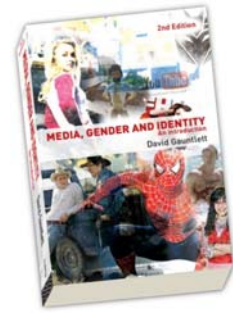


David Gauntlett:

Media, Gender and Identity, second edition

EXTRA MATERIAL (2008)



Media, Gender and Identity, second edition, is a book by David Gauntlett, published in 2008. The book's website at www.theoryhead.com offers a number of free 'extras'. This is one of them.

The text is © David Gauntlett, 2008; not to be reproduced without permission. If you use this material for teaching or research purposes, please include the information in this box, including the website address, www.theoryhead.com.

HISTORICAL CORNER

Men's magazines in 2001

In the second edition of *Media, Gender and Identity* (2008), I discussed some of the most prominent themes in today's men's lifestyle magazines, rather than going through particular magazine titles one by one. But, for those who want it – although it is now necessarily dated – the more detailed discussion of particular men's magazines from the first edition (2002) appears here.

What's in them

All of the men's lifestyle magazines cover aspects of men's lives today, which previous literature for men (the hobby and special-interest magazines) did not discuss. And they all include reviews of films, music, video games and books (except *Men's Health*). But the magazines otherwise differ quite a lot: *Loaded* celebrates watching football with a few beers, for example, but the *Men's Health* reader would forego the drink, and play the game himself. *FHM* encourages quality sex, whilst *Front* stands for quantity. Here we'll look at each magazine in a little more detail, with an emphasis on titles with the highest UK circulation figures. (Circulation figures are per monthly issue, for the period 1 January to 30 June 2001, and come from official auditors ABC (Audit Bureau of Circulations); see www.abc.org.uk and www.accessabc.com).

1. *FHM*

UK circulation: 700,000; US circulation: 822,000

Websites: www.fhm.com, www.fhmus.com

FHM is an extremely successful magazine by any standards. In the UK, it's the biggest lifestyle magazine, selling more copies than any other men's or women's title. A US version was launched in February 2000, with the circulation topping one million in July 2001 (Emap, 2001). *FHM* has become an international success in some 15 countries including Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Turkey and France (2001).

Why has *FHM* done so well? The editor who oversaw its rise to power, Mike Soutar, argued in 1999 that '*FHM* understood how men communicate, and principally that's through humour... In a group of men there's no-one more respected than the funniest guy'. He also said that the key to its success was capturing the essence of being a twenty-something man, 'when part of you wants to settle down and get a mortgage, but part of you thinks your mates are more important and you want to shag anything that moves' (Varley, 1999). He also added, tellingly, that 'whatever [men are] like on the outside, on the inside we're just a seething mass of insecurities and we are simply unable to do things in the house very well'.

Announcing the launch of the US version, editor Ed Needham promised that 'if men can do it, read it, buy it, think about it, or spend their money on it – they will find it in *FHM*. We created our publication based on three guiding principles. Everything in the magazine must be one or more of the following: funny, sexy, useful' (WriteNews, 2000). The mantra of 'funny, sexy, useful' had been established by Soutar at the UK edition in the mid-1990s (Garratt, 1997). In another article, Dana Fields, US *FHM*'s executive publisher and 'a self-described ardent feminist', said that the magazine would 'address personal issues that men would never talk about among themselves, like relationships and face cream' (Crabtree, 2000). She says, 'The magazine is like a male *Cosmo*. It freely acknowledges that men are insecure and have a lot of questions about their bodies'.

These nods towards men's insecurities are important: *FHM* is built around a complex and sometimes contradictory mix of cockiness and knowing uselessness, with the odd bit of genuine misery and euphoria thrown in. The implied reader of *FHM* is not the super-confident know-all of masculine stereotypes; on the contrary, his magazine is always giving him advice, in a multitude of ways. Problem pages are no longer a turn-off; indeed, *FHM* includes more than one, in the 'Hospital' section for health, sex and relationship problems, and the 'Expert Dads' section where experts-as-father-figures offer solutions to everyday challenges as well as more intimate advice. There is also sex advice from lesbians – on the rational basis that they know best how to please a woman – in the regular 'Letters from Lesbos', and typically in another article such as those highlighted on the cover as 'Blow her mind! Treat her to the deadliest sex moves ever!' (August 2001), 'Transform your puny love life with a week at the *FHM* Sex Camp' (July 2001), 'Help! My woman is broken! Her sexual malfunctions – and how to mend them' (May 2001) and 'Ladies' Night! How to deliver the ultimate "lovemaking" performance' (January 2001). Love and relationships are treated in a somewhat goal-oriented way – which isn't that different to the approach of women's mags like *Cosmo* – in features such as 'Woo her pants off! Be romantic – without puking' (March 1997), "'You complete me, darling" –

