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Exploring the 'shopping imaginary': The dreamworld of women's magazines

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Keywords:

Women's magazines, department stores, experiential consumption, browsing, shopping around, consumer culture, the 'shopping imaginary'

Abstract

This paper focuses on the consumer imagination and, more specifically, on the imaginary shopping spaces which women's magazines create. It addresses the anticipatory, imaginary and experiential consumption which this medium invites. The paper explores how women's magazines function as 'dreamworlds' of shopping; and how contemporary readers consume these imaginary shopping spaces. In order to illustrate what the authors term the 'shopping imaginary', they draw on findings from a study of women's experiential consumption of magazines, which show the multifaceted ways around which imaginary consumption is explored and enjoyed by women. The study suggests that women's magazines, like department stores, are spaces that facilitate and celebrate just looking and browsing, and, above all, they are shopping spaces that address the power of the imagination within them. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

For many people, one of the most pleasurable aspects of shopping is the daydreaming that surrounds it, as they conjure up the many visions of 'myself-that-could-be' (Belk, 1996). Clearly, the authors are not referring here to the mundane drudgery of a weekly grocery shop or a late-night, panic buy of a tin of

cat food in the local corner shop. Instead, they are talking about leisure shopping, the kind of shopping that has become one of the largest recreational pastimes apart from television. As leisure shopping is largely located in the imagination, it takes place in an experiential realm rather than a commercial realm (McCracken, 1988; Campbell, 1997). As

such it is about the quest rather than the conquest, the search rather than the possession, and it is concerned with the aspirations, fantasies and visual feasting that a display of merchandise, an evocative image or an attractive scenario can engender in people as consumers. It is also about shopping around rather than shopping for; shopping for recreation, leisure and pleasure (Bellenger and Korgaonkar, 1980; Jansen-Verbeke, 1987; Bloch *et al.*, 1989).

This paper focuses on the consumer imagination and, more specifically, on the imaginary shopping spaces which women's magazines create. Women's magazines are an ideal vehicle for exploring what the authors have termed the 'shopping imaginary'. Not only are they a popular consumer good in their own right (McCracken, 1993), but these artefacts or storehouses made up of texts and images offer imaginary worlds that are rich with consumer products. Women's magazines contain all the excitement of consumption, both in terms of the actual consumption of the magazine as a desirable commodity, and in terms of the anticipatory, imaginary and experiential consumption they invite. Above all they facilitate flights of fancy far beyond the confines of the product itself, and indeed their intention is to feed and stimulate people's desires for desire. The focus of this paper is on these latter aspects and, more specifically, the authors seek to explore two main issues: how women's magazines function as 'dreamworlds' of shopping, and how contemporary readers consume these imaginary shopping spaces.

To date studies of women's magazines have tended to focus on understanding the intentions of producers and the cultural values that are embedded in the text (Ferguson, 1983; Winship, 1987; Ballaster *et al.*, 1991; Ford *et al.*, 1991; Kates and Shaw-Garlock, 1999). Reader-response theory, however, is increasingly drawn on in consumer research because it privileges collective

and individual human experience (Radway, 1987; Stern, 1989; Scott, 1994; Hermes, 1995; O'Donohoe, 2000). The authors believe that the experiential realm of leisure shopping can be understood best by going direct to the source, namely consumers themselves, and hence a consumer focus has been adopted in this study.

The paper begins by tracing the evolution of women's magazines, showing their many parallels with department stores as spaces of consumption for women. Whereas the glory days of department store culture have long since departed, women's magazines have continued to flourish, creating many mental spaces where women can retreat into a 'dreamworld' of shopping. In order to illustrate the shopping imaginary that such magazines inspire, the authors draw on findings from a study of women's experiential consumption of magazines, which show the multifaceted ways around which imaginary consumption is explored and enjoyed by them.

WOMEN AND SHOPPING: 'MAGASINS' ET MAGAZINES

In the 19th century, two consumption phenomena emerged that were to redraw and redefine femininity according to a discourse of consumption. These were the early department stores (*les grands magasins*) and women's magazines, and between them they were to herald a conflation of femininity with consumption and shopping that has continued to endure (Nava, 1997). Department stores and women's magazines offered women a window on a world of goods, but they also offered women a window of opportunity, enabling them to look at and explore a multiplicity of possibilities and personas, all facilitated by a burgeoning consumer culture (McCracken, 1993; Ang, 1996; Nava, 1997).

Both of these 'feminised spaces' gathered together a miscellany of material goods (Beetham, 1996). Indeed,

the links between department stores and magazines are revealed in their shared etymological roots, as both originate as storehouses or 'makazins' (Oxford English Dictionary). Both were repositories for goods and merchandise, offering variety and choice to consumers (Garvey, 1996). Above all, both were originally conceived as 'dreamworlds' (Williams, 1982) or pleasure zones that invited women in 'to look, dream, and purchase' (Scanlon, 1995: 16).

