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Fun, Fearless, Feminist?: Gender and Sexuality In *Cosmopolitan*

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Magazines, like other forms of popular culture, impact our identities and perceptions of ourselves and of the society that we live in. In my thesis, I seek to draw a connection between a fashion and beauty magazine, *Cosmopolitan*, and Third Wave feminism. Criticism of the magazine has stemmed from the idea that *Cosmo* expresses contradicting ideologies and focuses too closely on women's ability to please men. For my research, I look at the history and motives behind the Second and Third Wave movements and how they differentiate. Then, by considering and applying contemporary feminist theory, I deconstruct and analyze the magazine. I argue that, despite its glossy cover and apolitical nature, *Cosmopolitan* does reiterate and perpetuate components of contemporary feminist thought by representing female gender identity and sexuality as empowering and inspiring.

The Birth of the Single Girl

In 1965, Helen Gurley Brown became editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan*, determined to create a magazine that surpassed the traditional norms of femininity and embraced a new age woman.¹ Brown wanted to target a group of readers that no other publication had sought to recognize: single working-class independent women. Unlike their middle-class counterparts, working class women were not college-educated nor were they seeking jobs in male-dominated fields. Although uneducated, these women saw an opportunity in the growing work force and began taking jobs as secretaries and temps, “Pink-Collar” jobs as Brown categorized them.² Further, single women passed the age of 25 were viewed either as misfits in society or unsuited for marriage or relationships. At this time, women’s roles were designated and confined to marriage and the home. Brown saw these standards as a problem both in perpetuating oppressive ideas of women and ignoring the true notion of what it meant to be a single woman during this time. She aspired to create a magazine that not only addressed the issues of modern day workingwomen, but also inspired them to embrace their sexuality and independence.³

In *Sex and the Single Girl*, written just three years prior to her start at *Cosmopolitan*, Brown revealed the truth about what it meant to be female and single through her own personal experiences as an unmarried woman during the 1940’s and 50’s in Los Angeles.⁴ Her message called for the sexual liberation of women and the elimination of the sexual double standard. Brown saw an injustice in that single as well as married men were free to indulge in sexual

¹ James Landers, *The Improbable First Century of Cosmopolitan Magazine* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2010), 224-225.

² Laurie Ouellette. "Inventing the Cosmo Girl: Class identity and girl-style American dreams." *Media, Culture & Society* 21, no. 3 (May 1, 1999): 359-383. <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed October 24, 2011).

³ Jennifer Scalon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xii-xiii.

⁴ Landers, *The Improbable First Century of Cosmopolitan Magazine*, 222.

activities at their leisure while women who participated in pre-marital sex were viewed in a derogatory way. She opposed the view that only men could have sex for pleasure and believed that women should not only be seen as equals to men in the workplace but also in their sexual desires and activities. Like the free market, Brown saw sexuality as a bargaining tool that women could use in relationships with men. She acknowledged the fact that sex was a powerful thing and suggested that women should not be ashamed to use it to get what they want. Even with its unconventional messages, Brown's *Cosmopolitan* became a popular outlet for women to escape from the sexual and social limitations they endured and inspired them to make changes.⁵

A lot has changed since Brown's *Cosmopolitan* hit the stands during the Second Wave Feminist Movement in the 1960's. Because more women are now college educated, they are no longer confined to the roles of housewife or secretary. Nor does 'single girl' still carry the same negative connotation for young women. These changes have led to a shift in feminist theory and objective. In the 1990's, a new movement, called The Third Wave, arose within feminist discourse. Women's needs were changing and they were demanding equality and respect in new ways. The Third Wave differentiates from the Second most significantly in acknowledging and embracing women from all different races, classes, and sexual orientations. Secondly, the Third Wave is a movement that aspires to dismantle the stereotypes claiming that a woman cannot fight for equality and at the same time enjoy her femininity.

Today, *Cosmopolitan* is still read by millions of women across the world looking for inspiration and advice. So, I am interested in what sort of ways *Cosmopolitan* is expressing this sense of inspiration to its millions of readers. Hence, I pose the questions; can *Cosmopolitan*, a fashion and beauty launched in the wake of Second Wave activism, illustrate contemporary feminist ideas? And if so, how does it establish and implement Third Wave ideologies within its

⁵ Scalon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere*, 170-182.

articles and content? To answer my questions, the first part of my paper describes *Cosmopolitan* as the magazine it is today, and how critics and scholars have deconstructed its content. Next, I look at the history and motives behind the Second Wave movement and how its implications connect and vary with Brown's view of female identity. Then, I discuss the emergence of the Third Wave and how its theories and ideas differentiate from the Second. I also consult the work of many different Third Wave theorists and activists. Among these feminists are Angela McRobbie, Jennifer Baumgardner, Amy Richards, Judith Butler, Anita Harris, and Imelda Whelehan. Within their texts and articles, these women express their views and theories on the implications of gender and femininity pertaining to contemporary or Third Wave Feminist ideas. The last part of my paper applies these theories and ideas to my analysis of *Cosmopolitan*. I use Third Wave concepts as a guide and reference in my deconstruction of the magazine. My analysis focuses both on individual articles within *Cosmo* as well as the magazine's message and presentation as a whole. In response to my questions I argue that, despite its glossy cover and apolitical nature, *Cosmopolitan* does convey and articulate Third Wave ideas. *Cosmopolitan* is by no means a reputed feminist magazine, nor does it accentuate every aspect of Third Wave theory, but it does reiterate and perpetuate components of contemporary feminist thought by representing female gender identity and sexuality as empowering and inspiring.

