

# Talking Yourself Out: Why Are There No “Readers” of Women’s Magazines?

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Women’s magazines have been a prominent and popular form of mass media for many years now, and yet we know comparatively little about how they are read and interpreted by their audience. Research on the subject, such as that of Talbot (1992 and 1995), Ferguson (1983) and McCracken (1993), has tended to focus on women’s magazines as a site for the macro level production and transmission of ideologies of femininity. However, this is only one side of the story. This paper provides a different focus by examining how readers themselves interpret these ideologies, and reproduce or resist them at the microsocial level.

Talbot looks at the teenage magazine Jackie from a critical discourse analysis perspective. She focuses on how the producers of the texts discursively construct subject positions for both themselves and for the implied reader. Specifically, she concentrates on the way writers assume an intimate relationship with the reader, positioning themselves in the role of big sister or knowledgeable friend. Talbot argues that this creates an imagined feminine community or “synthetic sisterhood” which acts to obscure the ideologies at work in the texts. This community is synthetic because it treats the target audience as a single community based solely on their shared femaleness, thereby failing to recognise the diversity of women’s experience. The producers of the texts also construct the impression that they are addressing each community member as an individual, creating a tone of intimacy which is used to disguise a consumerist agenda.

There are several problems with this notion of a “synthetic sisterhood”. Firstly, is there a sisterhood at all? On the basis of my own data I would argue that readers do not necessarily perceive themselves as members of a community of women’s magazine readers. Secondly, if readers do feel that they are part of a sisterhood, does this entail that they are therefore blind to the consumerism and artificiality on which it is based? A useful parallel would be the increasing popularity of internet chatrooms. Chatrooms offer people a means of experimenting with their identities in a way which is unavailable to them in face-to-face communication, so the synthetic nature of these communities is in fact what makes them so appealing.

This type of text-centred approach is valuable for its analysis of the “top-down” processes through which discourses of femininity are circulated in the wider society. Talbot argues that readers draw on the discourses presented in the magazines when constructing their own femininity, but acknowledges the reader’s agency in this process, and does not simply portray them as passive and uncritical. However, by seeking to uncover meaning and ideological effects purely within the texts themselves, work within CDA and social semiotics can end up privileging the interpretations of the analyst. I would argue that one cannot fully understand the ideological effects of the magazines, and how they acquire meaning, without turning to the readers themselves. This means examining the micro-level discursive practices

used by readers in order to make sense of the texts, and to reproduce or resist the discourses found within them.

Hermes (1995) does just this in her study of both male and female readers of women's magazines. Her view is that the texts only acquire meaning through readers' interaction with them, an approach which provides a valuable focus on the readers themselves.

Hermes also introduces the concept of "the fallacy of meaningfulness". This is the assumption that all media use is of significance to its consumers. Hermes questions this assumption, arguing that if we look at the role media consumption plays in everyday life, we see that it is often a secondary, and even meaningless activity. This, for me, is where her approach can become problematic, as an eagerness not to treat readers as "cultural dopes" can lead the analyst to take their words at face value, and to lose sight of the power the media has in people's lives. Even those women I spoke to who never buy or read women's magazines were fully aware of their subject matter, and were even able to imitate the style in which they are written. If the discourses found in women's magazines are so familiar even to non-readers, then this suggests that they are not as insignificant as they might at first appear. It is therefore important to look beyond the surface of the readers' comments in order to gain a better understanding of how women orient to the magazines' discourses in their talk. This is what I am trying to do with my own research, but unlike Hermes, I do not believe that taking a critical standpoint necessarily involves undermining the views of the readers.

This paper is based on data from interviews with eighteen readers of women's magazines. It looks in particular at the strategies they employ in order to construct their own identities in relation to the perceived target readers of the magazines. By doing this I hope to demonstrate that although the transmission of ideologies from text to reader is by no means straightforward, the process of interpretation is not completely arbitrary and unconstrained. In other words, readers do not passively absorb and reproduce the ideologies found in the texts. Rather, their interpretations are mediated by other factors, such as the class, age and ethnicity of individual readers. However, the ability of readers to articulate their responses, and to reconstruct meanings from the texts is limited by the cultural dominance of the traditional discourses found in the texts.

The women that I have interviewed range from those who say they never read women's magazines to those who read them on a regular basis. One of the most striking features of their reports is the reluctance of all my informants to describe themselves as "readers". My informants often questioned their suitability as interviewees, saying that they "don't really read" magazines. I heard this type of comment not only from women who only read magazines in waiting rooms, but also from those who buy them every month. Despite this disclaimer they were all able to produce a fairly detailed critique and meta-analysis of the genre.

