

Abstract: *Unnamed men and available women: Connecting the popular, the personal and the political in racialised hyperheterosexual representations of women in South African magazines*

The aim of this presentation is to reflect on the linkages between the popular, the personal and the political. I do this through interrogating the ways that compulsory heteropatriarchy establishes women's representation as hyperheterosexual for an unnamed and unmarked, but clearly, masculine audience in a select group of mainstream magazines. Using a feminist methodology foregrounding the intersectionalities between gender, race and sexuality, I argue that hyperheterofeminine performances are racialised with few exceptions – white femininities are presented as normative, and black femininities as 'other' and exotic. If heteronormativity and white normalcy determines women's representation in the media – a space which relies on repetition in order to establish normativity in the popular imagination – then the struggle for women's bodily integrity, freedom and equality, needs to be more aggressively pursued in the current South African climate.

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Introduction

This paper is premised on the notion that the media shapes our identities, and operates as both a *site* and *instrument* of transformation. While not all media operate from heteropatriarchal¹ racist foundations, much of the mainstream media appears to reproduce and reinforce imaginary binaries of gender (woman/man), race (black/white) and sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual), amongst others, at a time when transformation is a priority in our country. Even though my discussion could be extended to other media such as television, I chose magazines as a site of exploration because they provide substantial insights into the dynamics of a patriarchal heteronormative society that remains divided by constructs of gender, race, socio-economic status, sexuality and other socially-significant markers.

My analysis is framed within a feminist methodology, which understands the intersectionalities of subjectivities such as gender, race and sexuality, to be central in reading both written and visual texts. The magazines I explored over a period of three years (2003 to 2005) are *Men's Health*, *FHM (For Him Magazine)*, *Blink*, *Fair Lady*, *Femina* and *True Love*, all which except for *Blink*, are owned by Media24 and claim the largest readerships in South Africa.²

Hyperheterosexuality

Women across racial constructs in men's magazines such as *FHM*, *Men's Health* and *Blink*, are often presented as hypersexual. The term 'hypersexualisation' has been used in black feminist literature specifically to describe the ways in which

¹ Heteropatriarchy suggests an institutionalised system of male domination over women within a heteronormative society. This system legitimises the subjugation of women and has been naturalised within most cultural, economic, social and religious spaces including the media.

² In October 2007, Touchline Media, a consortium within Media24, was accused of manipulating magazine circulation figures. The magazines affected include *Men's Health*, *True Love* and *Fair Lady*. It is important to note that I consider readership figures, and not circulation figures, in my analysis of the magazines in Chapter Four.

black physical bodies have been sexualised and exoticised through colonial obsession with racial difference. But if the prefix 'hyper' is understood as a manic expression of sexuality, then in the magazines I explore, it is both black and white women who are hypersexualised. However, it is the racialised dimensions of representations of black women's hypersexuality (read as the exoticised 'other') that locates black female sexuality as excessive and abundant, beyond the hypersexual representations of white female sexuality.

Within this context, the term 'hypersexual' as a description of representations of both black and white female sexuality, also seems inadequate for an analysis of how female bodies are hypersexualised within a heteropatriarchal matrix. The inclusion of the term 'hetero' within 'hypersexual' attempts to visibilise and draw attention to the ways that representations of women as hypersexual are not neutral, but deliberately positioned as such for an audience - a male audience who is often unnamed but central in defining female sexuality in ways that reinforce and maintain patriarchy.

One way in which this hyperheterosexuality is revealed is in the ways that women are presented as passive and vulnerable - lounging, standing or sitting - where attention is drawn to particular parts of their bodies which our society deems sexual - buttocks, breasts, legs and mouth - and where they are presented as 'available' to the male reader. Two such images and its accompanying text appear in *FHM*, where images of white women are accompanied by stereotypical statements foregrounding their passivity and availability. Text accompanying an image of a white woman lying on her stomach, wearing only panties, where she describes her "best assets" in "three words: lips, legs and boobs" also reads that it's her "dream to be arrested for indecent exposure" (*FHM*, March 2005: 104 and 106, see figure 1 below). Another image in *FHM* foregrounding white women's availability is complemented by the text "Do you know anyone? I'm still single" (November 2004: 27, see figure 2 below). These images and statements depict white women

as passive, vulnerable and available sexual objects for a male audience. An example of hyperheterosexuality in *Blink* magazine's 'Sticky Pages' feature, depicts an image of a black woman accompanied by a male voice who fragments and fetishises the black female body in the statement "with skin like that, a man is almost convinced she can slip anything down on it" (*Blink*, May 2005: 89, see figure 3 below).