Fun, Fearless, Female!

Today, the 'Cosmo girl' has become a well-known epithet. Invented by Brown herself, the 'Cosmo girl' is a woman who is fun, fearless, and wants to be the best she can be in every aspect of her life. Women across the world are drawn to this idea so much that *Cosmo* has become one of the most popular magazines in the world. The Hearst Corporation circulates 2.9 million copies of *Cosmopolitan* throughout the U.S. on a monthly basis. The magazine, targeted

at 18 to 34 year olds, is published in 64 international editions and 35 languages and is distributed to over 100 countries.⁶ Among other fashion and beauty magazines for young women, *Cosmopolitan* has the highest circulation rate in the U.S.⁷ *Cosmopolitan's* articles use inspiring and optimistic language to instruct women on how to be the best in every aspect of their lives, whether its at work, in relationships, or in the bedroom. Each month, on the cover page, a popular female celebrity or model is featured, dressed in revealing clothes and posed in a suggestive yet confident manner. Inside the magazine the celebrity appears again in a three-page piece about her life and career based on an interview with *Cosmopolitan*. Whether she is revealing a dark secret or telling a story of overcoming an obstacle, the monthly celebrity is always presented in a familiar and inspiring way. There is always a feature on sex advice, such as new positions to try in bed or new ways to please your man. A section of the magazine is also labeled "Man Manual", which includes articles that decode and explain men with the intention of helping women to understand them better. Moreover, the magazine always includes fashion and beauty advice, with a spread specific to that season's fashion. In another section, questions are answered pertaining to female specific health issues, and updates on topics that promote female well-being are given.

As a popular mainstream magazine, *Cosmopolitan*, has been assessed and deconstructed by many critics and theorists. Mainly, the magazine has been criticized for its sexualized and explicit nature and for focusing on the importance of pleasing and pleasuring men. For instance, Ellen McCracken suggests that *Cosmopolitan* does not actually liberate women sexually, as it represents itself to do so, but rather that it creates a sense of pseudo-sexual freedom that is

⁶ "Cosmopolitan Circulation" The Hearst Corporation, (accessed December 02, 2011)

http://www.cosmomedialkit.com/r5/cob_page.asp?category_code=circ.

⁷ "The 20 biggest magazines of 2011 so far" The Huffington Post, (accessed December 02, 2011),

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/10/the-20-biggest-magazines-n_923265.html#s326312&title=Time.

imagined and temporary. McCracken states that *Cosmopolitan*, through unrealistic and romanticized stories, promotes ideas of fantasy instead of reality. She argues, similarly to Second Wave theorists, that *Cosmopolitan* presents stereotypical images and ideas of women that are constructed by men's own ideas and desires of female sexuality.⁸ Rosalind Gill expands more on the debates concerning women's fashion magazines and states that *Cosmopolitan* presents contradictory notions of female sexuality. By promoting a sense of sexual independence and control among women, Gill suggests that *Cosmopolitan* contradicts itself by also reiterating the importance of satisfying men and maintaining heterosexual relationships.⁹ Other scholars, such as David Machin and Joanna Thornborrow, acknowledge *Cosmopolitan's* contradictory nature, yet evaluate the magazine through a transnational lens. They argue that these contradictions actually contribute to a global *Cosmopolitan* brand that has crossed transnational boundaries and has become accepted and idealized by young women of many different nationalities.¹⁰

Most scholarly discourse concerning *Cosmopolitan* deconstructs and considers the magazine with Second Wave ideas in mind. Critiques stem from the idea that *Cosmo* perpetuates oppressive concepts of female sexuality and that its images and messages hinder women's ability to advance in society. Many writers argue that *Cosmo's* content promotes women to use their sexuality to achieve status rather than through education or group activism and hence cannot be considered a feminist magazine or capable of illustrating feminist ideals. When considering Second Wave philosophy, these evaluations of *Cosmo* are valid, but it is also important to

⁸ Ellen McCracken, "Cosmopolitan: Pseudo-liberation, Vicarious Eroticism, and Traditional Moral Values", *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms.*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 158-162.

⁹ Rosalind Gill. "Gender and Magazines: From Cosmopolitan to Loaded", *Gender and the Media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 180-217.

