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# A space of one's own: Women's magazine consumption within family life

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- *This is a study of women's magazine consumption in the home. It explores issues of time and space, and addresses the importance the women who took part in the study place on magazine consumption in their lives, given the 'juggling' lifestyle experienced by most of them. The study reveals family life to be a landscape within which these women carve out what they perceive as valuable and rare time and space for themselves. The authors argue that in contemporary family life women's magazines play a key part in the quest for me-time and time away from others, in both a tangible and experiential sense.*

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## Introduction

The importance of a space of one's own is the subject of this article. The context is the consumption of women's magazines in the home by a group of contemporary, 'juggling' women, namely women in their 30s and 40s who typically have to wrestle with multiple expectations, responsibilities and roles associated with the home and the workplace (Thompson, 1996). We will discuss these women's access to, and desire for, space, time and privacy in the context of their family life, and their need for time and space in the domestic sphere, as well as the gender roles and gendered expectations within that domestic sphere.

We explore these issues via an interpretivist study of women's experiential consumption of magazines in the home. Experiential consumption is described by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) as focusing on the emotional, imaginative and sensory elements of the consumption experience, particularly its hedonic aspects and symbolic power. Experiential consumption also underlines the importance of desires and fantasies in relation to consumers' consumption of certain products and experiences, such as books, movies, television programmes and other media. In this study we describe how one such medium, women's magazines, are used as vehicles to facilitate and legitimise a focus on the self and time out from the family and their needs and wants. The study describes how these women, at both an imaginary and material level, use magazines to carve out alternative spaces that act as a break and a buffer from the typical restraints of home life.

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We explore the strategies and scenarios that characterise their disengagement from their typically multiple roles as wives, and/or housekeepers, and/or mothers, and the tension that exists for them between communal family living and their separate needs, as individuals, for privacy and space. We will argue that this quest for time out and 'me-time' represents an important desire for women to assert their right to a space of their own within the home environment, and in the midst of the hurly burly of everyday family life.

Women's magazines are a key medium for women, and indeed their demand has been sustained since their inception in the 18th century. Despite competition from new media, reading is currently prospering, according to Keynote (2005a), with an increase in books readership of 17.0 per cent and a rise in magazine readership of 6.1 per cent from 2004 to 2005 in the UK market. Keynote forecasts that the women's magazine market in the UK 'will continue to grow' from 2005 to 2009, despite competition from newspapers, television and the Internet. Readership of women's monthly magazines rose by 1.1 per cent during 2004 and it is now worth an estimated £402.9 m *per annum* in the UK (Keynote, 2005b). Research on readership of women's magazines reveals that 35 per cent of women are loyal readers who buy the same magazine every month.

Women's magazines enable women readers to enter a 'shared imaginary' (Finnegan, 1997), that is to say, an imagined community of other women readers who share common experiences and interests. The notion of an 'interpretive community' of readers is well-documented in literary theory (Fish, 1980), and it is a theoretical concept that has been applied to advertising research (see, e.g. Scott, 1994; Stern, 2000). In the women's magazine literature, the 'community' offered by a magazine has been likened to a 'dream world' of mutual desires and shared concerns (Winship, 1987).

In this paper we explore the experiential and symbolic aspects of women's magazine consumption in relation to the mental, spatial

and temporal aspects of consumption in the context of the geography and territories of the household. Space as regards the domestic sphere has a tangible, literal meaning that addresses issues of individual privacy, territory and the boundaries between communal and individual spaces (King, 2004). Space may also be envisaged in an intangible, imaginary sense, a mental space that is as much about psychological distancing as physical distancing. As such, it may be envisaged as a psychological need akin to a kind of self-therapy. In another sense, however, space is located in a particular place, in this case the home, and in the home environment space cannot be considered separately from time, as the two tend to be inextricably interlinked, especially for women, as we will demonstrate.

### ***Spaces of separation: Individual space versus collective space in the home***

The modernist equation of liberation with individualism has had particular consequences for women in that it led to liberal feminism becoming the dominant narrative of women's liberation. This so-called 'selfism' discourse proved to be very problematic for women, however, in that it perceives liberation as an individual struggle rather than a collective struggle. One can see its prevalence in women's magazines throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Ferguson, 1983; Winship, 1987; Ballaster *et al.*, 1991). In the 21st century, however, the narrative of individualisation in the context of femininity has come to equate individual freedom, in postmodern terms, with women's right to 'me-time' and self-indulgence. After all, many of the battles for equality in the workplace and in the home are perceived to have been won, and thus attention has turned to the private sphere as a place where these 'juggling' women assume their traditional roles as mothers, home-makers and housekeepers and also try to unwind from the demands of their day-to-day responsibilities, both in the home and in the workplace. In

the context of the private sphere, then, liberation may take the form of small acts of assertion and rebellion within family life that acquire a powerful, symbolic quality. They also have some political significance, albeit at a micro level, in that battles for personal space are continually waged and contested in the home, as finite space is negotiated and re-negotiated by individual family members.

