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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper offers a production-based study of online consumer magazines for – and largely by – millennial women, with a particular focus on sex and relationship content. Adopting a feminist discourse analytic approach and a solidary-critical position, I examine 62 interviews conducted with producers, mainly writers and editors, from 12 publications based in the UK and Spain. The analysis maps how notions of intimacy penetrate different dimensions of the magazine, along with networks of influence for the development of content about sex and relationships, marked by a perceived shift from 'experts' to 'real life'. The ways in which producers describe the particularities of woman's magazine online journalism and dis/articulate a range of critiques are also explored. The paper highlights the increasing importance of ideas about authenticity for these media, making connections to online cultures, a reinvigorated interest in feminism, and contemporary branding strategies. Ultimately, I argue that journalists at women's magazines simultaneously (re) produce, suffer and contest sexist media, deserving further feminist scholarly attention, and our solidarity as well as critique.

#### **Introduction**

Even with the multiplication of media in the digital era, the young woman's magazine continues to prevail as an important cultural site of mediated intimacy. Print circulation is declining, in line with the publishing industry generally and consumer magazines in particular. However, an online model has catapulted the reach of brands – compare for instance *Cosmopolitan UK's* combined print and digital monthly circulation of 405,308 to the more than 6.5 million unique users its website engages.<sup>1</sup> Contributing to their success, women's online magazines offer free of charge content, and significantly greater opportunities for interaction. This includes 'internal' features in the form of discussion boards and/or comment sections under the editorial, along with the possibility to engage with social media by 'liking', 'sharing', 'retweeting' or 'pinning' content.

Women's magazine media, then, is remarkably resilient, having maintained high levels of popularity across time<sup>2</sup> and space, in spite of significant economic and industry challenges – as well as ongoing critique, notably by feminists. Contrasting the rich text-based body of research, however, feminist scholars have paid little attention to the experiences and perspectives of the *producers* of women's magazines (but see Duffy, 2013a; Earnshaw, 1984; Ferguson, 1983; Gough-Yates, 2003; Keller, 2011; Milkie, 2002; Murphy, 2013). Moreover, the production of content about sex and relationships remains a conspicuously under-explored topic (Boynton, 2009).

This paper contributes understandings about the mediation of intimacy in contemporary commercial digital media through a production-oriented study of sex and relationship content in Young women's magazines online. Drawing on 62 interviews with producers, it responds to calls for feminist research that asks questions about everyday practice, the various levels of constraint and influence (McRobbie, 1996), alongside the ways these professionals 'understand, represent and relate to their product' (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 6) in addition to their – newly interactive and networked – readers. The focus is on websites based in the UK and Spain but globally accessed and owned by European or international corporations, thereby including a

transnational perspective. The paper highlights how notions about authenticity are increasingly central to the mediation of intimacy within this commercial media product uniquely created *for* and largely *by* (millennial)3 women.

### **The sexual politics of women's magazines**

Motivating much feminist scholarship on women's magazines is an understanding of these media as a key cultural site for the re/production of normative gender and sexual identities and relations (Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer, & Hebron, 1991; Ferguson, 1983; Gill, 2007). The literature is marked by a critical concern about stubborn textual continuities – not least the promotion of 'commodified desire' (McCracken, 1993) and 'consumer femininity' (Talbot, 2010) – even in the face of apparent departures from past practices. One example is how the emphasis upon sex brought about by the reinvented *Cosmopolitan* of the mid-1960s ultimately meant yet more work and consumption for women (Winship, 1987). A second example is the recent turn to 'confidence' and 'love your body' discourses, where despite calls to self-acceptance texts re/produce – indeed necessitate – the very body hate messages purportedly being challenged (Favaro, 2017a; Gill & Elias, 2014; Murphy, 2013). Certainly, the micro-scrutiny and shaming of female bodies is still very much part of women's magazines, now often operating via a 'girlfriend gaze', which is exploited as a marketing device, and acts 'as a system of mutual governance' (Winch, 2012, p. 21).

Another persistent continuity is the figuration of 'woman' as almost exclusively white, able-bodied, middle-class and heterosexual. Notwithstanding some recent discussion of LGBTQIA experiences of intimacy in some publications and in some contexts, the Mars-Venus model is still pervasive. That is, women and men are represented as complementary 'internally undifferentiated categories' (Cameron, 2007, p. 55), which are profoundly different, and therefore in need of constant sex and relationship advice. Such magazine advice is still primarily framed around a narrow array of intelligible bodies, subjectivities and practices (e.g. heteromonogamous long-term relationships as ideal), and the prioritization of dominant masculine models of sex (e.g. coitus as 'real sex') and eroticism (e.g. pornography-inspired aesthetics and scripts). This is part of a broader uneven distribution of power privileging men (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2009; Menard & Kleinplatz, 2008), which now tends to be obscured by a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007).

Against a cultural backdrop where 'great sex' has emerged as imperative, contemporary women's magazines exhort readers to become 'sexual entrepreneurs': a contradictorily postfeminist feminine subject who is always 'up for it', 'spiced up' and updating her sexual CV, within limited – markedly masculinist – parameters that are tightly policed (Harvey & Gill, 2011). Elements of her compulsory sexual labour include 'mastering the art of sexy stripping', being a 'head mistress', experimenting with sex toys and costumes, watching and emulating mainstream pornographic material, and, post-*Fifty Shades*,<sup>4</sup> adding a light touch of 'kinky chic' or 'bondage babe'. Although this is articulated via post/feminist tropes of female desire and agency, empowerment and independence, the need to find and please (to keep) a man is never far from view – even if the sexual practice causes her emotional or physical discomfort (Boynton, 2009; Favaro, 2017b; Gill, 2009; see also Tyler, 2008, for self-help literature). Yet under

the cultural context of postfeminism this must be represented/understood as self-chosen, as well as undertaken in an active and emotionally engaged manner – ultimately, again, to increase men’s enjoyment. ‘One thing men don’t like is mechanical oral sex, performed without passion’ reminds us *SoFeminine.co.uk*, in a manner I would argue is unabashedly misogynistic. The present paper makes a novel contribution to these text-based understandings about the sexual politics of these publications by examining the politics of *production* concerning the most widely consumed medium today: the woman’s magazine *online*.