¹⁰ David Machin, and Joanna Thornborrow. "Branding and discourse: the case of Cosmopolitan." *Discourse & Society* 14, no. 4 (July 2003): 453-471. *Gender Studies Database*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 24, 2011).

analyze this magazine in more than one way. What I found to be absent or lacking among critical analyses of *Cosmopolitan* is a consideration of the magazine that applies Third Wave ideas. That is why I wanted to determine if *Cosmopolitan*, as a fashion and beauty magazine, is capable of effectively demonstrating aspects of Third Wave Feminism.

They Wanted More Than Just the Vote

At the same time Brown was petitioning for women's sexual liberation, Betty Friedan was writing *The Feminine Mystique*. Released just one year after Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl*, Friedan's book caught the attention of hundreds of housewives, prompting the start of the Second Wave Feminist movement. Through interviews and research, Friedan revealed the truth about a widespread unhappiness felt by many American women during the 1950's and into the 60's. This unhappiness, Friedan explained, was the result of married women losing their sense of self in their mundane chores after they had become wives and mothers. Friedan showed how the imprisonment of being a housewife caused many women to forget their own needs and happiness. She equated this loss of self, described in the book as "the problem that has no name", to the inequalities created by the traditional patriarchal family and socially constructed ideas of women.¹¹ Her book was an outcry against the conventional ideas of women's identities and roles within society and a push for women to get out of their homes and routines and to partake in activities that made them feel fulfilled and accomplished, whether it be through work or hobby.

Friedan's book influenced middle class housewives to step out of the restraints of their home and inspired women across America to stand up for the injustices they endured. These changes sparked the beginning of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960's, 70's and into the 80's, where women were calling for the elimination of social and political inequalities between women and men. Activist groups were fighting for many legal and political changes,

¹¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 1963).

such as equal pay and employment in the workplace, better health and family planning organizations, equal education opportunities, and the right to have an abortion. Women were fighting for gender equality and the end of gender discrimination, as well as the right to make their own choices pertaining to their body and sexuality.¹²

Second Wave feminists believed that women were not sexual beings to be objectified. They sought to acknowledge and stop the victimization of women through sexual violence and harassment, both in and outside of the workplace. Second Wave theorist, Catherine A. Mackinnon, argues that female sexuality, like gender, is a social construct determined by a male dominated society. She suggests that sex is an entity powered by men and male interests by stating, “the fact that male power has power means that the interests of male sexuality construct what sexuality as such means, including the standard way it is allowed and recognized to be felt and expressed and experienced, in a way that determines women’s biographies, including sexual ones.”¹³ In a way, both Second Wave feminists and Brown were demanding the same thing: that female sexuality be determined and controlled by women, not men. While their agencies for achieving sexual liberation may have been different, their objectives were the same.

The Third Wave movement is really just an extension and advancement of the Second Wave but with new considerations and objectives in mind. Like Second Wave feminists, Third Wavers continue to demand awareness concerning domestic violence and rape, the right to choose an abortion, and access to decent and affordable birth control. The Third Wave is not necessarily fighting for new social or political rights, but instead is looking to expand and protect the rights that Second Wave feminists fought for. The differences between the movements

¹² Kathleen A. Laughlin, “Introduction: The Long History of Feminism”, *Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1-8.

¹³ Catherine A. Mackinnon, “Sexuality”, *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 158-180.

become apparent in how activists and theorists approach and view these issues. In regards to the Third Wave, Imelda Whelehan argues that feminism today looks a lot differently than it did in the 1960's and into the 80's and writes, "one needs to realize that second wave feminism has undergone a massive epistemological transformation, and not all the changes in the shape of feminism remain directed at the original goals".¹⁴ Some theorists strive to call this new era the Third Wave, in which a younger generation has arrived with a culmination of assumed freedoms and a drive for equality but also a fear of the title 'feminist'. These theorists' views stem from the assertion that feminism is in fact still alive, especially through women's continuous fight against injustices, such as domestic violence and racial or homosexual discrimination.¹⁵ They also recognize that our society is a lot different today than it was fifty years ago and to attract participants it must tweak its outlook to suit the needs of the modern-day woman.¹⁶ Promoters of the Third Wave argue that the freedoms and rights that women enjoy today are in fact part of the reason why feminism still lives.

Other scholars have claimed that feminism has died and that we live in a 'Post-Feminist' society, in which gender equality has already been achieved by the work of the Second Wave. Angela McRobbie describes this as 'feminism taken into account', meaning that the feminist political movement has passed away but women continue to partake in the equality that it achieved, such as equal opportunities in the workforce and legal protections against sexual harassment. She suggests that women today acknowledge the accomplishments of feminism but

¹⁴ Imelda Whelehan, "Crisis in Feminism?", *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'*, (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 127.

¹⁵ "Our Work", The Tronvig Group, (accessed on December 08, 2011), <http://www.thirdwavefoundation.org/our-work/>.

