

CULTURE OF SEX: SEXUAL LINGUISTICS AND DISCOURSE OF
COSMOPOLITAN EDITIONS IN THE UNITED STATES, FRANCE AND INDIA

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DEDICATION

I would like to thank my family for all of their support and encouragement. I would also like to thank my husband for his assistance, patience and sense of humor over the last few months.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
LIST OF TABLES	iv
ABSTRACT	v
Chapter	
1. Introduction	1
2. Literature Review	3
<i>Sexuality and sexual identities</i>	
<i>Sexual linguistics</i>	
<i>Sexual discourse</i>	
<i>Normative</i>	
<i>Social construction of reality theory</i>	
3. Research Questions	28
4. Methodology	29
5. Results: Content Analysis	35
<i>References to sex</i>	
<i>References to male and female anatomy</i>	
6. Results: Textual Analysis	46
<i>Tones</i>	
<i>Pleasure</i>	
<i>Discourse</i>	
<i>Normative versus non-normative behavior</i>	
7. Discussion	71
8. Conclusion	75
<i>Limitations and recommendations for future research</i>	
APPENDIX	
List of samples	79
REFERENCES	81

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Sample breakdown per type of article	36
2. <i>Cosmopolitan</i> , <i>Cosmopolitan France</i> and <i>Cosmopolitan India</i> references to having sex, sex acts and orgasm	37
3. <i>Cosmopolitan</i> , <i>Cosmopolitan France</i> and <i>Cosmopolitan India</i> references to male and female anatomy	41

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ABSTRACT

Cosmopolitan is one of the most popular magazines for women, both domestically and internationally; it is published in 28 languages in 45 countries. However, *Cosmopolitan*, especially its sexual content, is subject to change by cultures who maintain social norms and standards different from the United States. This study compared the approaches *Cosmopolitan*, *Cosmopolitan France* and *Cosmopolitan India* use in presenting sexual information. A total of 12 magazines were content and textual analyzed to determine whether their sexual linguistics and discourse differed. This study also examined whether *Cosmopolitan* and its sister magazines promoted normative behavior or pushed pre-existing social norms and values.

The findings showed that all three magazines used a distinct approach to sex, but not in the way hypothesized. *Cosmopolitan* and *Cosmopolitan India* used a prescriptive discourse, one designed to educate the reader and establish a mentor-protégée relationship. *Cosmopolitan India* was also found to have an explicit, straightforward approach to sex to accommodate an evolving readership. *Cosmopolitan France* used a descriptive discourse and focused on the self-perceptions and body confidence of the reader. These findings provide insight into how *Cosmopolitan* and its international editions could accommodate readerships according to established or developing cultural standards.

Introduction

Although *Cosmopolitan* has been in circulation since 1886, it was not until Helen Gurley Brown became editor-in-chief in the 1950s that *Cosmopolitan* took on its role of promoting sexual independence. Now, one of the most popular women's lifestyle magazines, *Cosmopolitan* provides insight on sexual relationships, health, fitness, beauty, popular culture, vacations and recipes. Printed in 45 countries in 28 languages, *Cosmopolitan* has a readership of roughly 36 million women worldwide (Carr 2002, p.1).

Given its international readership and emphasis on women's sexuality, however, few studies have been conducted on the sexual language used by international versions of the magazine. Rather, research has focused on the implications of sexual advertising occurring in international editions of *Cosmopolitan* or the effect of sexual language on readers in the United States. In order to fill this gap in research, it is necessary to look at the sexual linguistics and discourse from an international perspective, particularly in such a widely read, sexually themed magazine like *Cosmopolitan*. Conducting such research can contribute to a better understanding of how media depictions of sexuality may vary within different cultural settings.

Research (Wiseman, 1976; Henslin, 1978; Goodenough, 1981; Gilbert & Gubar, 1985; Reinholtz, Muehlenhard, Phelps & Satterfield, 1995) on sexual linguistics and discourse has shown how sociocultural norms shape the way people speak about and perceive sex and their own sexuality. Moreover, research (Kehily, 1999; McNair, 2002; Yang, 2004; Jackson, 2005; Machin & van Leeuwen, 2005; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gauntlett, 2008) has shown that media can play a significant role in educating or informing people on sex in a way that can reflect local norms and values.

Cosmopolitan, as such a prevalent and popular resource, must adjust to accommodate the cultural needs of its geographically diverse readership. For example, *Cosmopolitan* must submit to governmental regulations that control how sexuality is presented in China, where sexual language is prohibited. In other places, however, where the culture is open about sexuality, such as in Sweden, the magazine runs fewer sexual articles to accommodate a readership more comfortable with sex (Carr, 1). By studying the differences in how cultures use sexual language, it could help inform how the media is affected by cultural norms.