### **Data and methods**

The analysis presented here is part of a larger research project looking at discursive constructions of gender, sex, sexuality and intimate relationships in young women’s lifestyle magazines, and exploring the ways in which these media relate to feminism and to convergence culture (Favaro, 2017c). The project examines online publications based in the UK and Spain but accessed worldwide, and integrates analyses of the editorial content, user discussions in the forums and producer interviews. Here I focus on 62 interviews I conducted between December 2014 and December 2015 with female producers, mainly editors and writers. These worked (or had worked) for at least one of the following: the online-only *SoFeminine.co.uk* (auFeminin-Axel Springer), *FemaleFirst.co.uk* (independent) and *TheDebrief.co.uk* (Bauer) in the UK, *EnFemenino.com* (auFeminin-Axel Springer), *Grazia.es* (Mondadori) and *Nosotras.com* (ITnet Group) in Spain; along with the well-established global brands *Cosmopolitan* (Hearst UK/ Gruner + Jahr Spain), *Elle* (Hearst UK/Spain) and *Glamour* (Condé Nast UK/Spain) in both countries. All participants were white, and, apart from some ‘top’ editors, largely coincided with the target audience in age (early 20s to mid-30s). Almost all had first degrees, many also postgraduate qualifications, and were based in the capital cities of London and Madrid. Two were email interviews, and the rest took place via Skype (29), in cafés (24), on the phone (4), at the participants’ office (2) and home (1). These 60 in-depth semi-structured interviews lasted just over one hour on average in duration, and were audio-recorded with permission. The recordings were transcribed, and coded – both inductively and deductively – using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo).

In analysing the interview material, I am informed by feminist poststructuralist accounts of gender, language and power (e.g. Weedon, 1997), along with critical discourse analytic traditions in the social sciences (e.g. Wetherell & Potter, 1992). This involves an interest in de-mystifying the ideological work effected by discourse. Here such a commitment to textual deconstruction and ideology critique is integrated with a politicized orientation to ‘giving voice’, in the context of what I call a solidary-critical position (see Favaro, 2017c). This speaks to an understanding of the interviewed journalists as women who *simultaneously* (re)produce, suffer and contest sexist media. Likewise, it is a tool to negotiate the complicated terrain of researching other women who – like my participants – identify as feminists, and whose feminism may conflict with the researcher’s own perspectives. Analytically, a solidary-critique entails prioritizing questions of politics and ethics over theoretical and methodological purity, which here means taking some elements at face value, notably accounts about working conditions; and offering multi-causal explanations that transcend binaries and

attend to complexity, contradiction and the understandings of the other, whilst remaining committed to critique as political engagement for social transformation.

### **Analysis: mediating intimacy online**

The analysis is divided into four sections. The first discusses how notions of intimacy penetrate different dimensions of the young woman's magazine. In the second I map networks of influence for the development of sex and relationship content. Next, the analysis focuses on key particularities of the online platform. The last section examines how producers dis/articulate a range of critiques of women's magazines.

### ***'An intimate relationship': magazines, readers, producers***

A good magazine is like a girlfriend. She understands you, she knows you, she makes you laugh, she encourages you. It's an intimate relationship. (Editor-in-chief, UK)<sup>5</sup>

Notions of intimacy lie at the very core of women's magazines. Most clearly, as in the above interview extract, publications present themselves as a 'best friend' to the reader. At the linguistic level, this effect is for example achieved through the direct address 'you' (simulating a two-way friendly interaction), an inclusive pronoun 'we' (establishing common ground), and through an informal style mirroring the supposed speech of the target audience (creating a sense of closeness) (see 'synthetic sisterhood', Talbot, 2010). Intimacy is equally central at the content level. In the words of magazine professionals, these publications provide copy dedicated to the topics 'every woman' is interested in, namely fashion and beauty, together with 'features that speak to you and your concerns and your relationships'.

The idea of an intimate magazine-reader relationship was repeatedly mobilized when I asked producers about their initial interest in working within the industry. Especially in the UK,<sup>6</sup> most responded with almost identical statements like: 'I have always been interested in it because I grew up reading those magazines'. This early readership experience was often described as 'a passion', even 'an obsession', where they would 'devour' magazines and 'literally gorge over them for hours'. When inquired about the appeal of this media as readers,<sup>7</sup> many research participants mentioned aspirational pleasures. Publications were for example claimed to offer a 'visual feast', or 'an exciting world that you wanted to be a part of'. Additionally highlighted was an informative/didactic value, particularly with respect to sex and relationships. For example:

When you're sort of 15, 16, you're thinking, 'oh God I'm becoming a woman'. They're like your bible, and you learn things about sex and like ... Who are we going to ask about actual sex? It's not going to be your mom and dad, is it? (Intern, mid-20s, UK)

I literally got all my information about relationships from these magazines. (Freelance writer, mid-30s, UK)

Most repeatedly portrayed as central to the appeal of this media were 'identification' and a 'sense of belonging'. The interviewed journalists described the(ir) experience of reading as equivalent to 'talking to your best friend', and the magazine as something that you can 'rely on' and 'trust', which is 'honest', 'reassuring', 'supportive' and

'relatable'. They similarly highlighted notions of 'camaraderie' and 'a fun community-esque thing'. Women's magazines were declared to render a valuable sense of 'being part of a gang' and 'part of a community', 'clique', 'tribe' or 'group'.