¹⁶ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, "What is Feminism?", *ManifestA: young women, feminism, and the future*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 50-86.

that women take these accomplishments for granted and view them as a thing of the past.¹⁷

While organizations such as the Third Wave Foundation do exist, female activism as a whole has slowed down immensely over the last few decades. Post-Feminists believe that politically and actively, feminism has died in the public sphere. Many suggest that feminism has become something to be studied, rather than something to be fought for and acted upon.¹⁸

There are two main dimensions of Third Wave feminism that pertain to its inception. The first is the Second Wave's blindness to racial and cultural differences and the second is the generation gap between the 1960's and now, and the need to embrace these societal changes. Sometime during the Second Wave movement in the 1980's, feminists were beginning to express their dissatisfaction in the way that certain ethnic and racial groups were being under- or misrepresented. Activists and theorists began to criticize the Second Wave for being too narrow-minded in the sense that it only embraced the agendas and experiences of middle-class, heterosexual, white females. Black women, especially, felt that their cultural and ethnic identities were lost under the blanket of white female concerns and leadership. They acknowledged that not only their gender, but also their race put them at a disadvantage in society. Imelda Whelehan further explains this neglect and separation felt by many Black feminists and writes, "black feminist have argued that as a consequence, white feminism does not simply ignore the specificity of the black female experience, it also occludes and distorts the nature of those problems peculiar to black female existence in a profoundly ethnocentric fashion."¹⁹ Women

¹⁷ Angela McRobbie, "Notes on Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime", *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3-14.

¹⁸ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, "What is Feminism?", 50-86.

¹⁹ Imelda Whelehan, "Black Feminism: Reimagining 'Equality'", *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'*, (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 113.

wanted the feminist movement to be reconstructed so that it included and supported the experiences and backgrounds of all types of women, including bi- and homosexuals as well.²⁰

Since women felt that they were being misrepresented within the movement, feminists began to alter their idea of female identity. Throughout the Second Wave, the attention of the movement was on the idea of a homogenous female identity. When women began to feel that their individual identity did not fit in to the 'sisterhood' that the movement was acknowledging, theorists began to demand that feminism start focusing more on the individual rather than the group. There was a call to reestablish what the term 'woman' meant and to acknowledge that the term no longer captured the validity of its subjects. In *Gender Trouble*, released in 1990, Judith Butler explains that there is a problem in feminism because of the assumption in that the term 'women' is all encompassing. She writes,

“The term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.”²¹

She asserts that this new movement of feminism should take the initiative to rid itself of the idea that feminism is a single and consistent entity. Further she states that the female subject should not be the center of feminist politics, as the initiating factor for political agenda, because the idea of a female subject is based off of faulty representations. She proposes that gender is not necessarily constructed, as other gender politics have suggested, but rather that it is something

²⁰ Imelda Whelehan, “Black Feminism: Reimagining ‘Equality’”, 106-122.

²¹ Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire”, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 3.

that is performed and created through these performances.²² Her ideas, in accordance with other feminist and gender politics theorists, advocated for a better understanding and representation of gender within the modern age of feminist thought.

On the other side of the debate, feminists address a new sense of feminist expression. ‘Girl Power’, a term coined in the early 90’s by the sub cultural Riot grrrls and British pop band, the Spice Girls, refers to an idea that girls are free to be themselves and should feel proud of that ability. It also functions around the importance of female bonding and friendships as well as the importance of empowering the individual.²³ Feminists did not always recognize ‘Girl Power’ as a legitimate tool for empowering women because they believed it promoted the idea that women should act immaturely to gain equality. Yet Third Wave feminists embrace this youthful sense of female empowerment and recognize its positive factors, along with other more contemporary and youthful approaches to feminism.²⁴ By this I mean that Third Wavers accept that this generation, influenced by technology and mass media, has found new outlets and sources from which to create their identities. In 1991, Naomi Wolf argued that women, living in this postmodern age, are exposed to constant and inescapable images of artificial female beauty. Wolf explains that while women today may feel equality and freedoms in society, they still have not been able to escape what she calls, ‘The Beauty Myth’, the resistance against female advancement through the use of media imagery. Her ideas stem from the fact that by the early 80’s and into the 90’s, eating disorders and cosmetic surgery procedures were on the rise like never before. She attributes these fads to the ways in which women were consuming culture through technology

²² Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire”, 1-34.

²³ Bettina Fritzsche, “Spicy Strategies: Pop Feminist and Other Empowerments in Girl Culture,” *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 155-162.

²⁴ Griffin, Christine, “Good Girls, Bad Girls”, *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29-43.

and media.²⁵ Hence, contemporary feminist theorists, like Wolf, want to acknowledge and address the issues that young women and girls, living in this postmodern society, experience.