The right to individual space has always been a particularly problematic concept for women in our culture. This is because women frequently have to reconcile their right to space and time out from others with the relational and work demands of family life. Above all, they have to overcome the guilt associated with putting self before others (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Lash, 2001). The present authors have discussed elsewhere the ambivalence and guilt experienced by women readers of magazines in relation to the concepts of me-time and self-indulgence (Stevens *et al.*, 2003). Gray's (1992) study of household leisure activities also revealed the guilt experienced by women in relation to leisure in the home generally. Chodorow's (1978) influential study of gender development and gendered subjectivity argued that women are conditioned to be nurturing, relational and familial, whereas men are conditioned to be independent, separate and autonomous. If we accept Chodorow's argument, one can see how the notion of 'me-time' might conflict with the dominant, accepted narrative of femininity. Our research indicates that despite the passage of time and the concomitant improvement in women's 'lot', self-nurturing and private space continue to be complex and problematic concepts for women in the 21st century.

Moreover, privacy within the home can be particularly problematic for women, not least from a design point of view. Munro and Madigan (1999) note that since the 1960s housing in the UK has adopted the North American, modernist emphasis on open-plan living. New housing has become based on communal spaces, such as open-plan kitchen/diners, which appeal to consumers' demands

for a sense of light and space. Given the typical layout of new housing it thus becomes more and more difficult to have individual privacy, except in the bedrooms. Indeed many children now have their own multi-functional bedrooms, which give them their own privacy and also give parents privacy from them (Murdock *et al.*, 1995). Men are also likely to have their own rooms, for example a DIY workroom or shed, or other hobby-type affiliated spaces (Morley, 2000). It is rare for a woman to have a room of her own, however, unless it is the kitchen, which is also 'the heart of the process of domestic labour' (Morley, 2000, p. 72). Unless the woman is without a partner, the sanctuary of the bedroom is a shared sanctuary, and thus privacy is a particularly difficult concept for many women in our culture.

Women's traditional responsibility for domestic order also means that they are not always able to enjoy home as a relaxing haven in the way other household members can, particularly since women have been typically responsible for emotional care, peace-keeping and domestic harmony, at least according to familial ideology (Gray, 1992; Munro and Madigan, 1999). One way in which women take time out within a crowded family scenario is to distance themselves, perhaps by cooking or ironing whilst others watch TV. This 'busy-ness' can create a space without the pointed separation that would be indicated if they left the room (Munro and Madigan, 1999).

Aside from relational demands, the home also suggests humdrum aspects and drudgery, especially for women, who continue to do most of the household chores (Oakley, 1974; Gray, 1992; Morley, 2000). In this context, magazine consumption may be an act that serves to offer an interlude or break from the demands and routine activities of family life. Women consumers of magazines in the home may thus be conceptualised as active individuals, constructing and making sense of a particular consumption practice in the context of their everyday lives, and trying to balance *their* needs with the needs of others in the family. These needs are increasingly accepted and uncontested ones in our culture, given that

they are in line with the democratisation of the family away from patriarchal values (Munro and Madigan, 1999). Indeed women's right to time and space is now so well-acknowledged that it has become woven into narratives of womanhood in consumer culture and media texts, particularly visible in advertising narratives. As we will argue, however, issues of time and space continue to be complex and difficult ones for women.

### ***Women's genres and women's lives***

Women's genres such as soap opera, romance fiction and women's magazines can best be understood when viewed through the lens of 'women's culture' (Showalter in Abel, 1982). This perspective positions women's genres within a 'muted' communality of women based on equality and sisterhood, and as such women's culture can be perceived as an empowering one that often serves to mock the dominant (male) discourse and culture (Radner, 1995). Women's genres have been traditionally associated with low culture as opposed to high culture, and consequently have been trivialised and denigrated (Lury, 1996). Indeed mass culture in all its forms has been traditionally perceived as 'feminine and inferior' (Huysen, 1986, p. 196, in Hollows, 2000). This perspective has been challenged and indeed overturned, with cultural studies critics now celebrating popular culture as important cultural practices that privilege consumption and 'the beliefs and practices of ordinary people' (Schudson, 1998, p. 495). The shift in focus is symptomatic of the breakdown of high culture and low culture, and indeed many other binary oppositions in contemporary Western consumer culture (Nowell-Smith, 1987; Frith, 1998). It is typically attributed to postmodernism, and McRobbie (1994) argues that one of the major effects of postmodernism in cultural studies has been to take 'popular pleasures seriously' (p. 26). The new *Zeitgeist* manifests itself as a post-modern interest in readers and consumers

rather than a modernist interest in producers and texts, in how texts are received and interpreted by readers, rather than in how they are constructed and made.

There has been considerable debate in the past 10 years or so about the relationship between feminism and postmodernism (see, e.g. Nava, 1991; Ang and Hermes, 1997; Shildrick, 1997; Creed, 1998; Morris, 1998), and the issue of whether women's genres should be understood within a modernist discourse of concern and displeasure, or within a postmodernist discourse of celebration and pleasure is one that continues to rage in feminist media studies (Van Zoonen, 1994). The literature on women's magazines reflects these two conflicting discourses. The modernist concern discourse predominated in the 1970s and 1980s during Second wave feminism, and resulted in some powerful critiques of women's magazines (see, e.g. Ferguson, 1983; Winship, 1987), all of which critiqued women's magazines for creating and perpetuating false consciousness in women. More recently, reader-focused studies have adopted a postmodern, non-judgemental and celebratory perspective (see e.g. Radner, 1995; Ang, 1996). Nava (1991) writes that the paradigm shift from production to consumption in these so-called postmodern times has led to an orientation towards 'fantasy, identity, meaning and protest', and ultimately to 'a new consumer activism' in relation to which women are ideally placed (p. 167). This postmodern feminist stance focuses less on the oppressive and exploitative power of women's magazines, and more on their liberatory potential: media that offer women multiple pleasures, multiple choices and indeed acknowledge multiple identities (McCracken, 1993). The focus for researchers and commentators is thus on respect rather than concern for readers, on not moralising, and on letting readers speak and judge for themselves. Above all, a post-modern emphasis stresses pleasure, creativity and reader resistance (Hermes, 1995). In keeping with this perspective, Ang (1996) suggests that rather than seeing women's genres as either a cause for concern or

something to celebrate, it is perhaps more constructive for us to adopt a flexible and pragmatic approach. Our work is positioned within this postmodern feminist perspective.