The purpose of this study then is to look how three international editions of *Cosmopolitan* – *Cosmopolitan* (U.S.), *Cosmopolitan France* and *Cosmopolitan India*, discuss sex. This study uses content and textual analysis to examine, compare and contrast the sexual linguistics and discourse used by each edition, as each occurs in a culture with, presumably, different norms. Additionally, this study analyzes whether *Cosmopolitan*, *Cosmopolitan France* and *Cosmopolitan India* urge normative sexual behavior or push the boundaries of pre-existing social and cultural norms.

Literature Review

Sexuality and sexual identities

Cosmopolitan and its sister magazines present the concept of the “fun, fearless female” as a model for how women should behave, both in the workplace and in their sexual lives (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003). With this model comes a standard for sexuality, such as how a woman should behave on a date and how she should engage in any kind of sexual contact. In a perfect world, this woman has agency and all of her problems can be solved by following *Cosmopolitan*'s sex tips (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003). As *Cosmopolitan* endeavors to educate readers on sex and sexuality, it is necessary to understand what factors, especially cultural norms and media messages, shape how sexual identities and sexuality are developed.

It is important to look at a range of research that has focused on women and sexuality. First, in one case, research has shown what women perceive to be sexuality. Second, research has focused on the way women, including young women, have turned to magazines as teachers of sexuality and sexual identities. This research has also shown the impact of magazines in shaping sexuality. Third, additional research has shown that sexual desire plays a role in sexual identities. Fourth, studies have shown the impact of cultural and societal standards on the development of sexuality. Finally, research has shown the role that *Cosmopolitan* can play in the development of female sexuality. In this research, male sexuality or stereotypes also plays a role in how women perceive their own sexual identities.

In her article, Loe (2008) observed the way junior and senior college students discussed elements of sex – everything from medical marketing to definitions of sexuality

and the ways in which the U.S. provides sex education. Based on the students' discussion of sexuality, Loe (2008) observed that sexuality is a particularly complex concept, one potentially made more complicated by education and health care messages. For example, as medical markets may promote female sexual dysfunction, or FSD, as primarily physiological and easily treated by medication, sexuality as a whole becomes marginalized as such promotion fails to acknowledge the emotional, mental or pleasurable aspects of it. In this case, based on Loe's (2008) observations, it seems fair to conclude that sexuality is, above all, a complex concept that is multidimensional, not just physiological.

To continue the discussion of the complex nature of sexuality, it is important to look at how other messages, such as those provided by magazines, may shape or provide information on sexual identities. In her study, Jackson (2005) analyzed the discourse of question-and-answer letters in a young woman's magazine. Jackson's study focused specifically on sexual health, especially safe sex, and sexual identities. She noted that magazines, in this case teen magazines, are a particularly influential resource for young women who are developing their sexual identities and exploring sexuality. She asserted that these advice columns provide meaning for women negotiating their identities and have a significant effect on women's subjectivity about their own sexuality. She found that sex, as it appeared in the question-and-answer articles, was framed as painful, dangerous, safe and technique. Additionally, Jackson asserted that sex is taught; what will have an impact on the role of *Cosmopolitan*, therefore, will be whether or not Jackson's observations, specifically about technique and the idea that sex must be learned, can likewise be found in an adult women's magazine that readily provides sex

information. Jackson came to the conclusion that as a highly significant source of information for sexuality, advice columns and columnists maintain a particularly influential role over women's development of sexuality and sexual identities.

Like Jackson (2005), Kehily (1999) noted the impact of magazines on young women, particularly the role that magazines can play in teaching sexuality. Kehily also noted that magazines are a cultural resource for young women to learn about sexuality. She asserted that magazines are not only a cultural resource for young men and women, who must then contextualize the material to fit their own lives, but they also create a framework for discussion. Additionally, like Jackson, Kehily noted the impact of "problem" sections, or advice columns, in framing sexuality, emotions and personal problems, and how that contributes to the concept of sexual subjectivity. While Jackson and Kehily both focused on adolescent magazines, their studies are important as they noted the role of magazines as cultural resources in which sexuality can be taught or shaped. What needs to be explored at this point is if adult readers, such as those of *Cosmopolitan*, are likewise affected by or learn about sexuality from magazines.

In examining the impact of adult magazines on women's sexual identities and sexuality, Yang (2004) focused on the role of international magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle* and *Marie Claire*. Yang determined that not only do these international magazines play a role in negotiating local and global issues, they play a significant role in women's self-formation, sexually and otherwise. She asserted that sexual identity is the site of struggle, as women must negotiate conflicting discourses of empowerment and disempowerment. What is particularly significant is her assertion that *Cosmopolitan's* articles on sex and relationships define its international status and

likewise shape local discourse. Although her study focused specifically on Taiwan and its historical influence on the development of women's sexuality, the impact of magazines remains significant, particularly as Yang stressed that magazines may impact the meanings of sexuality.

As magazines may act as cultural resources for women and take on the role of educator, they maintain a significant amount of influence, especially in how sexuality is framed and shaped. However, up to this point, the research presented has not articulated a clear definition of what sexuality is, only that it is a complex subject which may be shaped or marginalized by media, especially magazines. Therefore, it is necessary to look at other research, especially those involving sexual health and desire, to determine the elements of sexual identity.