In the 19th century women were increasingly appropriating public spaces, both symbolically and materially, and they had begun to venture out into the city streets (Wilson, 1992; Nava, 1997). Department stores, in particular, offered women a legitimate, enclosed and monitored space, a space that was removed from the dangers of the city streets. They were also considered legitimate and 'respectable spaces' for women to explore (Garvey, 1996). Above all, they were places that invited women to enter a world wherein they could look, stroll, browse and, perhaps, purchase. Within the confines of the department store, at once a public and a private space, women could enjoy the freedoms offered by shopping. They were now able to enjoy a public arena, which enabled them to indulge in the pleasure of looking, of being voyeurs or voyeuses. In shopping excursions women were also brought into direct contact with an ever-expanding array of consumer goods and services, all vying for their attention. (Nava, 1997).

Women's magazines also facilitated browsing behaviour and provided women with the pleasure of 'just looking'. Like department stores, they provided an enclosed and monitored space, a space that was prescribed and predetermined by publishers and editors (Garvey, 1996). By the end of the 19th century this medium was defining women as shoppers rather than readers, a shift that reflected a powerful and pervasive discourse that characterised women as consumers and consumers as

women (Ballaster *et al.*, 1991; Damon-Moore, 1994; Scanlon, 1995). In tandem with this, women's magazines had become as attentive to the 'vulgar' imperatives of commercialism as other mass media (Braithwaite, 1995: 17), and before long women's magazines resembled glittering shop windows urging women to spend (Winship, 1987). A mutually dependent relationship between editorial text and advertising text was established, and the boundaries between these two, often-conflicting interests became blurred, a blurring which continues to persist.

By the 1950s, department stores and women's magazines were firmly established as spaces that affirmed women's roles as shoppers and active consumers (Winship, 1987; Beetham, 1996). Both also reinforced the link between consumption and pleasurable recreation, offering women the opportunity to flick through, dip into and browse, 'without necessarily buying everything on offer' (Moore, 1986); letting women enjoy consumption as an experience in itself and an end in itself (Hermes, 1995; Radner, 1995). They were both 'women's spaces', offering women places for themselves and time for themselves; and they sought to stimulate, nurture and, indeed, capture women's aspirations and fantasies as consumers, captivating them with new spaces and new consumer goods, where fresh meanings could be created and new identities explored, both at a literal and at a playful, imaginary level.

METHODOLOGY

This study is derived from a larger, qualitative study of women's experiential consumption of women's magazines. One of the key findings to emerge from the larger study was the parallel between browsing through women's magazines and browsing in other 'feminine' spaces. A phenomenological approach was taken to the research, as recommended by Thompson (1996), as this was considered

the most appropriate means by which to understand the underlying cultural and personal meanings that surrounded women's consumption of magazines, and the role played by the imagination in the process. The main research method used was in-depth interviews. These are the preferred method for carrying out phenomenological research because they focus on human experience (Woodruffe, 1997).

The study drew on a pool of 40 women of 'middle youth', namely in their 30s and 40s. This age group was chosen because women's magazines and marketing campaigns for this target group of 'juggling' women with limited free time often focus on experiential and hedonic appeals. It was also the age group to which the researchers belonged and thus there was greater identification and empathy with this group of consumers. All were recruited using friendship pyramiding and snowballing (Hermes, 1995). Initially, informants were drawn from the first author's personal and professional networks, and this fanned out through the recommendations of friends and acquaintances of those interviewed.

The overall research strategy was to explore women consumer's feelings and behaviour in relation to women's magazines within the context of their day-to-day lives, an emphasis that is consistent with both phenomenological research and women's studies research (McRobbie, 1994; Ang and Hermes, 1997; Andrews and Talbot, 2000; Eccles and Woodruffe-Burton, 2000).

For the purpose of this study, both authors analysed the transcripts specifically to explore both browsing behaviour in the context of women's magazine consumption, and the shopping imaginary that they invoke. Four key themes were identified: 'Browsing around in women's magazines: A space to oneself', 'Wishful thinking and impossible imaginings', 'Bridging the fantasy-reality gap' and 'The pleasure of just looking'.

Browsing around in women's magazines: A space to oneself

Women's magazines facilitate a kind of consumption behaviour that is not dissimilar to browsing through goods on display in a shopping environment, or wandering in and out of various 'departments' in search of something appealing. Women's genres are often described as offering a feminine or feminised space, and key aspects of those 'feminine' spaces are that they are open-ended, fluid and cyclical in form, reflecting the pattern of women's everyday lives (see, for example, Ballaster *et al.*, 1991).

The form of women's magazines encourages particular 'shopping' behaviour on the part of their consumers, allowing considerable freedom and empowerment to readers as they wander around the text. The fact that women's magazines are fragmented and offer bite-sized portions to the 'juggling' generation of women (Thompson, 1996) is often perceived as one of their virtues. Many of the women who took part in the study found that much of their pleasure in reading magazines resided in the space, both mental and physical, that they facilitated. In effect, the form of women's magazines was compatible with the fragmented pattern of their everyday lives, and enabled them to take a break and relax. They particularly liked the fact that they were easy to pick up and put down, and they did not require much attention or intellectual effort, as the following quotation from Finnoula illustrates.