Women's genres are usually cyclical and fluid in form and they tend to comprise women-centred narratives and have a relational and private sphere focus. They are also primarily written by and consumed by women and construct and address a feminine subject (Modleski, 1982; Ballaster *et al.*, 1991; Geraghty, 1991). Modleski (1982) has argued that women's genres reflect the deferrals, incompleteness, repetitions and lack of focus so often experienced by women in terms of their work in the home. More recently, Moores (1997) writes that they typically appeal to fantasy, but offer 'emotional realism'. Escapism and fantasy are key characteristics of women's genres, enabling women to enter ideal worlds which often bear little or no resemblance to their everyday lives (Geraghty, 1997, 1998). In their utopian appeal, however, these genres may also serve as resistance to the current social order and challenge masculine cultural norms (Modleski, 1982; Light, 1984; Ballaster *et al.*, 1991; Beetham, 1996).

With regard to women's magazines as a genre, different magazines are read in different ways. Weekly magazines tend to be read in a shallow way as befits their format, content and purpose (Winship, 1987). However, monthly magazines (namely those that are bought regularly and are often subscribed to) are read in an entirely different manner that is in some respects more comparable to reading books. These magazines are read in a sustained, concentrated, time-intensive and attention-intensive way. This form of magazine consumption was given high status and high significance by the women who took part in this research study. Monthly magazines are typically consumed in a ritualistic manner that involves planning and anticipation, as well as scene setting and privacy. As such they facilitate a consumer ritual that is highly charged with symbolic, expressive activity (Rook, 1985). In a sense women become stage managers, materially manipulating time and

space in order to set the scene for magazine consumption.

The overall purpose of this current study has been to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the values and meanings attached to women reader's rituals surrounding magazine consumption, and how magazines assist them in configuring time and space within the confines of family life. As such, its primary focus is on women consumers, and what they make of magazines in the context of their day-to-day lives.

### **Methodology**

This study is based on a larger research project that involved a pool of 36 women readers of magazines ranging in age from 25 to 50. All of the women interviewed lived in Ireland and the average age of the women interviewed was 35. For details of the respondents who took part in phase two of the research project, which forms the basis of this study, refer to **Table 1**. The research project is located within the interpretivist paradigm and consequently it used a multi-method, qualitative approach. This included small group discussions, in-depth interviews, accompanied readings, personal diaries, personal subjective introspection and video viewings of an advertising campaign for a women's magazine. The primary focus of the study was to understand how and why women consumed magazines. The women readers were recruited using friendship pyramiding and snowballing (Hermes, 1995). The main criterion for selection was that the participants read women's magazines on a regular basis and thus broadly belonged to the same interpretive community (Fish, 1980). The women were from a range of social backgrounds, incomes and educational levels, but all were united by their common pleasure in reading women's magazines. Most of the women worked, either full-time or part-time, and thus had a role or roles in both the public and private spheres. However, like most women in contemporary Western culture, they felt primarily responsible for child

**Table 1.** Participants in the research study

Pseudonym	Age	Family details	Occupation	Preferred magazines
Andrea	36	Married, two children	Office administrator, civil service	<i>Cosmopolitan, Hello</i>
Anne	34	Married, two children	Supervisor, govt agency	<i>Marie Claire, Cosmopolitan</i>
Carol	37	Married, two children	Mature student	<i>Hello, Hello</i>
Caroline	35	Married, one child	University lecturer	<i>Hello, OK</i>
Dervla	42	Married, two children	Secretary in university department	<i>Now, Woman</i>
Donna	33	Single	Clerical worker	<i>Hello, OK, Cosmopolitan, Now</i>
Dymphna	42	Married, one child	Senior university academic	<i>Marie Claire, Good Housekeeping, Homes &amp; Gardens</i>
Erin	34	Married, one child	Mature student	<i>Vogue, Elle</i>
Finnoula	40	Married, two children	Journalist in local newspaper	<i>Vogue, Elle, Ideal Home</i>
Helen	37	Separated, two children	Primary school teacher	<i>She, New Woman, OK, Hello</i>
Isabelle	44	Married, One child	Housewife	<i>Marie Claire</i>
Jane	34	Married, three children	Freelance counsellor	<i>Marie Claire</i>
Janeen	37	Married, two children	Supervisor, govt agency	<i>Ok, Hello, Cosmopolitan</i>
Joan	40	Married, three children	Mature student	<i>OK, Hello, Now, Woman &amp; Home</i>
Joanne	39	Married, two children	Housewife	<i>Good Housekeeping, Hello</i>
Jules	36	Married, two children	Part-time social/community worker	<i>Now, Hello</i>
Julia	34	Co-habiting, two children	Social/community worker	<i>Marie Claire, OK</i>
Julie	42	Separated, two children	Mature student	<i>OK, Hello, Red</i>
Juliet	35	Married, two children	Part-time university administrator	<i>Zest</i>
Katie	36	Married, two children	Freelance alternative health practitioner	<i>Prima, She, Woman &amp; Home, Essentials</i>
Laura	47	Co-habiting, two children	Part-time community worker	<i>Vogue, Prima, Bella</i>
Lucy	29	Single	Administrator, govt office	<i>Cosmopolitan, Marie Claire</i>
Maeve	34	Married	University lecturer	<i>Homes &amp; Gardens, Irish Interiors</i>
Maria	49	Married, five children	Housewife	<i>Good Housekeeping, Woman &amp; Home, OK</i>
Marie	35	Separated, three children	Administrative supervisor, civil service	<i>Red, Cosmopolitan, Hello, OK, Country Living</i>
Marina	37	Co-habiting	University lecturer	<i>Marie Claire, Cosmopolitan</i>
Mary	36	Married	Plate maker, newspaper office	<i>Elle, Cosmopolitan, Red</i>
Nadeen	35	Married, two children	Administrator, law firm	<i>Hello, OK</i>
Nadia	36	Co-habiting	Administrator, govt office	<i>Cosmopolitan, Marie Claire, Elle</i>
Rachel	36	Married, two children	Secondary school teacher	<i>Elle, Red, Cosmopolitan</i>
Roisin	40	Married, three children	Midwife	<i>Woman &amp; Home, Good Housekeeping, Marie Claire</i>
Rosemary	34	Co-habiting, one child	Administrator, community work	<i>Marie Claire, Red</i>
Rosia	38	Married, two children	Mature student	<i>Hello, OK</i>
Sandra	42	Married	Enterprise agency coordinator	<i>Marie Claire, Elle</i>
Sarah	36	Separated, one child	School administrator	<i>Cosmopolitan, Marie Claire, Red, Homes &amp; Gardens</i>
Sirtia	48	Single, one child	Unemployed	<i>Take a Break</i>

