

HL Essay

As I leave the train station on my daily journey to school I pass a newsagent's shop. At the shop's entrance is a large stand full of glossy magazines. I don't have time to dwell in the morning, but sometimes stop to browse the many publications on my return in the afternoon. Most of the magazines are 'lifestyle' magazines. Their polished, colourful covers and breezy tone shout out at me – an 18-year-old woman – telling me how to behave, dress, and look. They are secular, consumer society's guides for living well. They tell me how to be if I am to be anyone at all. My essay considers just one of these magazines, *Women's Health South Africa*, used as an example of a publication – because these publications do not differ much – that advises young women in matters of fitness, nutrition, fashion, sex and, sometimes, health. *Women's Health* constructs in its language and images an aspirational vision of womanhood, not so much reflecting society's view, but rather continuously constructing it. In my essay I ask how and why women are represented, as they apparently are, in *Women's Health*, as an example of the modern and ubiquitous lifestyle magazine.

Women's Health has a circulation of 8 million readers and has 13 international editions ("Women's Health," n.d). To the extent that this circulation data is accurate, it surely cannot account for those readers who may read *Women's Health* while waiting to see their dentist, doctor, accountant etc. And, I am not alone in perusing, encouraged to buy, but without obligation, among the newsagent's stands; it speaks to us whether we like it or not. It can be assumed, then, that the ideology of *Women's Health* travels far and wide.

Of course, it may be suggested that readers can negotiate or reject the dogma of *Women's Health*. All texts require readers after all, and readers are not generally compelled to be compliant. But, this is easier said than done in a social space, virtually global in range, which is saturated by an almost undifferentiated view of what women should be. Spender, quoting Whorf, suggests that "language is not neutral [...] it is a shaper of ideas, it is the programme for mental activity" (Spender 145). Spender goes on to claim that language as an influential shaping force is constructed by men and works in their interests. It follows that women are fashioned to become what men want them to be.

What do men want women to be? *Women's Health* gives us insight, and the rest of my essay considers the front cover of an edition of *Women's Health South Africa*



from January 2012 (See Appendix 1). Although the example is regional, any local variation is modest, and representations of women are for the most part globally undifferentiated. Also, while the focus is partial – a front cover – it is entirely typical – ideologically and sometimes linguistically – of the publication as a whole. Of course, the front cover has an important additional function that is, as part of a capitalist consumer society, to persuade women to buy the magazine. Women, in this view, are encouraged to consume and, in turn, embody what men desire them to be. A key idea in the front cover considered here is that women should aspire to lose weight. Not only is this timely – the magazine is published at the beginning of the year when people make new year's resolutions – it coincides with a contemporary, widespread belief that men find thinner women more sexually desirable.

One way in which the cover persuades women to alter their bodies is by manipulating society's beliefs and assumptions, addressing the reader and offering a 'dialogic space' for women to occupy. The dominant assumption is that women need to be thinner to be happy. The text's question, "will being thinner make you happy?" provokes curiosity. The pronoun, "you" highlights the reader's importance through synthetic personalisation. The rhetorical question already contains the answer, suggesting that it is yes, leaving readers to fill the dialogic space and commit to buying the magazine of their own accord. Furthermore, the comparative verb form "thinner" suggests that there is room for improvement in all readers; no one can be fully happy with what they have. Below this, a minor cover line declares "real women's weight loss revelations". The adjective "real" establishes obfuscation, suggesting both intimate life histories while implying that women who fail to lose weight are inauthentic failures. Equally, the hyperbolic noun "revelations" suggests that readers can gain access to privileged insights. Another assumption the text makes is that every woman wants to be more beautiful. Although the text does not explicitly claim that losing weight will make the reader happy, it relies on and interacts with other cover lines, to persuade readers that being thin is an aspect of beauty, contributing in turn to happiness.