One of the major critiques of Second Wave feminism is that it forgets and also condemns the enjoyments of being 'Girlie'. Third Wavers argue that the Second Wave associated equality and empowerment too heavily with the success of women accomplishing male tasks, rather than by claiming their own identity through feminine objectives. Third Wave activists Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, suggest that the Third Wave's most important objective is for women to let go of the stereotype that to be a powerful feminist one must denounce makeup, sex, high heels, and all other feminine things. Instead, they suggest that the Third Wave should celebrate being a girl and they write:

“In the same way that Betty Friedan's insistence on professional seriousness was a response to every woman in the office being called a girl, this Third Wave generation is predestined to fight against the equally rigid stereotype of being too serious, too political, and seemingly asexual. Girlie culture is a rebellion against the false impression that since women don't want to be sexually exploited, they don't want to be sexual; against the necessity of brass-buttoned, red-suited seriousness to infiltrate a man's world; against the anachronistic belief that because women could be dehumanized by porn, they must be; and the idea that girls and power don't mix.”²⁶

By equating this movement's objectives to Friedan's rejection of patriarchal family dynamics, Third Wave feminists aspire to promote a new sense of feminism in which women can still act politically, but at the same time enjoy their sexuality and beauty. Contemporary feminists still

²⁵ Naomi Wolf, "The Beauty Myth", *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 9-19.

²⁶ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, "Feminism and Femininity; Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Thong", *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 62.

acknowledge that the patriarchal structures of society have not completely been erased, but instead of trying to protect themselves from it, they combat these forms of oppression with a new strength. They assert that women should be able to embrace their sexuality and uniquely express themselves, especially because there are now laws and rules in place that protect their rights as women.²⁷

Empowering Women One 'Issue' At a Time

One of the ways in which *Cosmo* promotes ideas of female empowerment is by writing about issues pertaining to women's rights. Many of *Cosmopolitan's* articles confront and exploit different inequalities and types of violence that women today face. These articles focus on the promotion of women's rights and safety by informing women about issues that may pertain to them. In 2009, *Cosmo* included an article in the June edition about domestic violence in light of the recent incident involving pop artists, Rihanna and Chris Brown. The article states that one in four women suffer from domestic violence and usually the women with the highest risks are between the ages of 20 and 24. They argue that violence is never okay in a relationship and explain the ways in which women can protect themselves and get help if they find themselves in similar situations.²⁸ In this article, *Cosmo* is educating their readers on a problem in our society that all types of women, even celebrities, face and is promoting awareness for female safety. Further, in their October 2010 issue, *Cosmo* wrote an article titled, "How Serial Rapists Target their Victims", which gives detailed accounts of different high profile rape cases throughout the country. By using facts from the cases, this article explains the ways in which rapists target their

²⁷ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, "Girl You'll Be a Woman Soon," *ManifestA: young women, feminism, and the future*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 126-166.

²⁸ "Is It Ever Okay to Stay If He's Hit You?" *Cosmopolitan*, June 1, 2009, 44. (accessed December 02, 2011). <http://www.proquest.com/>.

victims and strike in even the most unsuspected places.²⁹ As a women's fashion and beauty magazine, domestic violence may not always be at the forefront, but *Cosmo* does make it a point to recognize several of the harsh realities that women continue to face. Writing about these violent acts not only spreads knowledge, but it also expands on existing feminist conversation concerning anti-violence campaigns.

Cosmopolitan, like feminists, is pro-choice and believes in a woman's right to choose to have a legal, safe, and affordable abortion. By stating that the magazine is pro-choice, I mean that it expresses these ideas within some of its articles and even uses persuasive language to petition for women to take a stand against the threats of pro-life lawmakers and activists. Before the 2004 election, *Cosmo*'s September edition included an article titled, "How Your Rights are Being Robbed." Since George Bush, a pro-life supporter, was one of the candidates for presidency at the time, *Cosmo* wrote to inform their readers about the possible realities of him winning the election. They argued that women's rights were in jeopardy if Bush won the election, since during the previous year he had signed a bill, The Unborn Victims of Violence Act, which gave legal rights to unborn fetuses, and hence threatened women's right to an abortion. The article reiterates how important it is for women to vote in the upcoming election and take a stand on the issue of abortion. *Cosmo* went so far as to state that women were not doing enough to oppose abortion laws and writes, "The war on women's rights is met with too little opposition."³⁰ With this use of progressive language, *Cosmo* is illustrating and promoting feminist ideas concerning a woman's right to make choices about her body. While it may be rare for *Cosmo* to advocate for female activism, this article exemplifies how the magazine is capable

²⁹ "How Serial Rapists Target Their victims." *Cosmopolitan*, October 1, 2010, 194. (accessed December 02, 2011), <http://www.proquest.com/>.

³⁰ Liz Welch. "How Your Rights Are Being Robbed." *Cosmopolitan*, September 1, 2004, 212,214. (accessed December 04, 2011), <http://www.proquest.com/>.

of expressing an assertive and powerful message to its readers. By petitioning for women to involve themselves in politics, *Cosmo* is not only conveying feminist ideas, but also influencing women to empower themselves by making a difference politically.