This deep emotional attachment and long-term connection to magazines was advanced as fundamental to enter the industry and succeed in the profession: 'I don't think you could ever write for a publication that you haven't read or loved'. Further to high levels of passion towards and familiarization with the genre, this was related to *reader identification*, with many noting: 'I am a reader of the website as well'. Also depicted as crucial in this sense was a *generational equivalence* between writers and readers. This way, producers argued, magazines can give 'women millennials' 'what we need and what we want'. This mirrors the growing discourse in the industry, notably by the newer brands like TheDebrief.co.uk, which targets 'female millennials' and boasts to be 'written for these girls by these girls (no one older than 26 in the team!)'. Mobilisations of a producer-consumer 'shared identity' discourse (McRobbie, 1996) pervade my data:

In terms of relating to the audience, we are them basically. I am the target audience. (Staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

The team is made up of people that are in the bracket, and so we know what we want to read and, therefore, we create it. (Intern, mid-20s, UK)

A sense of intimate community was also often attributed to the offices of women's magazines, portrayed as 'a group of girls' 'chatting away' and 'a bunch of women being really supportive'. 'And that warmth hopefully comes across in the pages' noted a senior editor, suggesting the marketing drive behind such a representation.

However, complicating the notion of a close group of girls, the companies under discussion are structurally *profoundly hierarchical and exclusionary* – as evinced by the more critical accounts in the interviews.<sup>8</sup> For example, a Spanish former managing editor asserted that she experienced difficulties to make changes because: 'At the end of the day, these magazines operate according to the editor-in-chief, who calls the shots and give the orders'. Others problematized how 'there is no door open' for most women in a sector where internships are essential but 'nearly always unpaid', and where 'people still hire in their own likeness'. And this limits the voices, experiences and intimacies that publications feature, as discussed in an interview with a freelancer, after I asked her what she would like to see change in the industry:

Participant: People are very, 'I'm very white, middle class, generally straight that I write about'. You get quite a conventional view of the world, and you get quite a pale stale same old people that are in the media. There's not such a plurality of voices. You don't necessarily hear about the personal experiences of a forty-two-year-old Muslim woman in Birmingham. You don't hear about her sex life. You don't hear about how dating is with her, what's out there for her.

Laura: Why do you think not?

Participant: I think to a certain extent people still hire people in their own likeness, and get writers who they relate to and whose lives they relate to. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

Despite these structural – and textual – practices of exclusion and exclusivity,

producers repeatedly declared that women's magazines offer an increasingly faithful reflection of 'the(ir) real world', as I explore in the following section, which looks at the process of selecting intimacies.

### ***Selecting magazine intimacies: from experts to real life***

When it comes to sourcing ideas for pieces, magazine producers depicted as absolutely crucial looking at the competitors, to then find 'a different angle' or 'put your own slant on it', a practice which plays a role in maintaining the repetitive and limited nature of the content. Another recurrent response to my question about sourcing ideas for sex and relationship content was: 'It's just looking at the world' or 'I think, "What are people doing in the real world?"' For women's magazine producers, one important part 'the real world' is 'key dates'. "'St Valentines. Things to do on St Valentines" or "postures for St Valentines he is going to love in bed"', swiftly improvised a Spanish writer to illustrate the point, vividly indicating the formulaic character of the genre. Additionally mentioned were celebrity news (e.g. break ups) and popular media successes. With regard to the latter, repeatedly mentioned were the ('feminist') HBO television series *Girls*, and, especially, the ('liberal') series of erotic romance novels *Fifty Shades of Grey* (and movie adaptation) (for feminist critiques see McRobbie [2015]; and Tankard Reist [2015], respectively).

Monitoring online media was also highlighted as fundamental for the development of pieces about sex and relationships. This includes news sites, magazines and blogs, particularly those produced in the US, considered both in the UK and Spain as a 'step ahead' and a central birthplace of 'trends or conversations':

US things like *Atlantic*, *Slate*, *The Cut*, bloggers over there, just because I often feel like their dating scene is one step ahead, like an app will launch there, then it will come here. It feels like a lot of sexual, relationship trends or conversations start in New York. (Features writer, mid-20s, UK).

The interviewed journalists likewise mentioned looking at 'what people talk about on social media', alongside other interactive online spaces. One staff writer gave the following example: 'People ask questions on *Yahoo* like "What should I do if my boyfriend did this"'. Others spoke about 'trawling' their own forums 'either to find ideas or to find case studies for ideas that we'd already come up with'. Journalists explained that this is particularly useful for online viral pieces (see next section), while with SEO (search engine optimization) content writing the focus is upon keywords typed into search engines (notably *Google*).