How women spot a tosser' (July 1998), 'How to get dumped with dignity' (February 2000), the helpful 'How to master polite conversation' (August 2001), and 'They can be yours! Seduce any girl with FHM's Miracle Pulling Guide' (January 2002). Whilst cynics might expect these 'advice' pieces to be mere excuses for sexist jokes, this is not the case: a typical article on how to appeal to women (January 2002) suggests that men should listen to what women actually say, be clean, display an ability to be responsible and caring, be able to cook, avoid getting drunk, and avoid 'hunting in man-packs'.

Health advice is also given each month, although the dour tone of traditional medical warnings is (predictably) replaced with cheerful joshing about disappointing bodies and ways to look less horrific. Health-related cover stories have included 'On tonight's menu: You! Meet the loathsome parasites that call your body home' (July 2001), 'Lose your lard and get fit for the beach!' (June 2001), and 'Heal ladies' problems! Your girlfriend's health explained' (February 1999). Various helpful quizzes have given men the chance to find out if they are in a 'doomed relationship', 'crap in bed', 'mental', 'boring', and other modern malaises. Those upset by the apparently humorous treatment of serious conditions should note that the magazine does suggest sensible treatments and solutions.

The advice doesn't stop there: men are not expected to be particularly competent at everyday chores, either, and *FHM* has offered pages of easy-but-impressive cooking, basic DIY, housework, cleaning, and even gardening (August 2001). Elsewhere, a monthly 'bloke test' interviews two male celebrities and compares their responses to questions about pointless macho achievements ('Can you open a beer bottle with your teeth?'), which may or may not be a wry satire on contemporary masculinity.

Of course, there are also pictures of scantily-clad women – actresses and models – accompanied by superficial 'titillating' interviews; and the general tone, as in all of these magazines, is heterosexual – notwithstanding *FHM*'s rather stereotyped but gay-friendly special feature in February 1999 ('They dress better. Have great hair. They get more sex. Women love them. Let's face it – homosexuals have more fun. So why not join them?'). But there are also many pages of attractive, well-turned-out men in each issue's substantial fashion section.

FHM's international editions vary somewhat. The Singapore edition is slightly more conservative, for example, and more easily shocked-and-amused by the idea of people having sex. The US version is slightly more wary of homosexuality, but retains most features of the British original, including the worries about sexual incompetence. ('Chances are FHM's Sex-o-Meter proved you're not a stud after all,' the August 2001 issue notes frankly. 'Take a tip or two from these ladies and re-educate yourself in the sack'). The French version has slightly more risqué photography than other editions – including more frightening photos of penis ailments in the 'FHM Hospital' section ('Relaxez-vous et dites tout au docteur!') – and the section which UK and US editions call 'Grooming', in their masculine way, is called 'Beauty' by the less anxious French. The 'Amour!' section hints that this version takes a more sensitive approach to affairs of

the heart, but this turns out to be photos of *filles les plus sexy* and readers' 'Sex Questions'. Overall, in these different editions the mix of material remains more or less the same. Meanwhile, back in the UK, an occasional spin-off health and fitness title, *FHM Bionic*, went monthly in July 2001 but then was axed altogether at the end of the year.

***FHM* summary**

What people think it is: Women in bikinis.

What it really is: Advice on sex, relationships and everyday life, plus interviews, reviews, and women in bikinis, all delivered in good humour, and mixed up in a way which doesn't quite address one coherent personality, but which seems to make sense.