Cosmo also utilizes its content to spread knowledge about female injustices through the use of narratives and personal stories. Throughout the editions that I analyzed, I found many articles of women telling stories about overcoming obstacles. *Cosmo* presents their stories in a way that expresses inspiration and fearlessness. In August 2011, *Cosmo* included an article titled, "I Was Forced into Sexual Slavery", which told three individual stories about American women who experienced sex trafficking. The interesting thing about this article is that the women were all U.S. citizens and were not impoverished or homeless, but were from the middle or working class. Each woman explains how she was somehow forced into the horrors of sexual violence and drugs and how she was able to escape it. One of the girl's parents had actually sold her for sex, while the other two, both young and naive, had run away with older men and became a part of their sex scheme.³¹ Not only does *Cosmo* focus on these women's stories to promote female strength and tenacity, but it also highlights an important and threatening reality in our society. This is apparent in the language of the article when *Cosmo* writes, "many of us assume that human trafficking involves oppressed, desperate women in the poorest countries. But this dangerous underground trade is exploding right here in the States".³² Instead of portraying these featured women as the victim, the magazine focused on their abilities to rise above and survive the evils that they had faced.

As I discussed above, Third Wave feminists seek to bring awareness and attention to the experiences and issues of young women in the present day. *Cosmopolitan* does this by including

³¹ Stephanie Booth. "I Was Forced Into Sexual Slavery". *Cosmopolitan*, August 1, 2011, 160. (accessed November 29, 2011), <http://www.proquest.com/>.

³² Booth, Stephanie. "I was Forced Into Sexual Slavery".

articles that acknowledge and involve the interests of modern day females. For example, the September 2007 edition included a piece on the rising danger of eating disorders in women, titled “Why Women’s Eating Habits Get So Out of Whack.” This report looked at the different ways in which women were eating unhealthily and abnormally in an effort to lose or control their weight. The report discussed how bulimia and anorexia were no longer the only ways in which women were harming their bodies because of an obsession with their weight. The author discussed how some women had begun to douse their half-eaten food in salt, ketchup, mustard, and other condiments so to stop themselves from eating the rest. Others had developed rituals of bizarre eating habits, such as consuming vegetables all day in public and then binge eating on fatty foods alone at night. The article includes the dangers and consequences of these destructive eating habits and why it is important to evaluate them.³³ By acknowledging the mass media’s involvement in these harsh realities, *Cosmopolitan* is addressing the ways in which women feel pressure and influence to be perfect.

Since the early 1990’s until today, *Cosmopolitan* has included four different articles in its magazines that recognize and discuss the rise of interracial relationships. One, in March 1992, titled “Love in Black and White”, told the story of a white woman and a Black South African man who met and fell in love. They shared with the magazine some of the hardships that they had endured from discriminatory people and also the joys of being in a relationship with someone from a very different cultural and regional background.³⁴ Again in February 2010, *Cosmopolitan* published a piece called, “This is What Love Looks Like Now”, which highlighted three interracial couples. The author suggested that what sparked the interest of this

³³ Lesley Rotchford. "Why Women's Eating Habits Get So Out of Whack." *Cosmopolitan*, September 1, 2007,182. (accessed December 03, 2011). <http://www.proquest.com/>.

³⁴ Mathabane, Gail, and Mathabane, Mark. "Love in Black and White." *Cosmopolitan*, March 1, 1992, 210. (accessed December 03, 2011), <http://www.proquest.com/>.

story was a recent incident in Louisiana where a Justice of the Peace turned down marrying an interracial couple. While the author noted that there are seven times as many bi-racial couples today as there was in the 1970's, she argued that interracial couples, like the one in Louisiana, still face prejudices.³⁵ This becomes apparent in the personal stories told by each couple, who share the struggles and joys of being with someone from a different race. Experiencing relationships in this way is very different than how most people experienced or witnessed love forty or fifty years ago. By featuring these stories and also acknowledging the inaccuracies in that Louisiana Justice's thinking, *Cosmopolitan* is expanding on new experiences that women today have in our changing society.

Third Wavers are very interested in embracing girlhood and female youth in connection to feminism. *Cosmopolitan* does this by focusing on female beauty and expressions of femininity. In every issue there is a section of the magazine called "Beauty Q & A", where readers' questions are answered about makeup, hair products, or skin care. The magazine uses inspiring language to promote the enjoyments of being female. A June 2007 article, "Feel Sexy in Your Own Skin", gives readers advise on how to feel more confident about their appearance and body, despite what type of figure they have. This article is not a how-to-guide for losing weight, nor does it suggest any dieting tricks, but rather it urges women to find their beauty without making changes to their appearance. The author advises women not to compare themselves to models or celebrities and to instead celebrate the woman that they are. Moreover, one of the ways the author suggests women can feel sexier is by, "enjoying being eye candy."³⁶ This advice reflects ideas of contemporary feminism in that women should be able to feel sexy

³⁵ Mina Azodi. "This Is What Love Looks Like Now." *Cosmopolitan*, February 1, 2010, 150. (accessed November 03, 2011), <http://www.proquest.com/>.