Academic research was conspicuous by its absence in the discussions about sources of information, influence or inspiration, and only a handful of participants spoke about sometimes interviewing psychologists and sexologists (lack of resources and time partly explains this, see below). Exemplifying the wider 'commodification of advice giving' (Boynton, 2009), more journalists mentioned newer types of 'sexpert/ise' such as 'coaches' or 'gurus' and studies by interested companies – ranging from commodity brands like Durex to dating services like eHarmony – looking for opportunities to self-publicize, often via a public relations agency:

It's very important to source information from professionals, all the gurus in sex and relationships. I'm

always really grateful when they get in touch or their PR gets in touch. (Staff writer, late-20s, UK)

Nevertheless, the idea of the expert was generally repudiated, and deemed an outdated approach to the production of sex and relationship magazine content, especially in the British context. For example:

I'm not a huge believer in these experts or relationship experts [...] of like, 'listen to these 10 tips of how to change your body language around your partner or around a guy you fancy, and then he's going to want to go out with you'. Having said that, that's quite old school anyway. (Digital writer, mid-20s, UK)

In endorsing this repudiation a British staff writer pointed to consumer demand: 'It's not all about expert views and always advice, people want to relate to it and hear other people's opinions'. Another similarly said that she herself wanted to see magazines 'playing less into the hands of experts, saying, "you need to be like this"'. Instead, for this writer: 'Real life is the way forward'. That is, in the interviews a clear dichotomy was established between drawing on expert knowledge and personal experience, respectively associated with the 'terribly boring', 'serious stuff' and 'smart, funny writing', but, most importantly, with being prescriptive and 'being real'. While some pointed to a 'good mix' as ideal, on the whole there was an extraordinary investment on a notion of 'real':

Everything that I write would be from my experience or my friends' experiences, so that way, in a way, I know it's reality. I know it's happening and it's real. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

Certainly, both in the UK and Spain this was the most recurrent response to the interview question about sourcing ideas for sex and relationship features: 'Me and my friends'. Suffusing my data are almost identical responses like:

It really really is to do with just hearing what your friends are talking about and what you're going through as well. It's very personal. (Staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

Going out to lunch with friends or going out for a drink and then one of them drops something into conversation about something that's going on with her boyfriend or something that's happened. They'd be like, 'why don't bla bla bla', and you think, 'actually, that was such a good angle for a story'. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

Most women's magazine journalists applauded first-person/personal content, both as media *consumers*: 'It feels a lot more intimate and I feel like I trust it and connect with it a lot more' and 'that's a big draw for me knowing that it's a real thing'; as well as media *producers*: 'That's my favorite stuff to write about, something that's personal to me and that's kind of anecdotal and very much about my life and my experiences'. In turn, listening/talking to friends was described as a major *and* appreciated source of 'new angles', 'trends' and 'stories'. 'There's only so many awkward dates I've been on', one freelancer exemplified. New ideas are likewise treasured since 'there's a cyclical nature to women's magazines'. In this sense, according to a staff writer: 'Essentially a lot of magazine sex features are "here are ten sex tips", and it's just how you package that'.

The 'listening to friends' approach was also endorsed as a form of audience research, with many highlighting that: 'A lot of my friends are readers of the publications that I

write for'. It was furthermore depicted as a particularly convenient one since 'we talk about it constantly'. Relatedly, several journalists spoke about 'conversations in the office', notably content meetings. Here I was again struck by the similarity in the descriptions, two representative examples being:

In our sex and relationship content meetings, almost all the pitches start with 'my mate was saying the other day that she ...' or 'I got told about a girl who ...' (Staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

So, someone says, 'oh, my friend mentioned this the other day'. And if everybody goes, 'oh, that happen to me, to me, to me', we know that's going to be a good feature because we've all experienced it and it's really touched a chord. But in order to know that you have got to share. (Features editor, late-30s, UK)

Therefore, sharing intimacies is fundamental to the job: 'We have to talk about our own personal lives a lot in order to come up with feature ideas'. This concerns in particular the youngest members of staff, for whom intimate experiences and friendship networks emerge as currency, and every emotion, relation and occasion must be 'put to work' (eliding work-play divisions and constituting the permanent role of trend tracker, peer-to-peer marketing researcher and brand ambassador). This approach was endorsed as 'the best way to deliver some authentic content' and 'keep it fresh'. Then, as explained by a senior editor: 'The higher you get, you're more editing and overseeing. It's more managerial'. A junior writer summarized the content production process as follows:

The actual ideas come from the frontlines [...] on a bottom level, the features writers and the freelancers. These then go to the editor. She'll be like, 'that's not our voice. That doesn't quite work for us'. She just knows. (Writer, mid-20s, UK)

This deeply embedded idea of an editor's 'instinct' effectively works to mystify the role they actively exert as 'cultural gatekeepers' (Milkie, 2002), as well as boundary markers for 'the bottom level'.

Again problematizing the notion of content springing from a sisterhood in full expression is the fact that 'you're limited about what you can discuss by the other print publications under the publishing house'. Research participants also mentioned the commercial partners and political agendas of publishing houses, and the ways in which:

Those high positions are still occupied by men. Even though [publisher]'s readership is predominantly ... I'd say 99% female, it's headed up almost exclusively by male CEOs and not particularly nice male CEOs. It's not a welcoming environment for you to feel like you can push the boundaries. (Features editor, mid-20s, UK)

Further contributing to the widespread sense of 'not wanting to rock the boat too much' in women's magazines are the ways that 'you feel like your job could be lost at any given moment', which is particularly fear-inducing because 'it's incredibly difficult to find work as a female journalist elsewhere'. Moreover: 'We're underpaid, overworked, under an inordinate amount of pressure'. Many producers additionally pointed to 'stretched' and 'shrinking teams', particularly now 'we've had the recession and it's just a bit crap for everyone' (especially in Spain). For a number of participants all this constitutes what critics of women's magazines often disregard, namely what a



young editor called 'the culture of fear'. It is within such a precarious and competitive work environment that many refrain from 'questioning' editors or 'pushing your own writing' (beyond established formulae), and often produce 'stuff I don't want to write', especially 'when you're a skint journalist'<sup>9</sup>:

If someone's saying to you, 'say something you don't really believe in. It's fine. Be light-hearted about it. Here's a load of money', it's very hard in the climate of journalism we're in not to be like, 'maybe I can'. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

Weaving a deeply contradictory discursive terrain, despite the many forces which 'limit your journalistic integrity' there was a powerful overarching investment in the idea that 'we're all just women talking about real life issues' – particularly by the (younger) writers. Senior professionals would more readily concede that 'absolutely crucial in terms of how a magazine is established' is 'the relationship with the advertisers'. A content director explained this difference in participant response on the basis that 'the more senior you get, the closer you become to the advertising demands'. Interestingly, she also mentioned that 'even producers want to believe that they [advertisers] are not really that influential'.