.Although Loe (2008) touched briefly on sexual dysfunction, especially FSD, or female sexual dysfunction, her observations were limited to how it was framed by medical marketing. Basson (2000) and Levine (2002), on the other hand, focused specifically on sexual desire and its relationship with sexual behavior. Basson concentrated on women's sexual function and dysfunction within long-term relationships; she presented a new model for representing female dysfunction with the hope that it would help define it. What is significant about Basson's findings is her assertion that women's sexual drives and responses are based on a need for intimacy and not necessarily physical stimulation. Levine (2002) came to a similar conclusion in his article. It should be noted, however, that Levine's article was not presented as research but as observations made by an experienced psychiatrist. Although his assertions were observations, they are important to understanding the nature of sexual desire and how it

relates to sexual identity, especially as *Cosmopolitan* magazine's question-and-answer articles can include advice on libidos and sexual functioning.

Levine (2002) stated that sexual desire is central to discussions and concepts of sexual identity, as well as sexual function and dysfunction. He went on to explore the various aspects of sexual desire, such as its individual, private nature. Sexual desire, according to Levine, is also affected by a variety of factors, including personal relationships, social situations and age. It is important to note that Levine, like Basson (2000), asserted that sexual desire differs between men and women. While this statement may seem obvious, it is significant in that Levine acknowledges the need for women to feel emotionally involved with a partner and maintain a level of psychological intimacy in order to engage in intercourse. This assertion may not be true for all women, but it is a characteristic of women in general. In addition, Levine made a connection between sexual desire and culture. He stated that how a culture affects a person's sexual desire and their need to express it may be uncertain, but it is certain that culture has an influence on sexual motivation and the "sexual mind," as he terms it (Levine, 2002, p. 48).

Based on the research presented, magazines have an influential role in educating women on how to develop their sexual identities. In addition, sexual desire and emotional intimacy play a significant role in how a woman behaves sexually; this concept of sexual desire, according to Levine (2002), is also linked to sexual identity. Therefore, sexual identity can be said to include elements of sexual desire, behavior and emotional intimacy, and it can be learned through cultural resources like magazines. However, as Levine stated that culture has an influence, it is necessary to explore the research surrounding the impact of societal and cultural standards on female sexuality.

Henslin (1978), in particular, focused on the impact of cultural standards on sexuality. Although his research incorporated changing sexual patterns and varying modes of sexuality, he determined that individual sexuality is learned from the collective's view of it. Essentially, it is the community, or the culture, that determines how an individual learns about sexuality and how his or her innate sex drive and functionality will be developed. Furthermore, he wrote:

Depending on their location, individuals experience differential exposure to the normative-producing effects of their society's social institutions...In this area would be included differences in ideas of how one ought to express sexuality, of what is considered desirable, undesirable but normal, borderline, or deviant, and how these differing ideas are related to differential exposure to social institutions. (Henslin, 1978, p. 7)

His work recognizes that individuals' sexuality is determined by their culture and that differences in their backgrounds can determine normative sexual behavior. Henslin went on to state that the dominant perception of female sexuality in a culture can determine how an individual woman perceives her own. He asserted that women then strive to achieve what is the culturally appropriate, prevailing view of female sexuality. What makes Henslin's statements relevant is that he confirmed that sexuality is learned; previous research (Jackson, 2005; Kehily, 1999) also asserted that women, especially young women, learn sexuality from resources like magazines. Additionally, Henslin asserted that there is an impact of societal views or standards on an individual. Therefore, societal and cultural expectations for sexuality and magazines play significant roles in defining, teaching or shaping sexuality.

Wiseman (1976) also asserted that cultural expectations play a significant role in sexuality. She explained that sexuality, especially across cultural lines, is determined by society's views and promotion of normative behavior. She wrote:

In one way or another humans have attempted to regulate the sex lives of their fellows since the beginning of time, telling them with whom it is suitable to meet, with whom it is suitable to have intercourse, and with whom it is suitable to marry for the purpose of having a family.
(Wiseman, 1976, p. 2)

Wiseman also stated that acceptable sexual techniques and public displays of affection are refereed by socially constructed norms. As these norms determine what is socially acceptable and what is not, the norms themselves will vary across cultures. Similarly, sexual pleasure derived from sexual intercourse must be learned. Therefore, standards for sexuality develop across cultures – though cultures can maintain different standards – and are taught.

Petras (1973) made a similar conclusion: sexual behavior is governed by social behavior. He emphasized that dating determines sexual behavior and teaches what is acceptable. Although Henslin (1978) and Wiseman (1976) mentioned dating and the influence peers can have on a woman's perceptions of sexuality, Petras (1973) went more in depth by stating that dating "is one of the most explicit ways for learning that there exists a marked discrepancy between the officially propagated or 'ideal' values of society, the 'real' values, and the actual behavior that occurs in certain situations" (p. 80). As he asserted that sexuality is first learned in childhood and adolescence, sexual identities will continue to develop into adulthood, though those identities are fluid and dynamic, not static. Therefore, based on his research, societal and cultural expectations for sexuality and social behaviors, like dating and marrying, serve to shape and influence the ways in which people perceive sexuality. As it has also already been pointed, these behaviors must be learned, and one of the cultural resources that exists to teach these

standards is magazines. However, it is important to note the role that *Cosmopolitan* magazine plays in this teaching of societal and cultural norms.