and household matters (see, e.g. Munro and Madigan, 1999).

An important dimension of the research was to contextualise women's consumption of magazines in relation to their lived experience and 'the on-going flow of everyday life' (Ang and Hermes, 1997, p. 340). The focus on respondents' life-worlds and 'lived experience' has been widely embraced in women's studies and media studies (McRobbie, 1994, 1997; Lury, 1996; Ang and Hermes, 1997; Andrews and Talbot, 2000). 'Storying the self' is a key aspect of research such as this, as it enables individuals to formulate, justify and express personal experience, and give meaning to what might otherwise be experienced as fragmented and chaotic (Finnegan, 1997). Radway (1987) and Grossberg (1988) argue that reception ethnographies, namely studies of everyday media consumption, should explore how media are subjectively experienced by their audiences. We chose to adopt the reception and experience approach to the research project, as identified by Rakow (1998). This takes 'an appreciative view of women's interaction with cultural products within the context of particular social situations and frames of understanding' (p. 284). Elsewhere, this approach has been described as 'engaged empathy' (Andrews and Talbot, 2000). The most well-known study of women's media that adopts this approach is Radway's 1987 study of women romance readers, which focused on how a particular group of women's reading habits fitted within the context of their everyday lives. She noted that reading romance novels constituted a 'minor act of independence that allowed them to assert their need for time and space away from the demands made on them in their roles as primary family caretakers (p. 286). The phenomenological, reader/consumer-focused approach taken in this study is one that has also been used in studies of women consumers in the consumer behaviour field (see, e.g. Thompson *et al.*, 1989, 1990, 1994; Thompson, 1996, 1997; Woodruffe, 1997; Woodruff-Burton, 1998).

Phase one of the research, which comprised four small group discussions and four in-depth

interviews, resulted in the decision to focus attention on women of 'middle youth' for phase two of the research, as it was apparent that this age group (namely women in their 30s and 40s) valued women's magazines as much for their experiential value as for their actual content. This was particularly evident in terms of the high value they placed on personal space, relaxation and time to themselves that magazines facilitated and legitimised. This age group of women also tended to have more multi-faceted lives, in that most were juggling full-time and part-time jobs with the demands of partners, children and homes. Given that they usually had roles in both spheres, they typically saw home as a place of work but also as a place of relaxation. It was decided that this age group would add to the richness of data from an 'experience and reception' perspective as well as from a consumer behaviour perspective.

Phase two of the research primarily comprised 18 in-depth interviews. A key finding to emerge from the study was that women's magazines were read not only for their content but for what they facilitated and legitimised within the fabric of women's busy lives. They were largely consumed for their experiential and sensuous appeal, and had an important role to play in the context of the fabric of the everyday lived experience of the women who took part in the research. The issue of how a magazine as a product category is transformed into a vehicle that enables women readers to transcend their day-to-day lives is explored elsewhere by one of the authors in a separate study (Stevens, 2002). In this present paper we focus on three important interlinking motifs that ran throughout all of the data, namely the mental, physical and temporal aspects of magazine consumption, and the rituals that surround them.

### **Findings**

The findings that follow are organised in terms of these three key themes. They show how the women who took part in the study mentally,

physically and temporally cleared a space and set the scene for magazine consumption. The first category, 'clearing a space' explores issues around the mental, imaginative and anticipatory aspects of magazine consumption that enable women to clear a space at some distance (either literally, metaphorically or both) away from the family and join an 'imaginary community' of other readers. The concept of a woman's magazine as a trusted 'friend' is a powerful and persistent one that characterises the women's magazine genre from its emergence in the 18th century to the present day (Ballaster *et al.*, 1991, p. 107). The second category, 'setting the scene', describes the physical, tangible dimensions of magazine consumption, addressing issues such as the actual scenarios within which women read magazines. The final category, 'time to oneself', explores temporal aspects and the role of time in this process. Time is an overarching factor that determines the mental and physical space available to women consumers of magazines.