³⁶ Celeste Perron. "Feel Sexy in Your Skin." *Cosmopolitan*, August 1, 2005, 158-160,162. (accessed December 08, 2011). <http://www.proquest.com/>.

and not victimized by men's voyeurism. Again in May 2011, "Go Ahead, Check Yourself Out," urged women to take time out for themselves and to enjoy feeling beautiful and feminine. With busy schedules and work demands, this author argues that women can sometimes forget to make time for themselves and relax. This article identifies some of the most unexpected places and times when women should take a look at themselves and feel beautiful, such as while out for drinks with the girls or right after having sexual intercourse. Because women's brains react in positive ways to certain stimuli, whether it's food or touch, the author explains how these chemical reactions can affect women's appearance for the better.³⁷ This advice contributes to readers' abilities to gain confidence and feel comfortable and satisfied in their skin.

Third Wave feminists criticize the Second Wave for having concentrated too much on gaining spots and positions in male spaces. They argue that the Second Wave feminists wanted equality so badly in male dominated places that they forgot or rejected the joys of being feminine.³⁸ *Cosmopolitan* celebrates femininity by expressing female pride within its text. For example, in "Girlie Things you Should Never Apologize for", the author argues that women should never feel ashamed or embarrassed about behaving in a stereotypical girlie fashion, such as day-dreaming about their wedding or watching Oprah. Because men take pride in male specific interests or quirky habits, such as burping or eating contests, the article argues, that women should too, but through feminine expression.³⁹ In this article, *Cosmopolitan* is empowering women by reinforcing ideas of confidence, and at the same time is encouraging

³⁷ Korin Miller. "Go Ahead, Check Yourself Out." *Cosmopolitan*, May 1, 2011, 192. (accessed December 10, 2011), <http://www.proquest.com/>.

³⁸ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, "Feminism and Femininity; Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Thong", 59-67.

³⁹ Colleen Rush. "Girlie things you should never apologize for." *Cosmopolitan*, December 1, 2002, 233-235. (accessed December 14, 2011), <http://www.proquest.com/>.

women to find identity outside of the male realm. The message that permeates here is that women can be powerful, established people without operating under the veil of masculinity.

Cosmopolitan's subject matter is very much centered around heterosexual relationships and understanding men. While many scholars argue that this male focus is an extension of patriarchal ideas, I view the magazine's messages as a way to empower women with knowledge. An article in the October 2010 issue, "What's triggering male tantrums?" explains why men these days are quick to lose their patience and temper when arguing or disagreeing with their significant other. The author attributes these increasing outbursts to the fact that women today are more assertive and successful and that this causes uncertainty and discomfort in men. Since women are demanding more from their boyfriends or husbands today, men are not always sure how to respond to these new demands or communicate effectively with their woman. *Cosmo* offers advice on how to handle their irrational reactions, and at the same time suggests that women should not change who they are or what they demand from their men.⁴⁰ The concentration in this article may be on men, but power is being bestowed onto the female reader. By deconstructing men and breaking down their thought process, *Cosmo* is putting women at an advantage and is promoting strength in women. This article also expresses ideas of gender understanding rather than dissociation of the sexes through blame or victimization.

One of the last and most important ways *Cosmopolitan* accentuates aspects of Third Wave feminism is through its expression of "feminism taken into account": McRobbie's idea that women perform and assume freedoms, accomplished by the Second Wave, everyday without consideration.⁴¹ *Cosmopolitan* does this in every issue by promoting and concentrating on

⁴⁰ "What's Triggering Male Tantrums?" *Cosmopolitan*, October 1, 2010, 48. (accessed December 14, 2011), <http://www.proquest.com/>.

⁴¹ McRobbie, "Notes on Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime". 3-14.

women's careers and jobs. There is a clear message that promotes the idea that women can have careers and also be girlfriends, wives, students, athletes, and have hobbies. Every monthly publication includes advice and dialogue that encourages and also assumes women's presence in the workforce. The February 2003 edition includes an article titled, "How To Land Your Dream Job", which gives women tips on how to get the job they want. The author states that women should not feel discouraged or fearful to go and find a new job if they do not feel happy with their current career or place of work.⁴² Additionally, in six issues since December 2010, there has been a recurring piece called "Raise Your Game", where readers' questions are answered pertaining to work.⁴³ All of the questions are answered in a matter-of-fact way as to suggest that women's presence in the workforce is normal and expected. All of these articles encourage women to strive for the best in their careers and promotes the idea that women should be very much involved in the greater economy.

Today women also enjoy the freedom to choose an abortion, another right that Second Wave feminists fought for. The Third Wave continues to fight for this ability and to make sure that this right is not taken away from women. *Cosmopolitan* exhibits 'feminism taken into account', by discussing a woman's freedom to choose an abortion. "A New Abortion Choice," an article from January 2001, educates women on a new abortion pill that had been recently approved by the FDA in the United States. The author discusses the procedure for taking this pill, what to expect, and outlets to use for help or questions.⁴⁴ This article is acknowledging and promoting the freedom of choosing an abortion. Unlike women during the Second Wave, women

⁴² Jillian Mackenzie. "How you can land your dream job." *Cosmopolitan*, February 1, 2003, 118. (accessed November 24, 2011), <http://www.proquest.com/>.