In his study, McNair (2002) examined the impact of *Cosmopolitan* on women's sexuality. Although his research focused on a more general view of sex within the media, he did note that *Cosmopolitan* plays a unique but influential role in society. He stated that Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* and *Cosmopolitan* ushered in a new generation of sexually assertive, professionally successful women. He further asserted that *Cosmopolitan* "pioneered the frank discussion of female sexuality and the role of women in work" (McNair, 2002, p. 23). *Cosmopolitan*, according to McNair, introduced the sexualized women of the 1990s and embraced more explicit language, both in verbal and visual language. He also wrote that *Cosmopolitan* "assumed a sexually active reader, and routinely advised her on the best methods of giving and getting pleasure, within or outside of a steady relationship" (McNair, 2002, p. 118). Similarly, Gauntlett (2008) noted the impact of *Cosmopolitan* on the ability for women to have a resource for sex. He wrote, "*Cosmo*'s assertion of women's right to enjoy sex, and to talk about it, was quite radical, and this new discourse brought other changes." (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 57). He also noted that *Cosmopolitan* offers a variety of articles on sexual positions and techniques, and that, in terms of sexual mores, *Cosmopolitan* has little respect for tradition. Therefore, *Cosmopolitan* became an outlet for women in society to not only seek information about sex but also to talk about it. As such, it is possible that *Cosmopolitan* became, and still is, a cultural resource for women to learn about sexuality.

Farvid and Braun (2006) also noted that *Cosmopolitan* plays a significant role in teaching women about sexuality. As magazines like *Cosmopolitan* can provide ample

evidence of sociocultural messages of sexuality, and femininity and masculinity, the researchers focused their study on the construction and deconstruction of women's sexuality. They hypothesized that women's sexuality, as portrayed in women's magazines *Cosmopolitan* and *Cleo*, the Australasian equivalent of *Cosmopolitan*, is constructed based on depictions of male and female sexuality. As the two genders' sexuality may occur in tandem, the combination of the two, especially as both may be emphasized in women's magazines, provide a standard for how female sexuality may be learned and developed. Furthermore, according to Farvid and Braun, *Cosmopolitan's* emphasis on emancipated sex and its subsequent development of the "fun, fearless female" present feminine sexuality as both desired and dominant. *Cosmopolitan* therefore acts as the medium in which discourses on sexual identity, femininity and masculinity reign supreme. The researchers also examined male sexuality, and found that even though sexuality is a key ingredient in a successful women's magazine, the emphasis is placed on a man's sexuality, particularly his pleasure and desires. They concluded that these magazines encourage women to maintain self-confidence in their sexuality and femininity; by doing so, a woman may then be able to manipulate a man into being her partner.

Until this point, what has not been addressed is the impact that a male figure can maintain over a women's sexuality; in the case of the research presented, this impact is seen through written depictions of male sexuality and stereotypes, particularly as they appear in *Cosmopolitan*.

In addressing male stereotypes, Kim and Ward (2004) assessed reading motivations, femininity ideologies, and sexual attitudes of college-age *Cosmopolitan* and

Seventeen readers. The researchers found that frequent readers of adult-focused magazines were more likely to reject male stereotypes of men being emotionally inept or unskilled and sexual predators. They also found that these adult-focused *Cosmopolitan* magazine readers were less likely to view sex as risky behavior. These frequent readers were also less likely to censor themselves. Conversely, frequent readers of teen-focused magazines had stronger support for male stereotypes and were more likely to equate sex with risk. What Kim and Ward found, however, that reinforces the conclusions of Farvid and Braun (2006), is that the frequent readers of adult-focused magazines who read *Cosmopolitan* solely for sexual advice were more likely to support both the male sexual stereotype and the sexually assertive female role.

Ménard and Kleinpatz (2007) further focused on the sexual content of *Cosmopolitan* and the stereotypes the magazine can present. The researchers used qualitative and quantitative measures to determine the specific content of messages promoting sexual satisfaction used by men's and women's magazines. By focusing their study on five components – technical/mechanical/physical factors, variety, relationship factors, psychological factors and pre-sex preparation – the researchers determined that advice on what constituted “great sex” was based on sexual and gender role stereotypes. They also found that this advice was framed in a way that promoted narrow sexual scripts and provided contradictory messages. In the case of “great sex,” women's magazines promote the idea that such an experience can only occur as a result of the acknowledgment of physiological and psychological differences between men and women. In other words, the experience can only occur if women are in an intimate, caring and long-term relationship that has “chemistry.” In addition, the researchers found that

Cosmopolitan provided the most sexual tips, almost double and triple the amount of tips provided by *Glamour* and *Redbook*. In a particularly interesting conclusion, they also found that men's magazines had few, if any sexual tips, while women's magazines were filled with "tips;" in this case, the researchers concluded that there is an assumption that men are naturally skilled at providing "great sex." This conclusion also feeds into the male sexual stereotype earlier identified by Kim and Ward (2004). Based on this research, it would also seem that *Cosmopolitan* takes note of the fact that women need a sense of emotional intimacy when engaging in sexual activities, a point that both Levine (2002) and Basson (2000) made.