***FHM*'s ideal man:** Good in bed, happy in relationships, witty, considerate, skilled in all things.

2. *Loaded*

UK circulation: 305,000

The archetypal 'lad's mag', *Loaded* was originally conceived as a celebration of 'the best fucking time of your life', emphasising excess, football, cars, drinking and music – the rock'n'roll lifestyle (Southwell, 1998; Jackson et al, 2001). Contrary to popular perception, the magazine was not obsessed with naked women; its attitude to women was often surprisingly indifferent, preferring to focus on macho achievements, gangsters and sport (particularly in the early issues of 1994–96; of the first 30 issues, only 8 had a woman on the cover). *Loaded* unapologetically sought to reclaim 'traditional male pleasures', following a feeling in the early 1990s that feminists didn't want men to enjoy themselves. In this sense, *Loaded* was correctly seen as part of a 'backlash' against feminism, even though feminists had never actually been much opposed to things like football or drinking, and *Loaded*'s creators insisted that they had no interest in such a counter-attack; deputy editor (and later editor) Tim Southwell said in an interview, '*Loaded* isn't clever enough to be a rebellion against feminism or anything else, there's no thesis behind [the magazine]... I don't care one way or the other, it's of no interest to me or to anyone else at *Loaded*' (Carter 1996: 15). Nevertheless, the magazine led a cultural change which made it increasingly acceptable and 'mainstream' to display or look at pictures of women wearing very little, influenced by the *Loaded* view that this was harmless; and being a 'lad' became an entertainment rather than a curse within mainstream culture. Southwell's explanation of its success, in 1996, was as follows:

Life's just too short to think about changes in masculinity... *Loaded* is successful because for the first time readers have got an amazing empathy

with the writers of the magazine. The writers of *Loaded* are just the same as anybody else that reads it... Readers love the fact that *Loaded* just went fuck that, fuck everything, we're just going to do exactly what we want... We tapped into something that's true to most young men in Britain. (Carter 1996: 14).

During 2001, things began to change slightly. Where the original editor, James Brown, had warned that 'grooming is for horses' (*Loaded* editorial, July 1995), the magazine now has pages headed 'Grooming'. New editor Keith Kendrick was reported to have upset the staff by proposing that they include *FHM*-style tips and advice, and material about relationships (Hodgson, 2001c). When appointed in January 2001, he declared that 'Men and women are not the opposite sex. That was then, this is now. We're friends with each other' (Hodgson, 2001b). He also said that 'Men have a more sophisticated attitude to life and relationships. *Loaded* should be a magazine that celebrates young men without being insulting to women' (Hodgson, 2001a).

Changes in the magazine were slight but noticeable. Throughout 2001, the regular 'Platinum rogues' section continued to chart the rise and fall of macho heroes, and Howard Marks, '*Loaded*'s smuggling legend', discussed drugs and criminality each month. In August 2001, the 'Rogue' section suggested it was business as usual, boasting 'Everything you probably don't need to know about women, sport, telly, drugs, sex, mobile phones, sheds, swearwords, fire, music, criminals, ice cream, biscuits, [and] films,' but the magazine's long-standing website was axed. By December 2001, an 'all new and improved' *Loaded* was trying to revive its flagging fortunes by going overboard on sex and relationships advice – sometimes in the *FHM* helpful style, but more often veiled in the 'raunchy' tone of articles like 'Sex tips from barmaids' and 'What models want in bed'. The February 2002 issue offered 'How mental is your girlfriend? Rapid response quiz' alongside features on war, naturism and strippers. *Loaded*'s makeover therefore leaves it like a slightly more childish, less intelligent version of *FHM*.

The publishers of *Loaded*, IPC, launched *Later* in 1999: a magazine for the older former reader of *Loaded*, aged 25–40. The magazine was not a big success, and closed in 2001.

***Loaded* summary**

What people think it is: Football, beer, naked women.

What it really is: Predictably masculine themes including sport, drinking, gangsters, silliness, some 'joke' sexism, a few scantily-clad women. Plus fashion. The singularity of its conception of manhood makes *Loaded*, arguably, more boring than it is offensive.

***Loaded*'s ideal man:** A single guy who can go out and 'have a laugh' at any time. Qualifications in extreme sports or drug smuggling an advantage.

3. *Maxim*

UK circulation: 305,000; US circulation: 2,513,000

Websites: www.maxim-magazine.co.uk, www.maximonline.com

Maxim in the UK looked for several years like a less well-designed hybrid of *FHM* and *Loaded*, although its circulation now rivals the latter. When launched in the USA in 1997, however, the magazine took off massively and became the best-selling men's lifestyle title, with a circulation three times that of established US favourites like *GQ* and *Esquire*, and double that of the famous music paper *Rolling Stone*. There are also editions published in a growing number of countries including France, Greece, The Netherlands, Italy, South Africa, Spain and Poland.