When talking themselves out of the target readership of magazines, my informants drew on notions of age, ethnicity, class and sexuality. Implicit in their talk was the belief that women's magazines do try to deceive readers in some way. However, by positioning themselves outside the target audience in terms of these social categories, they sought to construct themselves as being somehow immune to any negative influence the magazines might have. This paper focuses on the ways in which class is indexed in my informants' reports, and specifically by those informants from a middle class background.



23 A: = sounds *so* patronising – makes me sound like I think that I’m sort of  
24 God’s gift or something but *I’m not* – I’m not – I don’t think that – but I  
25 really do believe that people who buy them on a regular basis – aren’t  
26 that intelligent [.] I know that sounds awful and I don’t mean it – I  
27 (laughter) – you can’t say it in a way – which – it sort of – sounds less  
28 arrogant but [.] ah I just think that if you’re someone that – spends all  
29 your money on – and they are so expensive – on buying these  
30 magazines – em [.] and I’m talking about people that buy more than  
31 one so that – you know they’re spending like fifteen twenty quid a  
32 month on magazines [.] you know I think God! – you – ach! – you  
33 know open your eyes! – there’s so much more to sort of – discover  
34 out there! – em – and I’d much rather spend my time – reading a  
35 couple of *newspapers* – you know – with different views – and I  
36 mean I know what’s in newspapers can be just as much rubbish but –  
37 at least it’s concerned with – em things which are of a – of real  
38 importance in everyday life [.] em [.] you know – you can =

39 D: [mmh

40 A: = form – opinions that are actually quite useful to discussion  
41 - at the moment that you’re reading it – whereas stuff about – you  
42 know whether Joanne was right to sleep with her – stepfather – you  
43 know – I [.] pff! so what? – you know – I mean – you can think up that  
44 situation for yourself and work out how you – what you feel about =

45 D: [mm – mm – mmh

46 A: it – erm – so – I – I don’t know who they’re targeting I mean I know  
47 yeah – but then again – people might just have the money to buy  
48 magazines and they might just like a lot of light entertainment rather =

49 D: [yeah

50 A: = than watching TV or watching videos they buy magazines so – you  
51 know – I don’t think – I’m not sort of making a sweeping statement =

52 D: [mm

53 A: = and saying all people that buy magazines are stupid but [.] you  
54 know – people that buy magazines because they take it – *really*  
55 seriously and – em – they believe that the magazine they’re buying is  
56 the only place where you can find out the truth about such and such a  
57 thing [.] are seriously – you know – sort of – illusioned

Here Alice constructs a clear distinction between herself and the target reader. This distinction seems to be based largely around notions of intelligence, which she invokes explicitly in lines 26 and 53. However, she is clearly somewhat reticent about using this as a means of categorising other readers. In lines 5-6 she begins by saying that she is “too interested in other things” and “treat[s] it too much as entertainment” to qualify as a target reader, the implication being that target readers lack the cultural competence to evaluate what

is written in the magazines, while her own broad range of interests show that she possesses a greater level of cultural capital than a typical reader.

Although at this stage Alice has yet to explicitly raise the idea of intelligence, she is clearly critical of the target reader. In lines 10 –15 she constructs the target readers as women who “believe every word” of what is written in the magazines, whereas she knows that it is in fact “a load of rubbish”. Alice uses this comparison to suggest that these other women do not have her level of awareness and understanding. Her line of reasoning seems to be that magazines deceive less intelligent people. Because she herself is intelligent, therefore she is not deceived, and because she is not deceived, she is not a reader.

In lines 24-26 Alice goes on to state her belief that regular readers “aren’t that intelligent”, and what follows is an extended, and unprompted attempt to justify this opinion. She personalises this orientation to the idea of intelligence by suggesting that it “makes me sound like I think I’m God’s gift” and that she might seem arrogant. This move to a personal stance is interesting because it may be an attempt to defuse or disguise the introduction of notions of class, by using a discourse of individualism.

Alice further clarifies her comments on intelligence by arguing that she is not trying to comment on *all* magazine readers. She does this by offering alternative reasons why women might choose to buy magazines. On lines 47-50 she suggests that it might be because they have money to spare, or because they “just like a lot of light entertainment”. However, she passes over these ideas without expanding on them, which suggests to me that they are being offered primarily as justification for her disclaimer in line 51 that she is not making a sweeping statement about all magazine readers. This disclaimer then leads to yet another re-iteration of her belief that those women who do take magazines seriously are somehow deluded, reinforcing her negative construction of the target reader. This statement that some readers are deluded could be interpreted as introducing the idea of a false consciousness. This is interesting as it links back to much of the text analyses of women’s magazines, and the idea that the magazines are able to influence readers, while fooling them into thinking that they are acting independently.