In examining the influences on sexuality and sexual identity, some conclusions can be drawn. First, sexuality is a complex concept, one that can be muddied by external messages, like those of medical marketers, or marginalized as primarily physical. However, additional research has shown that emotional intimacy and sexual desire play a role in developing female sexuality. In addition, sexuality is something that must be learned, either from society or a secondary institution, like magazines. As one of those magazines, *Cosmopolitan* has an influential role in how women learn about and develop their own sexuality. Furthermore, *Cosmopolitan* incorporates the role of the male, whether he is stereotypical or not, in helping women develop their sexuality.

Sexual linguistics

While it has been established that magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan*, play an important role in teaching women about sexuality, the kind of language that appears in *Cosmopolitan* and what it means has not been explored. Furthermore, as cultural and

societal norms play a significant role in sexuality, they can likewise play a role in the language used to speak about sex. Research has shown that there is a correlation between perceptions of sexuality, cultural and societal standards for sexuality, and language. Furthermore, research has indicated that the use of word choices serve to distinguish language used by men and women and can affect individuals' perceptions of themselves or members of the opposite gender.

It is important to note, however, that the study of linguistics is complex, and recent research has focused primarily on gender differences in language. The linguistics used by *Cosmopolitan* may not reflect these differences as the magazine is geared toward women. Therefore, in the research that is presented, it is acknowledged that sexual linguistics incorporates gender and queer linguistics, but the emphasis is placed on the importance of word choices and the link between sociocultural standards and language.

Gilbert and Gubar (1985) noted in their essay that culture has long had a hand in shaping sexual linguistics. They wrote

For if language is a process of cultural artifice that both distances and defines nature, then it would seem that its workings might well embody the bodily differences through which each human being first confronts the fundamental sexuality of his or her own nature (Gilbert & Gubar, 1985, p. 515).

What the writers continued to focus on is the relationship between female and male language and the power struggle that can lie within, as male linguistics have historically dominated discussions of female sexuality. They went on to discuss the impact of the symbolic contract, and how it is influenced by patriarchal cultures' views of gender difference. While this kind of relationship between male and female linguistics may not

appear in *Cosmopolitan*, Gilbert and Gubar make an important point that sexual language can be shaped by culture.

Bucholtz and Hall (2004) take a deeper look at the relationship between linguistics and sexuality. While their study took on three issues by focusing on queer linguistics, suggesting a desire-centered approach to sexual linguistics rather than an identity-centered one, and examining social subjectivity and intersubjectivity, they noted the connection between language and sexuality. They came to a number of conclusions involving theoretical frameworks of sexuality and the misperceptions of queer linguistics and sexuality; however, they also noted that sexuality, and the resulting linguistics, are based outside of one's psyche and appear in a cultural, social and political world (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). While their study was complex and explored a variety of aspects of sexual linguistics, their conclusion touched on how sexual linguistics can be shaped by culture and society.

While Bucholtz and Hall (2004) focused on the thematic frameworks that act as a basis for queer linguistics and the relationship between sexuality and language, Eckert (1998) concentrated on sociolinguistics and word usages. She stated that language is way to communicate referential meaning; what this statement means in terms of society is that linguistics are constructed to reflect expressions of social meaning, such as emotion, attitude and social identity. Therefore, as she points out, language can reflect class, age, gender and ethnicity as well as the linguistic meanings and nuances of community. While her study went on to examine the word choices used by high school students, she noted the differences in word choices, specifically those termed standard and vernacular. Although these are spoken terms, and *Cosmopolitan* uses written words, both are

considered to be verbal expressions. Furthermore, her research indicated the link between society and language, though she focused on the ability of language to convey social meaning.

Goodenough (1981) focused specifically on the relationship between language and culture. He stated that culture is “learned and forms a body of tradition within society” (Goodenough, 1981, p. 49). While this definition may appear simple, Goodenough pointed out that culture, like linguistics, can be complex. Moreover, the material manifestations of what is learned from society are termed “cultural artifacts.” It could be possible that as Jackson (2005) and Kehily (1999) noted the role of magazines as cultural resources, they can also be termed cultural artifacts that represent what is learned in society. Furthermore, Goodenough identified the link between culture and society and linguistics. He wrote

Human societies, then, differ from one another in their linguistic makeup – in the languages and dialects in which their members have some competence and in the extent to which each of these languages and dialects is competently represented (Goodenough, 1981, p. 31).