Women are also encouraged to lose weight through the graphosemantic effect of the visual and written modes. The main cover line encourages women to "drop two sizes!" in large, bolded, black font, establishing high modal authority. An English-speaking reader will reflexively be drawn to the top left hand corner, and the size of the text may also attract the reader's attention, making it the first thing they read. The shape of the round letters in "drop" and "two" connote round stomachs, and the curved letters in "sizes" suggest a sleeker, ideal body as a result at the end of the claim. The imperative form of the verb, "drop" combined with the exclamation mark



connote an urgent need, imploring women to lose weight. The curve of the S's reflect the curved body of the model, suggesting that obtaining her body is a product of following the magazine's advice, once again implying that being thinner is beautiful and better. Juxtaposing text with the smiling face of Zoë Saldana suggests the positivity that will emerge from losing weight. The cover further suggests that women can change themselves by "train(ing) less" and "lose(ing) more". The counterintuitive antithesis in this statement creates a sense of simplicity in the task of losing weight, as it apparently requires little effort. This is an idea that may be appealing in time-pressurised societies generally, but will particularly attract women who still need to contend with the dual burden of public and domestic labour. The interaction of these stylistic features contributes to the central representation that changing their body will make women happier.

Another way in which women are encouraged to look better in order to feel better is through the subjective commentary of Zoë Saldana. The cover model has been digitally altered to look slimmer, as a result of the technological context of Photoshop despite, ironically, being described as "totally uncensored". The informal register is a typical convention of magazine covers, utilised to create synthetic personalisation between the writer(s) and the reader. Only small proportion of women will be able to obtain this body, but suggesting that this is normal encourages women to seek improvements that they could make. The caption stating that Saldana is "strong" and "sexy" uses sibilance to create harsh but sleek sounds, suggesting a 'trendy' person that female readers should strive become. Additionally, the positive adjectives promote the model instead of diminishing her. However, this assumes that the accompanying connotations are positive, which some readers may reject. The image takes up considerable space, and her posture physically opens her body, connoting self-confidence and importance. Her clothing is casual, which could imply that anyone could look like her: An authentic, "real" woman. Her representation as a carefree and beautiful combined with the complementing cover lines encourage women to believe that changing themselves physically will make their lives better.

Women are represented as needing change to be happy through the semantics of the written mode and the corresponding relationship with the graphosemantics of the visual mode, but why they are represented in this way is the consequence of societal beliefs that privilege male sexual desire for thin women. The magazine cover is certainly intended to appeal to a female reader who is encouraged to exchange money to purchase the magazine that promises to help them lose weight and, in turn, find happiness. But, it can be asked, happy for whom? Do, in fact, women need to be rakishly thin, possibly to the detriment of their health, to be happy?



Alternatively, is it the case that the magazine cover – as in most female lifestyle magazines – builds on a narrative – that is, an arbitrary categorization – in which men are the norm and women are deviant, where deviance may include too much body fat?

Challenging patriarchal, hegemonic narratives is not easy. I would like to think that on my next journey home from school I would resist being drawn to the empty promises of the lifestyle magazines in the train station's newsagent's shop. However, it is difficult to resist shiny magazines promising a better life. And, if as Spender claims (Spender 147) language is constructed and controlled by men, challenging society's dominant androcentric narratives represented in, for example, *Women's Health*, is difficult.

Works Cited:

Spender, Dale. "Language and Reality: Who Made the World?" *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader*, edited by Lucy Burke, Tony Crowley and Alan Girvin, Routledge 2000, pp. 145-153.

Wikipedia contributors. (2019, March 6). Women's Health (magazine). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 07:14, August 29, 2019, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Women%27s_Health_\(magazine\)&oldid=886464693](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Women%27s_Health_(magazine)&oldid=886464693)

Women's Health South Africa January/February 2012: Front Page Print.



Appendix:

Appendix 1



Special Weight-Loss Issue! South Africa

Women's Health

Jan/Feb 2012

DROP TWO SIZES!

Crush Holiday Kilos & Shrink Your Belly in Record Time!

Zoë Saldana
Strong, Sexy and Totally Uncensored!

Rock Your Single Life! p132

10 Ways To Look More Beautiful

Will Being Thinner Make You Happier?

REAL WOMEN'S WEIGHT-LOSS REVELATIONS

SHOP SMART!

50 BEST PACKAGED FOODS FOR WOMEN

What Sex Feels Like...
With Another Woman
When You're a Virgin
With a Man 15 Years Younger

TRAIN LESS LOSE MORE

R29.95 (R3.95 VAT INCL)
DISPERSAAG21 (DEL VAT) NAMIBIA 1299.95 VAT INCL

02024

www.StoreMags.com