Alice’s comments also question the value or truth of the information found in the magazines. These comments on value suggest a belief in some sort of hierarchy of reading material. This hierarchy is based on notions of “high” and “low” culture, according to which notions women’s magazines seem to rate very poorly. In lines 34-41 she says that she prefers to spend her time reading newspapers, as they give access to different views and deal with issues that are “of real importance in everyday life”. These notions about the relative value of different texts are also linked to issues of intelligence, education and class, and so by evaluating the magazines in these terms, this strengthens the underlying discourse of class. In order to discursively construct herself as an intelligent and educated woman, Alice has to assert her ability to differentiate between “high” and “low” culture. This links back to Alice’s comment that she is “too interested in other things” to take the magazines seriously. Unlike the target reader, Alice is able to judge the value of the magazines through comparisons with her other interests in higher forms of culture, such as newspapers.

This notion of a reading hierarchy is also made clear by Meera in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 2

Meera: 24, Indian, postgraduate student, middle class

- 1 D: so what is it that you like about them then?
- 2 M: you know I really don't know I've thought about this after you asked  
3 me and I *can't* figure it out – because [.] I sort of I find I'm actually  
4 look at them with a bit of disdain [.] and er – like I said I worked for =
- 5 D: [mmh
- 6 M: = a magazine – I was working for two years – and it would be  
7 completely beneath my dignity to *ever* [.] write or or to go to Elle or  
8 Cosmo for a job [.] and er – I wouldn't even – I wouldn't like to know =
- 9 D: [mmh
- 10 M: = anybody who was writing for them because I would think they were  
11 completely vacuous (laughter) – but yet I read it! – and I think it's just  
12 er maybe – it's like bathroom entertainment – you know – not =
- 13 D: [mmh
- 14 M: = beyond that it's – it's er sort of pretty pictures and – er – silly little  
15 life stories [.] um it's sort of taken the place in my life I guess of =
- 16 D: [mmh
- 17 M: = pulp – you know – the those – s- sort of stories that you used to  
18 read and – that people read in airports?
- [...]
- 19 D: when would you typically read them then?
- 20 M: um – I think probably – when I came home from a *long* day – I would  
21 never read them in public (laughter) very sad to say (more  
22 laughter) it's ridiculous very [.] bizarre
- 23 D: so you wouldn't read them if you were sitting on a train or something  
24 or on the bus? (M shakes head) no?
- 25 M: not only because I'd be ashamed to be caught with one of them but  
26 because I – I'd really – because if I felt that I had – sort of the  
27 attention span I would much rather give it to [.] er a book – a good =
- 28 D: [mmh
- 29 M: = book [.] er so it would probably be after I was really tired and I just  
30 wanted – some light entertainment and like I said because I don't  
31 read [.] a light books – this would be something that I'd read just =
- 32 D: [mmh

- 33 M: = before going to sleep and then – then forget about  
[...]
- 34 M: but [.] I think it's just fun – you know – in many ways [.] I think =
- 35 D: [mmh
- 36 M: = of entertainment actually as being more serious because – a good  
37 film a good music good book is all entertainment [.] I wouldn't put =
- 38 D: [mmh
- 39 M: = a magazine like Cosmo in entertainment it's just a bit of fun
- 40 D: right [.] so it's somehow it's kind of a step (laughing) a step below!
- 41 M: [ (laughing)it's a step down yeah –  
42 yeah!
- 43 D: so – you said that you wouldn't want to read it in public – cos =
- 44 M: [hmm
- 45 D: = you'd be – ashamed – I mean why – you know [.] **why** would you  
46 be ashamed? I mean how do you think that people would look at you  
47 or how do you think – how do you perceive – you know this image of  
48 someone who reads women's magazines that you wouldn't want to  
49 **be – seen** as that person?
- 50 M: um – I don't know but it's similar to the fact that **we** are – at home we  
51 um [.] er subscribe to several magazines like India Today which is a  
52 political magazine – Outlook that's another political magazine –  
53 Newsweek Time et cetera – but we wouldn't even consider  
54 subscribing to **these** and I – I really don't understand why I don't  
55 know – I don't think it's snob value – but er maybe when you're =
- 56 D: [mmh
- 57 M: = sort of em – tallying about you know – how much money you've  
58 spent you don't want to – **feel** that you've spent money on –  
59 something like that [.] not because it's frivolous but because =
- 60 D: [mmmh
- 61 M: = even that frivolity is so – unfulfilling – you know [.] em [.] but the =
- 62 D: [mmh