Although Goodenough focused on the elements of culture, language and society, his establishment of the relationship between linguistics and sociocultural standards is significant. What remains to be seen is how specific word choices may reflect those standards.

Trenholm and Todd-de-Mancillas (1980), however, concentrated on such word choices. They noted that there is a distinct difference on word meanings, such as when a woman is referred to as a “chick” or “girl” rather than as a “woman.” By focusing on the sexism that can exist between men and women, the researchers were able to identify various patterns in word choices and linguistics. While the researchers examined sexist

language and not necessarily sexual language, they noted that linguistics can have an impact on meaning, both in terms of content and the relationship between the speaker and the receiver. What makes Trenholm and Todd-de-Mancillas's conclusions relevant to the study of sexual linguistics and *Cosmopolitan* is its identification of the impact of word choices, particularly between the two people communicating. Clearly, *Cosmopolitan* is not speaking to someone, but it is conveying a verbal message that the reader receives. The language *Cosmopolitan* uses could then affect the perceptions of the reader towards herself or the sexual content of the magazine.

From the research presented so far, it would seem that there is a link between sexual linguistics and social and cultural norms. In addition, men and women differ in their construction and usages of words, which can serve to reflect or affect their perceptions. What is significant at this point is how word choices can be applied to the sexual linguistics that appear in *Cosmopolitan*.

In examining word choices as they appeared in *Cosmopolitan*, Machin and van Leeuwen (2003) noted the magazine's use of trendy, sexual words. The researchers found the international editorial teams of *Cosmopolitan* sought to copy the "cool," streetwise language appearing in the American version of *Cosmopolitan*. In this case, the trendy language became a new way of describing sexual acts that other cultures had yet to use. The researchers also found that the purpose of these words and *Cosmopolitan*'s conversational style was to reclassify normative behavior. In a later study, Machin and van Leeuwen (2005) further explored the linguistic style of *Cosmopolitan*. They focused on the lifestyle of the "fun, fearless female" that *Cosmopolitan* promotes. By analyzing two monthly editions (October and November 2001) of 44 versions of *Cosmopolitan* and

conducting interviews with editorial staff, they concluded that there are three different styles: individual, social and lifestyle. They then analyzed how various linguistic elements – fashion captions, advertising, direct address, the style of the expert, the style of the street and conversational style – use the three identified styles. The researchers came to the conclusion that *Cosmopolitan*'s linguistic style has been deliberately designed, and though each cultural edition of *Cosmopolitan* may use that style in individual ways, it, like the *Cosmo* brand, is global. What has not yet been explored, however, is how cultural editions of *Cosmopolitan* may differ in their use of linguistics, even if they use the overarching *Cosmo* brand.

Based on the research presented, there is a link between sexual linguistics and cultural norms. Additional research has shown that word choices, especially between men and women, can have an impact of perceptions. And, in looking at *Cosmopolitan* specifically and its use of word choices, it would seem that the magazine uses linguistics, especially trendy, cool, streetwise words, to describe sex acts and promote the *Cosmopolitan* “fun, fearless, female” lifestyle. What I do in this thesis, then, is look at the word choices used by *Cosmopolitan* and two of its international editions to see what patterns exist as the magazines are published in three different countries with, presumably, different cultural norms. In specific terms, this paper examines the word choices used to describe sexual acts and male and female anatomy.

Sexual discourse

While the research focusing on sexual linguistics has indicated the impact of word choice and its link with sociocultural norms, it is necessary to take a deeper look at sexual

discourse to see if it is similarly linked to such norms. Research has indicated that not only is sexual discourse shaped by norms, it is also strongly affected by the media, including magazines.

In her exploration of the discourse used in describing women in sports, Stevenson (2002) not only noted the relationship between sexual discourse and perceptions, but the powerful role the media plays. She asserted that the discourse involving women is typically sexualized. Historically, when women athletes did not appear to fit the feminine stereotype and looked too powerful, strong or masculine, discourse deemed these women as “other” or sexually ambiguous. On the other hand, for women who did fit the feminine stereotype, they were exploited by the media to promote the sport. In this case, the media played a significant role in how women athletes were perceived. Although her study focused primarily on the discourse of the Australian Open, women athletes’ performances and their subsequent portrayal by the media, Stevenson did establish a link between women, sexuality, discourse and the media.

Gauntlett (2008) further emphasized the link between the media, sexuality and discourse. He identified discourse as a ““way of talking about things’ within a group, culture or society; or a set of ideas within a culture which shapes how we perceive the world” (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 18). In *Cosmopolitan*, in particular, Gauntlett noted that the sexually explicit discourse was considered revolutionary as it presented a provocative discussion of sexual matters that may have earlier been perceived as intimate. This shift in discourse may have changed the ways in which women perceived and communicated about their own sexuality, thus making *Cosmopolitan* an important resource. This

development is an important reason for analyzing whether differences among international versions of the magazine are significant.