Fig. 1: *FHM*, March 2005: 106

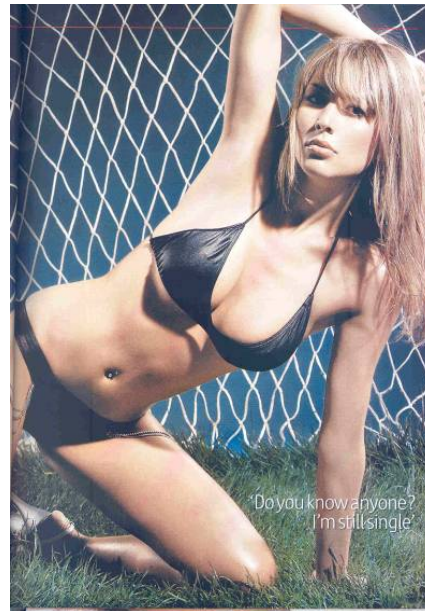


Fig. 2: *FHM*, November 2004: 27



Fig. 3: *Blink*, July 2005: 89

But there is also a conflicting presentation of black women in *Blink*'s 'Sticky Pages', where black women are depicted as both career-oriented and sex objects; where these women are named and speak with a voice that simultaneously centralises their physical bodies, while also acknowledging that they are more than the sum of their body parts. An example is Mmabatho Monthso who states that "I don't have a drop of blood in me that seeks approval or is overtly loud or seeks attention. I express myself through other means, like drawing or making a dress" (November 2004: 23). But just in case Mmabatho expresses herself as too independent for the *Blink* male readers, the magazine includes a sexualised image with the accompanying text alluding to the actress' (hetero)sexuality: "I need to look at a man and think, Yum, good choice! Someone with a brain, opinion, masculine, I don't really want to see his feminine side" (*Blink*, November 2004: 22, see figure 4 below). On the one hand, black women are presented as independent, assertive, articulate and goal oriented. On the other hand, images complementing the text continue to emphasize women's (hetero)sexualities in ways that have little to do with their career aspirations.

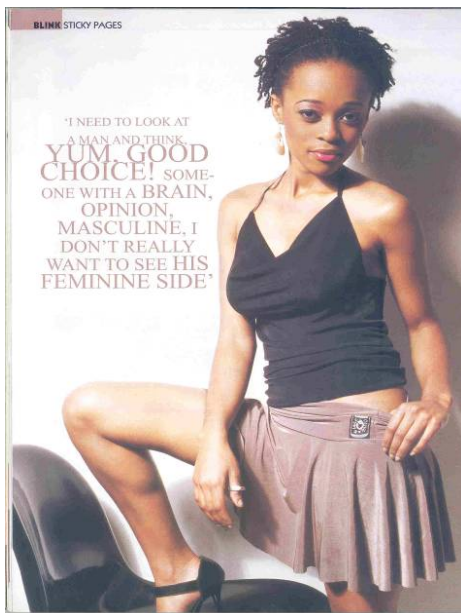


Fig. 4: *Blink*, November 2004: 22

Text suggesting that women are agents tends to be overwhelmed by a combination of images of women's sexualised bodies designed to appeal to heterosexual male readers, alongside language meant to be titillating, and repeatedly articulates the message that women do not really control their sexualities, their bodies or even their minds. Even when black and white women are presented as persons with some agency in *Blink's* 'Sticky Pages', their bodies are still (hetero)sexualised. Overall, these images and texts combine to produce discourses that reflect the ways in which women's physical bodies operate as sites of oppression within a limiting heteropatriarchal system where they seem to have little agency in presenting themselves differently.

“I've got bruises all the way up and down my legs from the guys grabbing me”: performing the (hetero)sexualised female body for male attention

Examples of heterofeminine exhibitionism can be seen in the South African versions of *FHM* where white women's physical bodies function as tools for men's attention. One such example is the performance by white women competing in a bikini competition for a predominantly male audience: “It's getting harder and harder to beat these college girls. Plus, I've got bruises all the way up and down my legs from the guys grabbing me” (See fig. 5: January 2005: 90). The tone evident in the relaying of this experience seems to legitimise male abuse of women's bodies. The notion of competitiveness between white women (“harder to beat these college girls”) and the abuse evident in “bruises...from the guys grabbing” her, represents white women as victims with agency primarily focused on the pursuit of male attention, and sets up white women as competing for male attention within a heterosexual matrix.



Fig. 5: *FHM*, Jan 2005: 90

Also common in *FHM* in particular is the presentation of mostly white women performing sexually with other women for male titillation (see figure 6 below), echoing depictions of lesbian sex in traditional heterosexual pornography, meant to titillate male viewers. In this context, lesbian desire and practice is located within the logic of heteronormativity where “women are encouraged to partake in sexual activities that men (supposedly) desire” (2006: 307). These depictions do not centralise women’s pleasure outside the heteropatriarchal male gaze. On the surface, these images might appear to reflect women pleasing themselves, but the pictures and text make it very clear that the performance is for men’s entertainment.