To consider the original, UK edition first: *Maxim*, it has to be said, does not have a clear 'unique selling point'. The August 2001 cover lists 'sex, gadgets, fashion, crime, beer, skittles' along the top; nothing distinctive there. *Maxim* combines the macho crime, daring-do and sports of *Loaded* with the sex and health advice, fashion and lifestyle stuff from *FHM*, plus the photo-interviews with famous attractive young women found in both. This perhaps adds up to a confusing picture of masculinity: the same reader who discovers armed robbery and extreme mountaineering in one part of the magazine also learns anatomy basics in the regular 'Nightschool' and reads an awestruck interview with a top model elsewhere. The 'How To' section offers monthly advice on the broadest range of topics, on everything from escaping a Mafia hit and winning at tennis, to wine-making and anger management (August 2001).

The US edition has a clearer identity, partly by virtue of being the first and most successful magazine of its type, and partly by playing to the clear-cut masculinity of the American 'jock' market. Commenting on the new phenomenon in 1999, *Time* magazine said:

Maxim... is ironic about its dumbness in the manner of a show like *South Park*, which is to say that the irony is often barely discernible, white noise for a generation that likes to laugh unapologetically at poo and look at pictures of breasts without feeling that [famous feminist] Patricia Ireland is peeking over anyone's shoulders. (Handy, 1999).

Mike Soutar, who followed the success of *FHM* in Britain by having another smash hit as editor of the US *Maxim*, left that job to return to the UK in May 2000, and in an article for *The Guardian* newspaper noted that:

The most striking thing about the US men's publishing business in 2000 is how much it resembles the UK men's publishing business back in 1995. Remember how British *GQ* and British *Esquire* – the established, snooty, advertiser-worshipping titles – were usurped so quickly by the funny, reader-driven men's upstarts led by *Loaded* and *FHM*? Well, it's happening all over

again in the US. Only this time *Maxim* leads the brash upstarts. And this time, the established, snooty, advertiser-worshipping titles are – American *GQ* and American *Esquire*! Shouldn't they be sacking people over at [publishers] Condé Nast and Hearst for screwing up so badly? Twice in a row? (Soutar, 2000).

The US version of *Maxim* has a similar mix of content to the UK edition described above – and of course, since it started with no *FHM* or *Loaded* in sight, it looked more distinctive. Although it offers relationship advice, articles in today's US *Maxim* tend to assume that women are a different species – to a greater extent than the UK magazines do – and that a woman will try to trap the unwilling man into a relationship. There is also a strong element of homophobic anxiety in the pitiable way that the magazine cannot accept physical contact between men. For example, a photo of rock band Blink-182 hugging each other is given the caption 'We're just giving him the Heimlich! We swear!', and a guide to male conduct warns that two men may never share an umbrella, stand at adjacent urinals, or compliment each other on looks (July 2001). Although supposedly humorous, these unattractive macho insecurities are unlikely to play well with the intelligent and attractive young women that *Maxim* man wants to take to bed.

***Maxim* summary**

What people think it is: Some kind of combination of *FHM* and *Loaded*.

What it really is: Some kind of combination of *FHM* and *Loaded*. Added macho factor and homophobia in the successful US edition.

***Maxim*'s ideal man:** Good at everything. Has sex with lots of attractive women. Somewhat lacking in clear identity.

4. *Men's Health*

UK circulation: 213,000; US circulation: 1,688,000

Websites: www.menshealth.co.uk, www.menshealth.com

The only magazine in this selection to regularly feature semi-naked men, instead of women, on the cover, *Men's Health* has a broader remit than its title suggests, and it is perhaps the publication which most closely parallels women's lifestyle magazines. The magazine has much on the body and appearance, unsurprisingly, including fitness routines, healthy eating, and ways to lose weight. There is also a strong strand of psychology, including a lot of advice on positive thinking, improving self-esteem, and using mental techniques for success. *Men's Health* also includes articles on how to keep romance and passion alive in a relationship – formerly the exclusive province of women's magazines – and sex advice, from erection problems to advanced techniques. In the US,

the magazine has spawned a junior version, *MH-18* – boasting ‘Tons of useful stuff for teenage guys’ – a complete (and unusually healthy-living) lifestyle guide for young men.

***Men’s Health* summary**

What people think it is: Health and fitness information for men.