In exploring communication involving sexuality, Reinholtz, Muehlenhard, Phelps and Satterfield (1995) delved into the issue of cultural norms and language. They noted that through media, such as magazines and television, cultural assumptions about sexuality are both created and perpetuated. The researchers also acknowledged that modes of communication, like magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, and the language used not only reflect cultural norms and values but they also shape those norms and values (Reinholtz, Muehlenhard, Phelps & Satterfield, 1995). The researchers went on to indicate the impact of sexual discourse on sexuality; they wrote

Language serves a highly influential role in the creation of a mutually agreed upon reality. Our conceptualization of human sexuality, for example, is a product of our culture and language and reflects but one way of understanding human sexual experience (Reinholtz, Muehlenhard, Phelps & Satterfield, 1995, p. 143).

Although the researchers focused primarily on sexual coercion, their description of the relationship between the media, language and social norms is significant. While this relationship was explored in the examination of sexual linguistics, it seems that it can also be said that sociocultural standards maintain an influence over discourse. What is important is if this relationship can be seen in international editions of a popular magazine like *Cosmopolitan*.

Machin and Thornborrow (2003) focused specifically on the sexual discourse of *Cosmopolitan*. In their exploration of the discursive elements of *Cosmopolitan*, they noted the impact of the magazine's global brand, which they identified as "a set of representations and values that are not indissolubly tied to a specific product or products"

(Machin & Thornborrow, 2003, p. 454). Although each culture's version of *Cosmopolitan* might differ, the researchers determined that all magazines contain a common element: the *Cosmo* brand. This "brand" promotes independence, fun and power through sexuality. In addition, they noted that this branding is consistent across cultural lines. What needs to be explored, then, is not how the *Cosmo* brand exists in international editions of *Cosmopolitan*, but how those editions might differ in their approach to discourse.

In looking at one international version, Erjavec (2006) explored the textual devices used in Slovenia's *Cosmopolitan*. Using critical discourse analysis, she determined that the sex, love and relationship section in *Cosmopolitan* focused on a prescriptive discourse, one that promoted normative sexual behavior. She noted that the discourse used and the conversational style of the articles were an effective means of identifying the boundaries of normal sexual behavior and abnormal sexual behavior. She also found that these articles employed imperative mood and prescriptive vocabulary. In order for *Cosmopolitan* to be useful in Slovenia, Erjavec determined that the magazine uses a common sense construction based on pseudo-intimate, pseudo-scientific and prescriptive discourse. What needs to be seen is if such a pattern of prescriptive discourse promoting normative sexual behavior might occur in other international editions of *Cosmopolitan* magazine.

As sexual discourse may be used by *Cosmopolitan*, it also, as indicated by the research presented, may be shaped by social and cultural norms. Furthermore, as the magazine may promote a frank, provocative and prescriptive discourse, it has a significant influence in presenting to readers what might be normative. As Erjavec (2006)

asserted that one version of the magazine promoted normative behavior, it needs to be determined if other editions similarly promote normative behavior.

Normative

In order to analyze editions of magazines to see if they promote normative behavior, it is necessary to first look at how normative behavior is structured, what kind of link it has with sexuality and the media, and how it can be affected by social and cultural norms. Social and cultural norms, in particular, have played a central role in the constructions of sexuality, sexual linguistics and sexual discourse as it may shape the way these three concepts are developed and how they appear in magazines. Therefore, it is important to note if normative behavior is likewise shaped by these norms as this effect may be reflected in international editions of *Cosmopolitan*; because these magazines appear in different cultures, the normative behavior they promote can be shaped by the existing and potentially different norms and values.

Ajzen (1991) defined “normative beliefs” as those that are concerned with the likelihood that important individuals or groups – the ingroup – will approve or disapprove of a given behavior. He also asserted that normative beliefs determine subjective norms, which are the perceived social pressures to perform a specific behavior. Based on this statement, it would seem that normative beliefs play a significant role in how people feel they should behave. What this assertion means for *Cosmopolitan* is that if the magazine is a cultural resource looked to by women as a way to learn about sexuality, it holds a significant amount of influence. Therefore, if the magazine presents normative behavior as it has “approved” it, readers might feel pressured to behave in the

way the magazine encourages. Although Ajzen's research was grounded in the theory of planned behavior, his definition of normative beliefs and its influence on subjective norms can serve as a basis for determining the kind of normative behavior that *Cosmopolitan* may promote.

However, other research has contradicted some of Ajzen's (1991) findings. Armitage and Connor (2001) found that the subjective norm has been considered a fairly weak predictor of behavior as actions driven primarily by attitude may be a separate category (Armitage & Connor, 2001). They then stated that a variety of factors of normative conduct may independently determine behavioral intentions. What is emphasized, however, is that, according to the expectancy-value model of the theory of planned behavior, normative beliefs relate directly to how an individual will approve or disapprove of behavior that is held by individuals or groups, such as society as a whole. Therefore, the same assertion could be made of *Cosmopolitan's* influence; as a resource looked to for guidance and learning, it may reflect the views of "society" and be interpreted as belonging to an ingroup. Readers may then look to the magazine as it promotes normative behavior.