When I asked about the role of advertisers in the development of sex-related pieces, writers and editors claimed that this content is 'much more free' because 'there is barely any advertising' or 'it's not as advertiser-based' (as fashion and beauty). After I prompted further, most proceeded to say that 'it's more about positioning'. That is, brands 'do not want to be associated with it' or 'just want to be far away from it'. When requested illustrations, participants spoke about the impossibility of having advertisers like Yves Saint Laurent and Chanel 'running next to' or even 'in the same issue' as 'an article about threesomes', 'a feature about kink fetish play' or 'an anal dildo sex toy': 'It will upset them and annoy them and they will go running'. Such advertiser adversity to content about sex was especially stressed in Spain, a censorship indeed evident in the more conservative approach to the subject. Many handled this dilemmatic situation by celebrating that 'there is more freedom online to talk about sex than in print'. And it is to this – the selling of intimacies online – that I now turn.

### ***Selling intimacies online: authenticity, shares and discerning users***

According to the producers of women's websites, online content is 'more newsy', 'more digestible' and 'snappier' than print, and characterized by 'humour', 'bluntness' and 'sassiness'. Some attributed this print–online contrast to consumption patterns distinctive to the medium, in the sense that 'people want an easy, quick, fun read online', along with 'no-nonsense stuff'. Others emphasized that 'online is catered for a slightly younger audience'. Crucially, this audience wants media that is 'realistic', 'relevant' and 'accessible' – and this is what online media offers:

Print media was giving you this kind of unrealistic blueprint for living, online media is designed really to make you feel like it's your friend down at the pub talking to you. You're talking about the topics that are relevant to you in a language that's really relevant. It's much more accessible. (Features editor, mid-20s, UK)

In addition to millennials, the web was celebrated as responding particularly well to women.<sup>10</sup> Vividly underscoring the producer-as-consumer identity of most

participants, a British staff writer described what young women today want as follows: 'We want entertaining stuff, we want real life, we want honest things'. Contrasts were again made with (traditional) print media:

Traditional print media doesn't necessarily tackle those issues that actually women really care about, [or] talk about sex, for instance, in a way that's particularly conducive to the way that women actually speak about sex in their friendships. (Freelance writer, late-20s, UK)

Particularly the younger journalists emphasized that, as a writer put it in an email: 'When girls are reading online, they want to hear the no-bullsh\*\* stuff'. Examples from magazines might include *TheDebrief.co.uk*'s '7 Pieces Of Non-Bullshit Relationship Advice From Couples That Have Been There, Done That' and 'Calling Bullshit On Things You Shouldn't Say To A New Lover'. Reflecting the sensibility articulated in the interviews, the latter contests well-established sexpert Tracey Cox (who has written for *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines, among others) with the refreshingly unusual claim that 'you don't need rules to figure out how to go about dating someone'.

In general terms, magazine journalists applauded the production process of online content on the basis that: 'It's very real and it's just being yourself'; noting the adoption of styles from personal blogs and *BuzzFeed*. Indeed, the property of 'realness' was often ascribed specifically to viral content. This was described as especially important for 'our generation' 'because we have so much to say', and contrasted to the 'SEO-led pieces, the expert-led pieces', which 'are there to guide you and give you advice'. It was explained that:

When we write viral content pieces, which are for example like 'the twenty-five things women want', obviously I'm not going to go to an expert for that because the point of that piece is to be honest and real. (Staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

As well as 'honest and real', viral content was described as 'light-hearted', 'entertaining', a 'quick and easy read' that is usually structured as 'listicles' (portmanteau of 'list' and 'article'), has the 'friend effect', and (thus) a 'must-share' factor. Locating intimacy at the heart of the online media business, journalists explained that what websites want is: 'For our audience to see pieces that they can relate to and in the most personal way possible [...] because that's what they go to their friends for'. Vitality, this content-reader connection is expected to motivate users to *share* the content, ideally via social media, which 'it's a massive contributor to our traffic'. At the level of journalistic practice this means that: 'All the time, it's finding that magic combination of an engaging article that's got that sharable component to it so you read something and you're like, "oh my God, I want to tell my friends about this"'. In this sense, online 'the more genuine the article' 'the better it does, automatically'.

Therefore, 'being real' content is the profitably shareable content, as required by a business model based on virality. The 'turn to authenticity' in women's magazines is likewise a commercial response to the emphasis upon intimacy and authenticity in Web 2.0 cultures, and the mounting consumer demand for 'something that feels a bit more genuine, a bit more real, a bit less rushed and mass produced' in contemporary

capitalist societies more generally (Gearin 2010, in Zhao, 2013, p. 143). Reflecting this is *TheDebrief.co.uk*'s description of their target audience: 'Seeking authenticity – demands honesty & transparency from brands'. Bauer's first digital-only UK brand equally tells potential clients that: 'How we sell to this girl is important – advertising messages must be authentic, entertaining and relevant'. Certainly, advertisers too are striving to adapt to this new environment. An increasingly popular strategy is native advertising, pioneered by *BuzzFeed* and described by a features editor as a 'much more subtle' approach where 'customers pay the publication to hide the advertising'.