⁴³ "Raise Your Game." *Cosmopolitan*. (accessed November 24, 2001), <http://www.proquest.com/>.

⁴⁴ Mary Jo Williams. 2001. A new abortion choice. *Cosmopolitan*, January 1, 93. (accessed December 08, 2011), <http://www.proquest.com/>.

today are introduced to many different safe options for abortion. *Cosmopolitan* accepts both the realities of this freedom and seeks also to preserve it.

Falling Short

It is important for me to also acknowledge the ways in which *Cosmopolitan* does not exhibit contemporary feminist theory. Feminists today strive to recognize and empower women from all different ethnic, racial, and sexual backgrounds. To continue the fight against female injustice, all types of women need to be accounted for and represented. Where *Cosmopolitan* falls short is that it doesn't embrace women from all different backgrounds. From 1999 until December 2011, *Cosmopolitan* featured no more than two Black or Latino models or celebrities for their monthly cover spread each year, sometimes none. Beyonce or Rihanna repeated many times, instead of the faces of new inspirational Black women.⁴⁵ It is very much still a white-dominated publication, in that it does not acknowledge the cultural experiences of non-whites. While their articles may be geared towards all young women, they still carry white overtones in terms of women's interests and experiences. This shows how *Cosmopolitan* does not exemplify aspects of Third Wave theory with consideration to race and ethnicity. To truly empower all women in every sense, *Cosmopolitan* needs to recognize and illustrate more diversity.

Cosmopolitan is also very explicitly geared towards heterosexual women. All love, sex, and relationship advice is strictly for women interested in men. This means that bi and homosexual women are excluded from relating to the magazine. Again, by ignoring the experiences of women from different sexual backgrounds, *Cosmopolitan* is restricting certain women from feeling empowered by their messages and articles. Over the past few years, there have been a couple of articles pertaining to bi or homosexual women, yet these are rare. One

⁴⁵ "Cosmo's Cover Gallery", The Hearst Corporation, (accessed December 06, 2011), <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/quizzes-games/cosmo-cover-gallery>.

article appeared in the January 2009 edition titled, “I Married a Cute Girl,” which is the story of two female TV producers who fell in love unexpectedly. *Cosmo* illustrates this story as inspirational and endorsing by opening with, “What’s the biggest difference between a straight couple and a fun, fearless female couple who decide they want to spend the rest of their lives with each other? The chicks both get engagement rings.”⁴⁶ Here *Cosmo* is including this lesbian couple in their ‘fun, fearless female’ group. Later, in 2010, an article titled, “Why More Girls are Kissing Girls” talks about female celebrities who embrace their bi-sexuality. The author suggests that bi-sexual women, who may be afraid to embrace their true identity, should look to these celebrities for inspiration.⁴⁷ *Cosmo*, in this article, encourages women to be in tune with their sexuality and to listen to themselves rather than society. While these two articles do in fact acknowledge and embrace homosexual relationships, this subject matter is not the norm in the magazine. Because *Cosmo* presents itself as a sexually liberating tool for women, it should include the sexual agendas of all women.

More Than A Magazine

Magazines are read by millions of women everyday. They are read for pleasure, for educational purposes, or for comfort. No matter what the reason though, readers absorb ideas and messages that they may not even realize are there. Just as Andi Zeisler writes, “Pop culture informs our understanding of political issues that at first glance seem to have nothing to do with pop culture; it also makes us see how something meant as pure entertainment can have everything to do with politics.”⁴⁸ Like other forms of media or popular culture, magazines

⁴⁶ Hillary Quinn. "I Married a Cute Girl". *Cosmopolitan*, January 1, 2009, 128. (accessed December 08, 2011), <http://www.proquest.com/>.

⁴⁷ "Why More Girls Are Kissing Girls." *Cosmopolitan*, July 1, 2010, 32. (accessed December 08, 2011), <http://www.proquest.com/>.

⁴⁸ Andi Zeisler, “Pop and Circumstance: Why Pop Culture Matters”, *Feminism and Pop Culture*, (Berkeley, California: Seal Press, 2008), 1-22.

influence how we view ourselves, as well as the world around us. Included in these somewhat subliminal messages are ideas of gender and sexuality.

In this paper, I have argued that *Cosmopolitan* illustrates and depicts Third Wave Feminist ideas. I looked at the history and differences between the Feminist Movements, and applied feminist theory to a fashion and beauty magazine. What I found is that magazines do not have to explicitly demand social change to spread a message. Readers may view *Cosmopolitan* as the sexualized, glossy, pop culture publication that it is, but its subtle and periodic empowering messages contribute to and sometimes embrace Third Wave feminist objectives. Thus under the pores of the soft, sensual, salacious ‘makeup’ of *Cosmopolitan*, there is a layer of substance and influence contributing to the face of Third Wave feminism and the promotion of women.

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