### *Clearing a space*

One of the key themes to emerge from the study was the mental processes that were involved in magazine consumption. This often took the form of mentally clearing a space, as well as thinking ahead, planning, and above all, looking forward to consuming their chosen magazines. Indeed this initial stage in the magazine consumption process was a very important one as it enabled women readers to set the scene, mentally, physically and temporally, for what was to follow. Anticipation was an integral part of this scene setting stage of the magazine consumption experience. This deep level of involvement on the part of our informants is characteristic of ritual rather than habit (Tetreault and Kleine, 1990). For example several made the point that the situation had to be right: reading the magazine when they were not fully relaxed would 'spoil' or 'ruin' the magazine consumption experience for them. Katie, who is married with two

small children and works freelance as an alternative health practitioner, likened these anticipatory aspects of magazine consumption to looking forward to opening a Christmas present. She went on:

*... it's tempting but you don't actually open it. ... It's like you're building up to something, it's something you're looking forward to ... It's like looking forward to Christmas or something and [the build up] is generally more exciting than the actual thing!*

In a similar vein, several others referred to the arrival of or purchase of their magazines as having the excitement and anticipation of a gift. Significantly, women's magazines are primarily bought as self-gifts. Monadic gift giving is often engaged in as a reward for work done or as a therapy to provide an escape from daily pressures (Mick and DeMoss, 1990a, 1990b). Sherry *et al.*'s (1995, p. 408) studies of monadic gift giving reveal that such behaviour is motivated by a need for 'volitional ceremonial self-care'.

As is evident from Katie's extracts, looking forward to magazine consumption was an intrinsic part of the consumption experience, and this looking forward was usually accompanied by references to how precious the magazine reading experience was to them, so much so that the situation had to be just right in order to maximise the pleasure of their consumption. For example Juliet, who is married with two teenage children and works part-time as a clerical administrator, describes how she 'would be eagerly waiting' for the right time to be able to read that magazine. 'I would forsake 2 days without reading that magazine [Zest] to wait for the right time to be able to read it'. Another woman, Isabelle, who is married with one child and does not work outside the home, likened waiting for her copy of *Marie Claire* to arrive in the post to an 'addiction'.

Dymphna, a senior academic who is married with one daughter, also stressed the importance of waiting until the situation was right

before she opened and read her *Marie Claire* and *Good Housekeeping*, putting them aside until she could devote her full attention to reading them:

*[Magazines] are something I look forward to doing ... and I would keep them until I had - go to bed and have time to enjoy them. I wouldn't flick through them. They are something that I would put aside and say I will look forward to reading that later at the end of the day when I've everything else out of the way ... I know they are going to come, and I look forward to getting them. ... I put them to the side ... I bring them home, I leave them.*

Delaying the consumption of her magazines in no way detracts from the pleasure they give, in fact it may actually enhance the pleasure. For the women readers who took part in the study, magazines are something to luxuriate over. They do not want to spoil their magazine consumption by flicking through a magazine at odd, stolen moments through the day.

Helen, who is a divorced teacher with two children, puts her magazine on a table in the hallway, and then waits until she has the chance to read it properly and give it her full attention: 'I'm just waiting for the opportunity, but I know it's there'. By placing it in full view on the hall table, she can see her magazine wherever she goes, which increases her anticipation, reminding her of the pleasures that await. The hallway is a neutral place, a liminal zone and a transitional space that is at the margins of family life, and at the threshold of other private and communal spaces in the home. The magazine is set in this transitional place, an aesthetically inviting and sacred object, awaiting its consumption when the time is right. Clearly this form of magazine reading is a far cry from snatching a few moments here and there in a busy day to flick through the pages of a magazine. This form of magazine reading is about setting aside 'quality' time in order to maximise the pleasure of their consumption.

Sometimes the anticipatory aspect of magazine consumption could lead to feelings of anxiety that it would not live up to expectations. There was a fear that consummation, to use Holbrook's (1995) preferred term for the consumption experience, would bring with it dissatisfaction, disappointment and anti-climax. Occasionally this anxiety was such that it led participants to delay their reading of magazines for fear of this disappointment: 'Sometimes the idea of it is so nice and I'm scared of being disappointed', said Caroline a lecturer who is married with two children.

### **Setting the scene**

A second key aspect of magazine consumption was the physical setting in which it took place. In the context of the home, this was a crucial issue for the women who took part in the study, particularly since much depended on the right scenario if they were to get the most pleasure possible from magazine consumption. All agreed that getting the scenario right was essential and that the right scenario meant the absence of other family members. For Katie, magazine consumption ideally takes place when her two children are asleep or her husband and children are elsewhere. Here she describes her ideal reading scenario:

*at night time when the children are in bed, or if [husband's name] would take them out in the afternoon I would look forward to them going and I would get quite excited, and if I had a magazine I would make sure they'd gone, get the coffee on and curl up in a chair. ... There'd be no noise; silence; you'd just want to be on your own and lock the door. ... I would need total peace.*

The need for seclusion from others was common to everyone who took part in the study. Like Katie, Juliet refers to the necessity for 'peace' if she is to be able to enjoy consuming magazines:

*I don't like noise, banging doors and squealing. I just like peace and quiet. . . . Time to myself and allowed that time for me to just de-stress, time for me to wind down, read my magazine, and get my information out of it, and for me that is pleasure. No noise, no interruptions, no hassle, and to be honest, maybe about 3 or 5 years ago that was unheard of. I had a young family and you just had never had time for yourself, and for me now - just to get that little bit of me back again - it just seems to be a circle and it has revolved right round again and during the week it is virtually impossible to have time to myself because I'm working most of the day, come home, the children, homeworks, taxi service - take me here, take me there, check homeworks, go through homeworks, get cleared up - you know, the run of the mill stuff. I wouldn't sit down 'til maybe 9.30, 10.00.*

Juliet and Katie's search for peace was echoed by other informants. The essential absence of other family members and the peace that this ensures is a way to enable them to opt out of family life and temporarily put aside their mothering roles. We can see this too in Juliet's quest to get a little bit of herself back which she feels is always in danger of being lost in the context of her multiple roles and duties within the home. As such, one can appreciate the emancipatory and indeed subversive potential of magazine consumption, whereby the consumption of such cultural products constitute minor acts of independence (Rakow, 1998, *op. cit.*).

Partners invariably got 'short shrift' when the women were trying to read their magazines. Isabelle, who is married with one daughter and does not work outside of the home, describes her reaction when her husband inadvertently interrupts her when she is consuming the much-loved copy of *Marie Claire* that she subscribes to every month: 'Actually [he] might come into the bedroom to ask me something and I say close the door, I'm reading my *Marie Claire!*'. In

similar vein, Lucy, who lives with her partner and has no children, goes to bed, lights a cigarette, and, like Isabelle, 'closes the door'. This emphatic action can be interpreted as a defensive, even defiant act. Assertive action is called for in order for them to carve out this time away from others and their demands.

For the majority of the women who took part in the study, reading a favourite magazine in the home was typically a private, solitary pleasure. As such the ceremony of reading enables women to concentrate exclusively on themselves and the pleasures offered by their magazines. This sentiment is expressed by Helen, a primary school teacher, who is separated and has two children. As Helen expressed it: 'you can't do it when the kids are around, or when you have friends round, it's not very sociable. . . . Because you do have to be quite focused on it to enjoy it and appreciate it'. This quote from Helen recalls the notion of women's magazines as a 'dreamworld' (Winship, 1987), which enables women to escape from their real, day-to-day lives. It also emphasises that immersion in the text is only really possible when there are no other distractions, and typically these distractions are other people.

It was only when these women were free from family considerations that they could enjoy magazine consumption. Whilst their consumption resulted in women turning away from their families, women's magazines opened up another, alternative 'woman's world' to them, an 'interpretive community' of readers, editors and writers, all of whom shared their interests, concerns and life experiences (Ballaster *et al.*, 1991). Indeed the sense of being understood by their preferred magazines and thus of experiencing a sense of connectedness to other women, was very strong in all of the women who took part in the study. Dymphna, for example used words like 'knows' and 'trusts' to refer to her preferred magazines, and Juliet remarked that she regarded her preferred magazine as a 'friend' that offered her 'support'. In similar vein Marina who is a lecturer and lives with her partner and young daughter, remarked that *Cosmopolitan* had 'always seemed to know what I would be interested

in', and later she commented that she would 'trust' what she was reading in it. There were numerous other examples of the importance of a sense of community in terms of the reading experience.

Getting the right props in place was a key part of women's pleasure in setting the scene for their consumption of magazines. Indeed there are constellations of other hedonistic, luxurious products (McCracken, 1988; Solomon, 1988) that help to set the scene: coffee, chocolate, wine; ambient products such as aromatic candles, luxurious bath oils and bath foams; and relaxing music all played a part, and were an intrinsic part of women's experiential consumption of magazines. They served to ensure that this time and space away from the family was as pleasurable and as self-indulgent as possible.

A typical scenario is well-illustrated by Sarah, who is a single mother with one daughter, and works full-time as a school administrator. She discusses her preferred way of reading magazines:

*I get in the bath, the lights are off, the candles are on, everything's steamed up because I have to have it so I'm nearly boiling myself. The bubbles are there, the door's locked, she [her daughter] could be squealing blue murder, but it's got to be something good to get me out of the bath. It's very self-indulgent, whereas I think I do the rest of the stuff because I think that's what everybody else expects me to do.*

This ceremony enables Sarah to focus on her own needs and wants, rather than the needs and wants of others. Her magazine consumption is intricately related to self-indulgence and sensuous pleasures. Radway (1987, p. 105) uses the phrase 'ritual wish' to describe women's consumption of romance fiction. By this she means that women consume this genre almost as an act of protest that they themselves receive little nurturance in their day-to-day lives. The phrase 'ritual wish' might equally apply to women's consumption of magazines. The 'ritual wish' is expressed as a

need for self-identity, self-regard and self-validation in magazine consumption; it is ritualised into a sensuous act of self-care and self-celebration. The importance of privacy, silence and solitude in terms of the right reading scenarios were emphasised throughout the interviews, and these were key elements of women's experiential consumption of magazines.

### *A time to oneself*

The previous two sections have explored the mental and physical aspects of magazine consumption. Whilst mental and physical spaces were very important issues in relation to magazine consumption, time was every bit as important an issue. This section will explore that complex, rare thing, time, in relation to women's magazine consumption.