Much like 'hidden' advertising, 'genuine' editorial was depicted as necessary 'if you don't want to alienate your younger audience', who are 'discerning', 'internet literate', 'very sophisticated consumers of digital media', and 'see the internet as their space'. This means that if content 'doesn't feel legitimate to them any more and they just won't visit you'. Moreover, dissatisfied users are potential content-producing competitors – as well as possible PR disasters for brands. According to a digital health editor: 'Social media has brought this sense of honesty and that "actually this content isn't working for me so I'm gonna create my own or I'm going to yell at you about yours"'. Another British editor similarly emphasized that: 'The moment you start putting stuff that doesn't feel genuine online you'll be called out on Twitter, and there'll be some sort of PR disaster for you and probably the advertiser as well'.

In response to this digital culture, the online approach to sex and relationships is 'a lot more tongue-in-cheek, a lot more cheeky', 'bolder' and 'braver' than in print. This is entangled with claims to authenticity: 'Sex tips from the subtle to the X rated. No topic too taboo [...] Keeping it real' and 'Relationship advice told straight up' promotes *SoFeminine.co.uk*. Magazine producers also noted that the web will more readily include sex and relationship topics considered 'a bit more risky or a bit more out there', under the understanding that it entails little cost, and that: 'It can be gotten rid of a lot easier if it does end up offending people' – namely 'your audience and your advertisers'. But also highlighted were the benefits derived from generating controversy and publishing 'salacious' content, certainly headlines: 'We play with polemic titles seeking the click' explained a Spanish fashion and lifestyle editor. Ultimately, as one British freelance sex writer declared: 'Controversy is king in the era of online content, which is driven by advertising'.

### ***'A love-hate relationship': dis/articulating critique***

Some of the practices of online magazine journalism discussed in the previous section were subjected to critique in the interviews. A number of research participants for instance mentioned feeling limited by the 'listicle' format, and by the 'trending topic' imperative for a feature to be commissioned. Also, the industry's aggressive incorporation of virality logics comes to erase the very qualities that made viral content appealing for the younger journalists in the first place. It was argued that: 'Once you chase traffic, your content isn't as genuine'. More generally, many magazine producers contended that the constant click-chase leads to content of poorer quality. One *Elle UK* professional said: 'You end up with more clichéd, more banal writing on the website'. Producers pointed to the fast pace of the work for the web for this same reason, emphasizing that 'online it's like bang it out, get it up', and, as such: 'You don't

have much time to think about stuff'. For some, these work practices cause significant anxiety and frustration. One notable example is a former Spanish web editor, who said she left the industry after finding the following too frustrating to continue:

There is no time to contrast sources, to conduct interviews, to talk to experts, to do research and consult studies [...] There is no rigor and the quality of the content is awful. It's simply more of the same. To fill up space, to upload the article for Google to give you points for publishing everyday, to generate more visits ... (Former web editor, mid-30s, Spain)

In her view, sex and relationships are 'very important' for people's 'psychological and physical health', and subsequently she felt a great sense of responsibility. However, other professionals would counter this critique by stressing that magazines are entertainment. 'Obviously I'm not qualified, we're doing things for *entertainment purposes*', remarked a British agony aunt.

Further to the entertainment defence, the pervasive discourses of 'personal opinion', 'honesty' and 'what we (millennial women) want' can also operate to block critique and exonerate magazines from the accountability that accompanies the dissemination of messages by (s)experts like psychologists. For instance, one 2015 article by *SoFeminine.co.uk*, which self-describes as 'the UK's leading lifestyle site for your daily dose of inspiration', and also boasts that it is 'written by millennials for millennials', preempts critique with the disclaimer 'Honesty is the best policy' before telling women that the way to become 'relationship material' is to practice fellatio passionately and skilfully. It moreover states that: 'The deeper you can go the longer your relationship will last', as men have 'mildly sadistic fantasies when receiving a blowjob' and like "throating" or basically (ab)using your mouth'. Potential critique was similarly rebutted in the interviews, often in combination with discourses of demand: 'There's nothing wrong with being honest. That's what people like, honesty'. Equally, pieces such as the 2014 article '17 Unexpected Signs You're A Psychob\*tch Girlfriend' can evade challenge on the basis that: 'It's just being honest, and that's why when women read it, they can completely relate to it'. Some magazine producers granted that viral content specifically 'might be a little bit controversial' and 'interpreted negatively' by 'some people', arguing this is 'because it's personal'. And for many: 'You could do no better than when you're just being yourself, and when you're just giving it your personal experience'.

Not all honesties and personal experiences have the same value for magazines, however. For instance, a freelance writer complained: 'I do give honest opinions but then when it's not what they [magazines] want to hear, they just disregard it and try and twist it'. On occasions she has felt pressured to promote 'the idea that having an open relationship is a way to spice up your sex life and your relationship'. She finds this problematic because: 'There's a lot of responsibility there and I feel that magazines they just don't think about that, they just want something that sounds exciting regardless of what the consequences for people might be'. Another writer expounded how an editor changed her personal experience piece about 'meeting up with an ex' to sound 'more insecure', 'more self-doubting' and 'concerned about my appearance' in order to make her 'more personable' and 'more relatable' (and obviously more advertising-friendly):

The editor put in that I was really worried about my outfit and that I put on this pair of skinny jeans so that I looked really sexy for him, because I knew he liked a rocker chick, and I was really hoping he'd like them. I hadn't written that at all. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

