates, a power imbalance exists whereby men are more often the ones who initiate and lead sexual activities with women (Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012, p. 168). Furthermore, the same authors assert that women and girls commonly report passively engaging in unwanted sexual activity. (Sanchez et. al., p. 169). Statements that reinforce the presumed sexual aggression of men have negative influences on sexual relationships between men and women and may contribute to passive engagement of women in unwanted sexual activity. This is problematic because, according to The Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton (2012), sexual assault consists of any sexual contact without voluntary consent—consent being a voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity (Sexual Assault, paras. 3-6). Passive engagement in unwanted sexual activity does not consist voluntary consent and is thus considered assault. Regarding the related statement outlined by Ky Henderson in the advice column, stereotypes about men which can validate aggressive behaviour and stereotypes of women as passive in relationships may be leading women to passively accept men's sexual advances even though these advances are unwanted.

The general findings of stereotyped statements about men seem consistent with the literature. Gupta, Zimmerman, and Fruhauf's (2008) content analysis on relationship advice in *Cosmopolitan* magazine indicated that stereotyped messages about relationships were highly prevalent. Women were told in these magazines that in order to improve or maintain their current relationships, they were responsible for changing men and themselves. This compares well to the main theme found within the data—the one including statements about men and their attitudes and behaviours towards women. With the emphasis on these types of statements, the readership of *Cosmopolitan* may feel pressured to cater to attitudes and behaviours that are stereotypic in nature. As has been explored, stereotypic attitudes and behaviours in heterosexual relationships can lead to

unequal power dynamics in relationships and may be a factor in influencing violent gendered behaviour such as sexual assault.

Limitations: This study presents interesting and insightful information about the nature of stereotyped generalizations of men and masculinity in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Although this is the case, there are a few limitations to address. A major limitation of this study is that 36 of the 70 Q&A's in *Cosmopolitan* magazine did not contain explicit or implicit statements about men and masculinity, and therefore were unable to be analyzed.

Another limitation of this study is that the sample was small and restricted to issues of *Cosmopolitan* magazine for only the year 2013. The culture of men's stereotypes in this section of *Cosmopolitan* magazine could have changed drastically throughout the years. Future studies should therefore use a larger sample of *Cosmopolitan* magazine to see if the statements about men and masculinity found are consistent throughout various years.

Overall, *Cosmopolitan* magazine has been found to contain stereotyped statements about men and masculinity. Further content analyses should be done in regards to stereotypes about sex and gender in other articles in this magazine because *Cosmopolitan* seems to be a great source for articles that promote stereotypes about men and women.

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