What it really is: A clever ‘masculine’ packaging of everything that women’s magazines are expected to be about – looks, sex, relationships, diets, psychology, lifestyle.

***Men’s Health’s* ideal man:** Supremely fit and good in bed, knowledgeable, considerate. *Men’s Health’s* ideal man is *everybody’s* ideal man – although this is potentially intimidating.

5. *Front*

UK circulation: 152,000

Launched in 1998, *Front* is the lad’s mag most obsessed with sex and ‘babes’. It’s a lifestyle magazine with most of the ‘lifestyle’ stuff ripped out. Relationships and health are given little space. Think *Loaded*, but delete half the male role models, and add more female lingerie models. To a certain extent, *Front* is aware that its projected readership is unlikely to get close to actual women. ‘A bloke is rarely happier than when he’s with a few mates, drinking, laughing and taking the piss out of each other,’ the editor assures them (February 2002).

***Front* summary**

What people think it is: Sex and women.

What it really is: Sex and women, clubbing and drugs, interviews with some men, more women and sex.

***Front’s* ideal man:** Surrounded by lusty, attractive, naked women.

6. *GQ*

UK circulation: 128,000; US circulation: 807,000

Websites: www.gq-magazine.co.uk, www.gq.com

Describing itself as ‘the most stylish men’s magazine in the world’, upmarket *GQ* is theoretically at the opposite end of the sleaze scale to *Front*. *GQ* prides itself on having well-known writers and the sharpest suits. But to avoid failure in the circulation wars, the

magazine nowadays combines old-fashioned upper-class masculinity (expensive fashion, posh restaurants, smart grooming) with a substantial dash of laddish populism (women in bikinis, supermodels, nudity). The August 2001 issue featured ridiculously slavish prose to accompany a Claudia Schiffer photo feature ('she has to be the most coveted and eligible woman in the world,' the editor writes, idiotically, declaring her 'a quintessential *GQ* woman'), plus an overbearing article on how women should behave, and a greater number of exposed breasts than in the same month's *Loaded*.

***GQ* summary**

What people think it is: Posh clothes and upmarket articles for 'gentlemen'.

What it really is: Expensive fashion and style features, some decent articles, plus embarrassing middle-aged lust and lots of scantily-clad women.

***GQ*'s ideal man:** Smartly dressed, well-read, and married to Claudia Schiffer, apparently.

The rest

There are, of course, several other less successful men's magazines. These include *Esquire* (USA and UK) and *Arena* (UK only), both of which are literate, reasonably classy style magazines, including music and celebrity interviews, fashion, and the reliably popular sex-related articles. Both take 'grooming' seriously: *Arena* advises that 'A man with grubby nails is a man who spends too much time under the bonnet and not enough in front of the mirror', whilst *Esquire*'s Grooming Panel tests out facial skincare products and 'age rescue therapy' creams (both August 2001). Both magazines have the confidence to be less insistently macho; for example, the same issue of *Arena* includes a substantial profile and interview with gay fashion designer Patrick Cox, a thoughtful discussion with political journalist John Pilger, and a (serious) tribute to cashmere knitwear. Like its brothers, of course, the magazine also features a handful of awestruck photo-based pieces on beautiful women.

More unique is the American *Men's Journal*, which caters for the more 'rugged', outdoorsy man who seeks travel and adventure, and doesn't want photo-features of celebrities in swimwear. Exercise and fitness is good for its own sake (rather than being a way to impress the 'ladies'), and grooming products are presented as protection against the elements. Because the emphasis is so clearly on conquest of the great outdoors, traditional masculinity is not challenged much by this magazine, although the idea that men would read a glossy lifestyle magazine which includes a 'Mind and Body' section at all remains mildly eyebrow-raising. With a well-heeled readership about two-thirds the size of the American *GQ*'s, *Men's Journal* is not doing badly in its field.

Finally, there are also technology-and-lifestyle magazines, such as *Stuff for Men* (USA and UK) and *T3* (UK), where the more traditional idea of a magazine for men about gadgets and electronics is welded to the newer idea of men's general-interest lifestyle coverage, plus the near-ubiquitous photographs of women in bikinis.

If you are interested in men's magazines, the book *Media, Gender and Identity – Second edition* by David Gauntlett (2008) contains a much more up-to-date full chapter discussing the magazines and their readers.

For information about the book see www.theoryhead.com