Again problematizing the creation process of 'relatable' content, an editor stated that online magazines in particular: 'They just toy the copy to make you sound like a hysterical woman because apparently that's more relatable for the readers, because they get more clicks'. As a result 'I've done this as an editor and a writer as well', she also noted. Much online sex content was similarly criticized for using 'shock value stuff' as 'clickbait':

Shock value stuff annoys me, because it means that a website is chasing traffic. [...] If I see another listicle about anal or 'things you only know if you love giving blowjobs' or 'things that go through every woman's mind while having sex' I'll punch something! (Staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

A recurrent response to criticisms of the 'clickbaiting the magazine' model was: 'We are not a charity'. As a Spanish digital writer and community manager also put it: 'At the end of the day, you are only asked for results, page visits. It's not an NGO, right?' This usual comeback to critiques of women's magazines is typically associated with discourses of consumer demand. I was repeatedly told that since magazines are 'commercial products designed to make money', change can only occur if the reader 'not only demands it, but demands it with their buck'. One features editor concluded: 'It's a capitalist system. That's unfortunately the way it is'.

Drawing on another 'blame the consumer' strategy, in our discussion about the possible incorporation of more diverse representations a British senior editor stated that 'the main barriers we have is that we have to cater for our readership'. She explained as follows: 'We try and include all cultures or races or genders or sexualities within our magazine in some way, but, we do have to ultimately think, "These are the people who are buying the magazine"'. This discourse of 'audience representation', then, allows magazines to navigate the ideological dilemma around proclaiming to represent 'reality' and maintaining the lens of socially privileged groups. Similarly seeking to disarticulate critiques of sex and relationship content, some magazine producers argued that audiences who ('might') feel 'alienated' limit how 'honest' and 'accurate' the 'portrayal of all different types of relationships, and all different types of sex' can be. Many Spanish journalists likewise contended that the greater emphasis on the 'romantic love stuff' rather than sex remains because 'there are readers from a very Catholic sector', and more generally because 'in Spain we are still more prudish' than in the UK, described as more 'advanced' and 'liberal' concerning sex.

Nonetheless, and particularly in the UK, the interviewed journalists declared that 'there's a real change in the air'. According to a freelancer: 'There is still kind of this whole sort of "10 blow job tips male fantasy", but they are writing more progressive things'. Another told me that 'man-pleasy stuff' has generally been 'turned into "how to have the best sex of your life"', which is so much more positive and feminist and it acknowledges that women have sex for sex's sake'. Indeed, many celebrated that 'magazines are listening', and in so doing have become 'so much pro-women'. For example:

They're talking about sex in a female-oriented way. They've listened to the way people want to hear about it, the problems they have. And not just glorifying it all or pleasing-your-man kind of stuff, and that's really exciting to see. (Ex-relationships columnist and current freelance writer, early-30s, UK)

Although, as with most issues, differences between publications were understandably drawn, there was a general sense of optimism based on the notion that: 'There's a real movement towards a better, more real discussion about sex and relationships'. This shift was located within 'a new wave of women's journalism that's happening now' connected to (interactive, youthful) digital media cultures and to the 'growing new wave of feminism', which producers celebrated as 'one of the biggest focus of recent times' in (primarily British) women's magazines, noting that: 'We're all in the same boat – we're all feminists' (see Favaro, 2017c). I was told that contemporary publications are accordingly 'always trying to enforce positive messages', and 'we're trying to be more relatable, more real'.

Most significantly in the British context, 'talking about sex in a more realistic way' includes featuring a diversity of sexualities and gender identities. 'We've been doing a lot of stuff on LGBTQIA recently', revealed a *Cosmopolitan UK* professional. Two November 2015 headlines include 'This is what it's really like to be gay and disabled' and '10 Heartbreaking confessions about dating as a transgender person' (note, again, the first person approach). Magazine producers also claimed to be 'making a lot of strides' as 'things that were once taboo are not taboo', such as (*Fifty Shades*-triggered) bondage, anal sex or 'ass motorboating' ('inspired by the episode of *Girls* with Marnie'). Less celebratory accounts connected this 'more risky' or 'more liberal' content to the magazine business model of: 'What's new, what haven't we tried yet, what can make us cool, what can make us better in bed than our next-door neighbors [...] you can be like celebrities, etc.'

Certainly, many women's magazine producers articulated critiques of the sex and relationship content in contemporary publications. For example, one staff writer said: 'I don't like the occasional implication that we should all be having orgasms constantly, having great sex and shagging everyone'. A number denounced how: 'Most women's magazines are still very heteronormative'. One news editor alluded to daily 'battles' in this sense:

Obviously with Twitter and certain feminists coming through on Twitter, and the feminist movement kind of coming up through online activity and online activism, it means that intersectionality is so much more important to people. But I'm still finding that a battle, daily. I look at the website and I think, 'why does it say, like, "how to get a boyfriend?" That's exclusive'. (News editor, late-20s, UK)

Critical voices also maintained that although 'it's subtly done': 'There's still a lot of impetus on women to worry about what men think of them and to try and get them into a relationship and to try and please them once they're in a relationship'. 'I don't think we can talk the talk about feminism and then be still doing things like that', expressed a British writer. Yet several research participants considered the recent embrace of feminism by women's magazines as 'lip service' and 'commercial bandwagon-hopping', emphasizing that: 'Every decision has got something commercially minded behind it'. In this same spirit, textual progressive or 'pro-woman' transformations were explained in terms of publications 'checking themselves in fear

of being scrutinized or told off', in response to 'a lot of backlash the women's magazines have received', and because 'prominent feminist female social media users' can start a Twitter 'war' or 'trial', which is bad for business (see Favaro, 2017c, on The *Vagenda* case).