The following extract from Katie's diary amusingly conveys how some women can perceive or, in this case, create a window of opportunity, stealing a few precious minutes in order to flick through a magazine. It also demonstrates women's multiple roles in contemporary life:

*I have a busy day in front of me - a friend coming for coffee in 1 hour and [her 7 year old daughter] is bringing a pal home from school, but I've been given a copy of Home and Life magazine and there is a feature on blondes - do blondes have more fun? So I've put [her 3 year old son] in front of the video and am sitting at the table with a coffee - the magazine has Marilyn Monroe on the front cover so I'm automatically drawn to it - had to break off from reading as [her son] peed on the carpet. This is really frustrating as I was really 'into' the article and it's harder to pick up again once you're interrupted. I think I'll go blonde again for the summer!-(Personal Diary).*

As we see in the above quote from Katie, such times facilitate a focus on the self rather than others, the 'myself that could be' (Belk et al., 1996). Katie, for example is playing with

the idea of going blonde. These me-times also have transformative potential, in that they allow women to envisage changes to the status quo, and muse on the gap between their actual lives and their aspirational lives. The periods of 'free' time and 'me-time' which magazines legitimised were frequently mentioned by the participants as part and parcel of their magazine consumption. The participants defended these rare 'times for me' as their 'right' as women who ordinarily had little time to focus on themselves, given the demands of family life, home and work in their lives.

Juliet vividly describes a typical day for her, where magazines fit into it, and what they mean to her in the context of the everyday fabric of her busy life:

*I can't just flick through a book or a magazine. I have to have time to me, and because I would have bought that magazine that day, you know, even if I didn't get reading it that day, I wouldn't be forcing myself to sit down to read it if the children are like swinging round the lampshade, or something ... time for me ... It has to be like, right I've done that, they've gone to school or I have left them off to do other activities like hockey, tennis or whatever it is they are doing. Then I think this is me, I've sorted the family out, this is my time - definitely - I just couldn't sit down and read a book knowing that there were dishes to be done.*

Juliet typifies what most of the participants in the study had to say in relation to me-time and magazine consumption. Magazine consumption was about allotting time to themselves, when they could engage in concentrated reading without fear of interruption, and without feeling guilty about the things they had to do. It is only when they have spent time doing all the other things, in fact, most of which revolve around other people's needs, that they can truly luxuriate in 'me-time', as was particularly evidenced by the comments of Katie, Juliet, Dymphna and Helen. Radway (1987) notes, in relation to women's con-

sumption of romance fiction, that women have little room for 'guilt-less, self-interested pursuit of individual pleasure' (p. 96), and that the consumption of romance fiction offers 'an important emotional release for women'. We would suggest that the same might be said of women's consumption of magazines.

Nadeen, a married woman with two children who works full-time as an administrator in a law firm, describes reading magazines as a rare time when she is free from having to think about others. This time she describes as 'you put your feet up and you don't answer to anybody'. Rosia, who is married with two children and is studying part-time, expressed similar sentiments when she remarked: 'I suppose it's the only time that I don't feel guilty about actually sitting reading'.

Dymphna made the point that magazine reading time was associated with leisure time and luxury, rather than day-to-day activities, and it centred around the concept of 'time off': 'on a Sunday, at weekends, I would sit outside, but it's always something I associate with luxury time as opposed to fitting it into a daily routine.' As a busy working woman with very little free time, she acknowledges that she 'would feel guilty almost sitting down reading that during the day because I would think that I should be doing something else, which is probably a very bad thing to feel'. She finds it difficult to justify magazine reading, therefore, except in the context of luxury time:

*It's because time is so precious, and I feel if I am reading I should be reading something that's to do with work, and it's a luxury that it is [her] time, you know, this isn't work time or anything else, this is my wee world that I close myself off in yeah, and I luxuriate in it.*

Magazines are thus used to legitimise time out from others. In this sense magazine reading may be envisaged, then, as an act of assertion, protest and resistance to the expectations of others in the context of women's daily lives.

## Discussion

As we can see from the above analysis, women's magazine reading, whilst located in the fabric of everyday life, often has sacred, ritualistic aspects that conflict with the daily, domestic round of duties and responsibilities. In their facilitation of mental, physical and temporal spaces that create a distancing from family life, magazine reading may become a highly charged, emotional activity that cannot merely be explained away as a silly habit or a trivial time-filler, as is evidenced in this study. Women's magazines have an important role in the lives of the women who took part in our study, because they both facilitate and legitimise 'me-time'. Rook (1985) has shown how consumer rituals play a significant role in everyday life, and we suggest that magazine reading of this nature is one such ritual. Like other rituals, it requires time, preparation, space and attention to detail, if it is to fulfil its role and have symbolic significance. Our findings demonstrate that the purchase of a simple commodity, a woman's magazine, may enable some women consumers to engage in 'sacred consumption', by which we mean the product becomes set apart from normal activities and is treated with some degree of respect. According to Solomon (2002), sacred consumption may relate to places, people or events. In the case of women's experiential consumption of magazines, we have shown in this localised study how the home is adapted by these women, at both a physical and mental level, to accommodate a sacred, private place within which magazines serve as a facilitator, enabling a woman to focus on her own needs and wants and to temporarily ignore the needs and wants of others.

Driver (1991) identifies the needs that are satisfied by ritual behaviour as: a quest for order, a sense of community and transformation. These three aspects provide a useful basis for the discussion that follows.