63 M: = reason I wouldn't want to be caught in public was because – em –  
64 I guess for that same peephole thing my eyes usually – sort of  
65 *goggle* (laughing) when I see something – and wouldn't be  
66 particularly happy for anybody to see me – looking like that (laughter)  
67 and em [...] yeah – and if I felt I had the attention span I would rather  
68 give it to something else

Meera freely admitted to buying at least two magazines a month, and yet she evaluates them in almost purely negative terms. In line 4 she explicitly comments on her “disdain” not only for the magazines themselves, but also for the journalists who write for them, whom she characterises in line 11 as “completely vacuous”. This constitutes a particularly overt assertion of her own superior cultural capital, as both a consumer and producer of media texts. Meera has worked as a journalist for the political magazine *India Today*, but she would consider working for *Cosmopolitan* as “completely beneath my dignity”. As with Alice, she is keen to position herself as intelligent and educated, and as someone who indulges in the reading of women's magazines but is under no illusions as to their intellectual worth.

Meera is unique amongst my informants in saying that she would be ashamed to be seen reading a women's magazine in public, although she describes her attitude as “ridiculous” and “bizarre”. As with Alice, this could be an attempt to construct her attitude as an idiosyncratic aspect of her personality rather than linking it to her social background. When asked why she would be ashamed, Meera refers to her family, and that while they have subscriptions to various political magazines, they would never consider subscribing to a women's magazine. This reference to her family background could be taken as an indirect reference to class, and a desire to conform to middle class standards for what is appropriate reading material. Although in line 55 she argues that this is not because of snobbery, the fact that she herself introduces the idea into the conversation suggests that she has at the very least considered snobbery as a possible interpretation of her comments, but is trying to avoid positioning herself in that way.

In lines 63-66 she goes on to reason that she does not like to be seen in public with women's magazines because of the way her eyes “goggle” when she's reading them. These comments could be connected to Alice's description of readers' amazement at what they read in the magazines. Perhaps Meera is concerned that if she were seen “goggling” at a magazine, that observers would perceive her as gullible and inexperienced. If we look back to her comments in lines 3-11, if she characterises journalists who write for women's magazines as vacuous then it is likely she is worried that other people might consider her to be vacuous for reading them.

Again in Meera's discourse we see the notion of a reading hierarchy, with political magazines constructed as somehow more authentic reading material than women's magazines. Meera places women's magazines on a par with pulp fiction, and argues that they are not really deserving of her attention; if she feels she can concentrate she would rather read a “good book” or do something else. She goes even further by suggesting that she would not classify women's magazines as entertainment as entertainment should be “more serious”. These ideas plug into largely middle class notions about the value of different media. Most of my middle class informants rate magazines very poorly, both as sources of information and as sources of entertainment. As a result they are keen to distance themselves

from the target readership, and to align themselves instead with other media such as newspapers and political magazines, which are seen as better markers of their cultural competence.

Class is only one of the categories used by women to talk themselves out of the target readership, and it is not a strategy unique to middle class readers. The working class women I have interviewed have suggested that they also feel outside the target audience. However in their case this is because they do not share the affluent lifestyle presented in them, and cannot afford to buy the products which are advertised. Sexuality, ethnicity and age are also indexed in some of the interviews, and are areas I hope to examine further as I continue with my research.

This all raises the question of who is a “typical” or “average” reader of women’s magazines? On the basis of my data it seems like the average reader is a reluctant reader, and that these average readers share only the property of feeling detached in some way from the target audience. If this is indeed the case then this begs a further question: If these women see women’s magazines as being of such little value, and do not wish to identify themselves with the target reader, then why do the magazines continue to sell? Although my informants do not allow their interests to be defined by the contents of the magazines, the themes of fashion, beauty and relationships must exert some sort of pull, otherwise why bother to look at them at all, even if it is only in the doctor’s waiting room? It seems that for middle class readers at least, their criticisms centre on the worth of the magazines as intellectual capital, and not on the nature of the images of women portrayed in them. If we go back to Talbot and the other text-based critiques, we could take this to mean that the cultural dominance of these discourses does limit the range of meanings readily available to women when articulating their responses. This can be seen in the way that women are able to distance themselves from the magazines by reason of their class, or other social categories to which they belong, but do not subvert or reconstruct the ideologies found in the texts by offering any alternative discourses. Perhaps this is why so many women continue to buy the magazines, because they feel that they ought to be interested in, and knowledgeable about, fashion and beauty and relationships, even though what they read so often turns out to be a disappointment.

### **Transcription Conventions**

:	lengthened sound/syllable
?	rising intonation
!	exclamatory intonation
=	continuous utterances
┌	overlap
-	short pause
[.]	long pause
<b><i>bold italics</i></b>	emphatic stress
( )	material that is not part of the talk being transcribed e.g. laughter

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