Still, even critical accounts were often accompanied by optimistic elements, not least because 'it's a very very interesting time, and exciting'. 'There are still things that are a bit outdated in it, but I do think it's moving in the right direction and that makes me really happy', a British freelancer conveyed. Another maintained that: 'The sexual revolution is tiny steps, little things, and they'll catch on the big magazine brands'. In this regard, both in the UK and Spain, many noted: 'I do feel like I can make a bit of a difference'. This was driven by a common belief that 'the only way you can really change these issues is from the inside', though in the context of an understanding that, as a former *Cosmopolitan UK* editor-in-chief put it: 'However much you love it, a magazine is a money-making machine'. Ultimately, for the producers of women's magazines holding critical views about the industry comes to constitute a 'love-hate relationship' (interestingly echoing the experience of many feminist scholars; McRobbie, 1999). One professional explained her decision to remain in the sector as follows:

I have quite strong views about this [women's magazines], but I still want to be part of it. It's like being part of a group of girlfriends. You wanna be in the group but you still might bitch about one of the girls. It's a love-hate thing. It's just a relationship. (Freelance writer, early-30s, UK)

### **Concluding notes**

The talk of women's magazine producers constitutes a heterogeneous discursive landscape, in which passionate attachments to the traditions of the genre and its femininities complexly co-exist with critical self-reflexivity, ambivalence, and ideological dilemmas. Cutting across accounts are celebratory notions of increasing authenticity and positive progress, portrayed as present work-in-progress in the UK and budding/impending model in Spain. This is associated with the impact of young people's critical awareness of commercialism, the digital ecosystem ('call out' culture, blog-style personal narratives, etc.), and the reinvigorated interest in (some) feminist ideas – one notably visible in the media and among young women, and especially concerned with questions of women's (mis/under-)representation (and injury). Femininity industries (and beyond) have responded with branding strategies revolving around intensified affect-laden notions about relationship building, intimacy and authenticity, thereby profitably incorporating selective elements from an increasingly accepted popular feminism, while also assimilating and capitalizing on audience scepticism toward mediated and consumer cultures, marked by an 'appeal of the real' (Duffy, 2013b, p. 150).

Indeed, against the backdrop of globalization, digitalization and 'savvy' interactive consumers, brands are told by marketing experts to 'Embrace the Age of Authenticity or risk being left behind' (Cohn & Wolfe, 2014), and that 'the search for the genuine is particularly emblematic of the millennial generation' (Solomon, 2015), as well as central to the new 'laws of cool' (Livingston, 2010, in Buckingham, 2014). Businesses are likewise told that: 'if Fourth Wave Feminism has taught marketers anything, it is

that truth, honesty and authenticity are crucial to establishing meaningful engagements with [female] consumers' (Kemp, 2015) – together with the millennial woman employee (Kelan, 2012). This is the very generation that is attempting to effect change in women's magazines, often inspired by feminist ideas and driven by a wish to consume and produce less narrow, alienating and injurious representations – and whose disaffection is incorporated into capitalism itself (see McGuigan, 2009, on 'cool capitalism'). The talk of the writers and editors of women's magazines reflects the ambivalence of contemporary brand cultures, where, as Banet-Weiser (2013, p. 5, 12) notes, 'both economic imperatives and 'authenticity' are expressed and experienced simultaneously', and which often hold at the same time 'possibility for individual resistance and corporate hegemony'. These women work in complex ways variously with and against the sexist capitalist apparatus that is the mass media. I hope to have shown how they deserve our solidarity as well as critique.

### Notes

1. Cosmopolitan 2016 Media pack. Hearst Magazines UK. From: [http://hearstcouk.wp.cdnds.net/tmp/wpro1455721699558662/2016/02/15123209/CosmoMediaPack\\_2016.pdf](http://hearstcouk.wp.cdnds.net/tmp/wpro1455721699558662/2016/02/15123209/CosmoMediaPack_2016.pdf) (accessed 7 April 2016).
2. The first major British periodical addressed exclusively to women and claiming female authorship, *The Ladies' Mercury*, dates back to 1693. It took the form of a reader's problem page.
3. 'Millennial' is a term used to refer to people with birth dates ranging from the early 1980s to the early 2000s.
4. I am referring to the successful novels by E. L. James.
5. Interview extracts are accompanied by the personal information each research participant agreed to disclose. Translations from Spanish are mine.
6. Especially in Spain, participants also mentioned the 'lack of opportunities' in other large media sectors.
7. I am not advancing this as an audience study in any simple way. The emphasis is rather on how producers construct their readership experience. For an important study of women's magazine reading, see Hermes (1995).
8. There is likely to be a degree of self-selection bias in my sample towards individuals with more critical views about women's magazines (see Favaro, 2017c).
9. The present study corroborates previous research on work in the contemporary cultural and new media industries as characterized by long hours, modest earnings, insecurity and precariousness (e.g. Gill, 2010). My findings suggest that this situation is particularly pronounced concerning women's magazines – and female professionals. First, there seem to be differences in salaries with respect to other similar sectors. According to a British features editor: 'Compared to all other areas in the media, including men's glossy magazines like GQ, the pay gap is extraordinary'. Second, many claimed that women's magazines are 'where the jobs are' for female journalists. They furthermore asserted that 'once you're in the female magazine machine, it's actually quite difficult to leave' because other types of publications like newspapers do not regard them as 'proper journalists'.
10. The link between the internet and femininity is a long-standing one, which is closely tied to commerce and audience commodification (see Consalvo, 2002).



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