First, in the context of the juggling that goes on in these women's everyday lives, women's magazines consumption, on a number of levels, expresses a quest for order. This order

is achieved through various magazine rituals, both temporally and spatially. These 'juggling' women see their time out to consume their favourite magazines as an opportunity to restore calm to their lives at both a tangible (physical) and intangible (mental) level. Temporal order is achieved through careful planning of time to create a space in their busy schedules, a time to themselves, away from family life, time (and space) that is legitimised by both the reader and indeed her family in most cases. This paper suggests that these women use magazines to appropriate a traditionally masculine domain of power; they too want the silence and privacy that is usually allotted to men in the household (Morley, 2000). Furthermore, they see this 'right' as territory that they must continually and perpetually fight for, defend and justify.

Spatial order manifests itself in the physical places where the ritual is performed. According to Driver (1991, p. 9), such spaces encourage people to 'construct alternative worlds ... different from ordinary life'. Our women readers each have their own favoured places and these differed for each woman depending on home circumstances. For some it was the bath, for others the sofa; the toilet even assumed symbolic significance as a sacred place where privacy could be expected, and, needless to say, respected! These private spaces became sanctuaries and places of refuge; they were sacred shrines; private rooms, either literally or metaphorically; spaces that became inviolable, and that enabled the women to be separate from other family members.

Driver's second function, a sense of community, is about uniting emotionally with others and establishing bonds. This has always been an important function of women's magazine consumption (Ballaster *et al.*, 1991). It is visible in terms of the interpretive community that the women perceived themselves to become a part of as they embarked on their magazine reading. Reading their preferred magazine enabled them to experience a sense of connection with other women, and to empathise with other women's lives and

concerns. The concept of an 'interpretive community' (Fish, 1980) focuses on text not as an object but as an experience, given meaning by readers' responses to it, and readers' shared sense of belonging to a community of like-minded readers who share communal terms of reference. As such, readers/consumers are empowered to construct their own meanings and interpretations, and this clearly has emancipatory potential. Driver observes that part of the ritual performance is to escape into this community and cut off from family life. That is clearly what the women readers in our study did when they consumed magazines. The family was ignored and another world was entered that was one remove from their own, but it was a world they could identify with. Within this community they were in some respects free to focus on themselves instead of having to think about others. But at another level they were able to put their own problems and issues as 'juggling' women into perspective, and perhaps even glean useful insights and more importantly, support and validation, from the 'interpretive community' that they had entered. By entering the 'dream world' offered by their magazine (Winship, 1987), the women readers entered a sisterhood of readers with common desires, experiences and aspirations (Radway, 1987; Ballaster *et al.*, 1991). Importantly, too, this community was a community of women, a female world removed from men and children. This too served to enhance the sense of belonging experienced by them.

Finally, Driver's third function of ritual behaviour, transformation, is visible at both a tangible level and an intangible level in the study. At a tangible level, women create ritualistic physical and mental scenarios that enable them to relax their bodies and their minds. Immersion in the world of women's magazines enabled the women in the study to recharge their batteries, and thus return to their day-to-day world with renewed energy. As well as this, women's magazines allowed them to consider transformation at an imaginary level by offering them a multiplicity of possibilities and pleasures. The notion of

transformation has always been a key element of the women's magazine genre (Beetham, 1996). Indeed Ferguson (1983) writes that within women's magazine discourse there is an implicit assumption that femininity is always in the making and that womanhood is both a natural state and is culturally acquired through labour and construction (Ballaster *et al.*, 1991; Damon-Moore, 1994). In the context of magazine consumption, the notion of choice and multiple possibilities that now typically characterises the women's magazine genre and 'feminine culture' generally, firmly positions women consumers as subjects, rather than objects of manipulation (Nava, 1987; Radner, 1995). Contemporary women's magazines thus accommodate contradiction and fragmentation, with choice rather than conversion their *raison d'être*. The genre has become a discourse within which women readers have a proactive, productive and often playful role, continually creating and recreating themselves, negotiating and manipulating the array of possibilities offered to them (Moore, 1986; Radner, 1995; Ang, 1996). Radner (1995) would argue that women readers are increasingly empowered in this discourse, free, as never before, to consider the many possibilities embedded in the heteroglossic discourse offered to them.

To conclude, this study has sought to demonstrate how mental, physical and temporal space is carved out by the women who took part in this study, in order that they may make a space for magazine consumption. We have also shown how the rituals surrounding magazine consumption give the act of reading, or, more precisely, the act of consuming a magazine, considerable symbolic significance. We have suggested, too, drawing on Driver's work, that women's magazines legitimise time out from the family, and validate women's right to space as individuals. They thus perform a valuable, indeed essential role, in that they offered these women the opportunity to go into an inner sanctum, away from the clamour of everyday, family life. By creating a sacred space for women readers, products such as women's magazines can

enable 'juggling' women to connect with the woman's community offered by magazines, recharge their batteries and return to the demands of family life (and indeed the demands of their lives outside of the home) with renewed vigour, better able to cope with the multiple roles of their day-to-day lives. We hope we have also demonstrated how women's magazine consumption expresses women's 'ritual wish' to be cared for and validated as individuals, to paraphrase Radway in her 1987 study of women's romance fiction consumption. This sense of being cared for is achieved by readers entering the 'woman's world' of magazines, a sacred community or sisterhood embedded in 'feminine culture'. This 'feminine culture' is a celebration of 'reconstructability' writes Radner (1995, p. 180), and is an affirmation of 'the heteroglossia of experience, its movements, its contradictions, its repetitions and its reclamations'.

### Biographical notes

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