Based on the assertions made by Ajzen (1991) and Armitage and Connor (2001), it has been asserted that *Cosmopolitan* could reflect normative behavior in its pages as readers may view it as a valuable source and member of an ingroup. However, *Cosmopolitan's* promotion of normative behavior incorporates sexual behavior, which neither Ajzen nor Armitage and Connor addressed. Therefore, it is necessary to determine if there is any kind of link between normative beliefs and any subsequent sexual behavior.

Through surveying 84 women, Hamblin (1983) examined male power and the role of normative behavior in heterosexual relationships by identifying what is “real” or “normal” when couples engage in sexual intercourse. She wrote

For women these definitions and expectations are imposed upon us in three ways – first, by constant reinforcement by the culture, secondly, by the actual sexual behaviour of men towards us, and thirdly, by our own internalisation of those beliefs (Hamblin, 1983, p. 109).

Previous research (Ménard & Kleinpatz, 2007; Kim & Ward, 2004) has shown how male roles may be perpetuated in magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and how it may affect women reader’s perceptions. For example, Ménard and Kleinpatz (2007) stated that men were depicted as being wild and animalistic, but defenseless against certain sex tricks while women were depicted as only enjoying sex for her partner’s sake (p. 13). Although Hamblin focused on society and men’s demand as two separate influences, when it comes to a magazine like *Cosmopolitan*, which may reflect cultural standards and provide normative behavior for how men enjoy the sexual pleasure female readers can give them, the two influences may be combined. As stated earlier, if women view *Cosmopolitan* as a resource for learning, it is possible that they may then internalize the magazine’s messages on what is “normal” and “real.”

Normative beliefs and behaviors can be transmitted to individuals as they perceive what behavior society or an ingroup approves or disapproves. As a cultural resource that serves to help readers learn their sexuality, *Cosmopolitan* can be viewed as part of that ingroup. Likewise, as magazines can reflect sociocultural standards, *Cosmopolitan* may also reflect society’s standards. Finally, as the magazine also incorporates male pleasure, it may present to the reader information on men’s views of sex and female behavior during sexual activities. As a result of all of these factors,

Cosmopolitan readers may adjust their behavior to fit what they perceive to be “normal” and “real.” Therefore, in this thesis, normative behavior refers to any behavior that is prescribed by *Cosmopolitan*.

Social construction of reality

Based on the research so far, social and cultural standards play a significant role in not only the development of sexuality and sexual behaviors, but also in sexual linguistics, sexual discourse, and the perceptions of normative behavior. As a result of these observations, it seems as though Berger and Luckmann’s (1966, 2002) theory of social construction of reality theory can explain the relationship culture has with these concepts.

Social construction of reality theory, according to Berger and Luckmann (1966, 2002), asserts that human behavior becomes embedded in society, therefore making reality constructed by man. Additionally, the control of humans through patterns of conduct is inherent to institutionalization. They wrote, “...Human sexuality is socially controlled by its institutionalization in the course of the particular history in question” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 43). Furthermore, in exploring sexuality in social construction of reality, the researchers also noted that “human sexuality is directed, sometimes rigidly structured, in every particular culture” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 49). Therefore, not only does social construction of reality provide for the theory that sexuality is a creation by society, but it also provides for normative behaviors, specifically those involving sexuality. Based on the research presented, this theory

accounts for the influence of culture on sexual identities and behaviors, and potentially the various expressions of sexuality, such as sexual linguistics and discourse.

Travis and White (2000) asserted that sexuality and sexual behaviors are controlled social constructs. In their analysis, the researchers stated that social construction of reality provides a framework for sexuality. They said that sexuality is “negotiated between people and groups and emerges as a result of normative standards about what is both typical and desirable” (Travis & White, 2000, p. 238). Furthermore, they went on to state

Although sexuality may be experienced as a personal and highly private aspect of the self, social and political frameworks fundamentally shape the ways in which we think about and experience sexuality. These frameworks encompass norms, expectations, labels, habits, customs, judgments, values, and social scripts of sexuality and sexual behavior (Travis & White, 2000, p. 239).

Therefore, it is possible to say that these frameworks, which may be a reflection of society, significantly influence the norms involving sex. Furthermore, while sexuality might be private, it is not excluded from outside influences. Society and culture could strongly shape how sexuality is constructed, both as a concept and in individuals’ lives. What remains to be seen, however, is how this influence of social and cultural standards for sexual normality is seen in *Cosmopolitan* and its international editions.

Swidler (1986) asserted that culture, which she defines as “symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life,” has a causal role in human action (Swidler, 1986, p. 273). She stated that there are two explanations for why people of various cultural backgrounds behave differently in similar situations: people live in “settled lives” or “unsettled lives.” Settled lives account for