One example is an image of two women (one black woman and another who appears to be white) drawing on notions of sadomasochism (see figure 6 below) where the accompanying text reads “He ravishes me on his vibrating tractor as the heavens open” (*FHM*, January 2005: 62). The magazines make it clear that these heterofeminine performances are located within a patriarchal heteronormative matrix, where women perform for men, even though the masculine audience is hardly ever named and visibilised. In one example, however, it is clearly stated that a woman being with another woman “doesn’t

make you a lesbian, it's just for fun...yeah, I need a man. There's gotta be a man in there!" (January 2005: 104, see figure 8 below). The possibility of women loving women is erased and instead distorted so that it fits very comfortably within a heteropatriarchal framework where men are the definers of women's sexualities.



Fig. 6: *FHM*, January 2005: 62



Fig. 7: *FHM*, January 2005: 104

Black hyperheterofemininity

In South Africa, magazines with a large white female readership such as *Femina* and *Fair Lady*, seldom present black women (black African, 'coloured' African or Indian African women) in their imagery, across editorial and advertisement contents. When black women are presented in *Femina* magazine, more often than not, they are exoticised in ways which mark the black female body as hyper(hetero)sexualised in ways that the white female body is not.

A special report on a book titled *The naked woman: a study of the female body* authored by Desmond Morris - who is set up as an expert on women's bodies - discusses his 'discovery' of 'not one but four female G-spots' (*Fair Lady*, January

2005: 33) features a full-page photo of a black African woman's naked body shown from behind (see image 8 below). Another example of this racialised hyper(hetero)sexualisation appears as a half-page promotional advertisement in the February 2005 edition of *Femina* magazine selling *JôJô Africa* body products. The main heading of the advert reads 'My African Dream' and is accompanied by text and an image of a naked black woman lying on her stomach with her face turned towards the camera against a backdrop of mountain and land, part of the African soil, emblematic of the African landscape (see figure 9 below). Using terms such as 'rare and distinctive', 'pure' and 'indigenous' (February 2005: 55) to describe the product, the text and imagery imply that black femininity, as signifier of Africa, is hyper(hetero)sexualised in ways that white women in *Femina* magazine are not. Within the context of minimal representation of black women in magazines targeting white women readers, where black women's bodies are shown and spoken about in these magazines, they are presented as *more heterosexualised* than white women's bodies.



Fig. 8: *Fair Lady*, January 2005: 33



Fig. 9: *Femina*, January 2005: 55

A series of shopping advertisements in *Femina* magazine features black and white female models selling various 'glamorous' looks. Both the 'shiny look' and the 'ultra feminine look' are modelled by white women (December, 2003: 110 and 113) with terms such as 'glow', 'glitters', 'sensual' and 'floaty' being ascribed to these women. On the other hand, both the 'colourful look' and the 'exotic look' (*Femina*, December 2003: 106 and 109, see figure 10 below) are modelled by black women, with terms such as 'bold' and 'oriental' being ascribed to the type of femininity presented by these women. In a similar example, while both white and black women again appear in this advert, it is one of the few locations where black women are represented in *Femina* magazine, and they are again described in exotic ways. The bold text accompanying the images of white women reads more neutrally: 'Just Now' (2005: 83); 'Hey-Hey' (2005: 85) and '(Global) Village Girls' (2005: 86). The bold text accompanying three images of black women read as follows: 'Wild Life' (February 2005: 79); 'Tula Mama' (February 2005: 85) and 'Township Tjerrie - The essence of Africa: Black and White and Animal Prints' (February 2005: 90). Here, white (hetero)femininity is presented as normative and neutral while black (hetero)femininity is presented as 'different' and thus exotic.



Fig. 10: *Femina*, December 2003: 106

While *Fair Lady* and *Femina* rarely present black women in their imagery, it is noteworthy how these women are presented when they are portrayed at all. While women across racial constructs in women's and men's magazines are often presented as erotic – hyperheterosexual - simply because they have vaginas, different from the normative presentation of men, the racialised dimensions of hyperheterofemininity in magazines with large numbers of white readers, give way to racist presentations of black women. This construction not only hypervisibilises black women as the 'Other' or 'the African' but simultaneously presents white (hetero)femininity as normative and 'empty' through its apparent lack of 'culture', 'ethnicity' and exoticism.

Hyperheterosexual representations of women across race reveal that women remain constituted as the sexualised 'other' within the normative gender binary. Black women, although seldom presented in magazines with large numbers of white female readers, such as *Fair Lady* and *Femina*, are exoticised and presented as the excessive and abundant 'other'. In the world of South African magazines, these normative constructions suggest very little space for resisting hegemonic ideas around gender, sexuality and race and owning different ways of being women and men. These magazine messages reveal that the socio-political

climate in which we live continues to define women's sexualities in ways reinforcing and maintaining heteropatriarchy, implying an unfulfilled 'democracy' where sexual rights to freedom and bodily integrity for women are yet to be realised.