'with magazines you can dip in and out of them and you don't have to really engage your brain too much generally with magazines. You can flip through them quickly, read what you want to read that might interest you at the time.'
(Finnoula)

The pleasure and 'ease' with which women's magazines could be perused was a point that was frequently made by the women readers. The actual format of the magazines, that the content was

open-ended, cyclic, repetitive and had no clear beginning, middle or end, facilitated this 'to-ing' and 'fro-ing' behaviour, and this in itself was regarded as intrinsically pleasurable. As Sirta expressed: 'it's just being able to pick it up and you can flick through it'. At other times the 'ease' of magazines also resided in the fact that they offered variety and choice in an easily assimilated form.

Phrases such as 'flicking', 'dipping', 'delving into' or 'browsing' recurred throughout the in-depth interviews, and were frequently used by informants to describe the pleasures of consuming magazines. Significantly, these words all describe tangible aspects of consumption, and make clear parallels with other arenas for leisure shopping, such as shopping malls, catalogue browsing and website browsing. Magazines thus tangibly convey many of the pleasurable physical sensations associated with an embodied shopping experience, despite their location in a largely imaginary sphere. The pleasures that magazines offer are immediate, requiring the minimum of effort for the maximum return.

'It's the instantaneous pleasure and the short-lived pleasure from magazines . . . just dipping into it, dipping in, and you get a wee bit of it and you dip back out again . . . there's a bit of everything I suppose in magazines.' (Marie)

Helen recalled the miscellany of the market stall when she referred to the variety offered by women's magazines. She confessed that is what reading magazines was 'all about' for her: 'I'm looking for a variety of experiences.' Marie noted magazines' ability to offer instantaneous pleasure and suggested that this was bound up with readers' freedom and choice.

'Oh it's definitely a pleasurable experience because you can pick what you want to read . . . if you start an article and you don't like it you can just move on to the next one so it's probably more pleasurable than a book, more instantaneously pleasurable than a book.' (Marie)

The women consumers who took part in the research thus enjoyed the sense of freedom they got from browsing through the pages of magazines, speculating on the choices available to them, all displayed for them in an easily assimilated and highly attractive form. As such they recall shopping environments and leisure shopping of the most pleasurable kind, namely all of the allure of consumer culture without thronging crowds, queues at tills and sore feet from pounding the streets and shopping malls. This is imaginary or virtual shopping, the anticipation of what might be if certain choices are made or certain retail fantasies realised. Women's magazines are conduits for the imagination, and it is to the imagination that attention is now turned.

Wishful thinking and impossible imaginings

Women's magazines offer a potent mix of reality and fantasy, and often these are intermingled to create a space wherein imagination can take flight. The grey zone between reality and fantasy offers ample opportunity for women consumers to explore wishful thinking and indulge in impossible imaginings. Some participants acknowledged that they enjoyed imagining the possibilities of transformation, and indeed this is an important part of the appeal of women's magazines. Janeen, for example, enjoyed fantasising and exploring the possibilities of ideal consumption, but she recognised that such imaginings might not be translated into buying behaviour and the purchase of desirable goods, or the acquisition of an ideal body. She knew that there is often an unbridgeable gap between fantasy and reality, as the following extract demonstrates.

'Just occasionally it flicks through my mind I could do this, I could wear that make-up, or I could do this, or go to the gym. I could lose weight, you know, or something like that. Yeah I think, I could do this if I put my mind to it, I could do it, you know? And I could fix my

kitchen around, my avocado bathroom could look beautiful, you know, it could happen, it really could, and I read on and I read on and I read on. And then the coffee break's over and you put the magazine down and you go into your avocado bathroom, and I know that it's never going to happen, it's never going to be beautiful! (Janeen)

This kind of wishful thinking did not make Janeen unhappy. On the contrary, she was amused by it, and laughed throughout the above quotation. Indeed, such fantasies are pleasurable to indulge in, no doubt providing much-needed escapism from avocado bathroom suites. As with imaginary shopping in other, more public domains, such as department stores, the women who expressed this idea were well aware that these imaginings were nothing more than pleasant imaginings. In Janeen's case the avocado bathroom suite was likely to remain in situ for the foreseeable future. Economic reality can be ignored for a short time, however, so that imaginary shopping can be enjoyed.

In the same vein, Sarah acknowledged that her dream of converting an old barn into an ideal home was probably always going to be just that. These are impossible imaginings that are unlikely ever to become realities, but she derived pleasure from imagining what the fantasy would be like in reality.

'I think I would like to buy an old barn or something and do it up, and so recently I have been buying Homes and Gardens . . . because they have done a special on barns from start to finish . . . I am never going to do it, but my parents live in the country and the house that they were looking at does have a barn that came with it.' (Sarah)

Increasingly, the consumption and lifestyle choices offered in women's magazines are perceived in a liberatory light. Women are free to roam through the text, speculating on the choices available to them, picking and choosing, or not, as the case may be, from the array of choices on display. Radner (1995), for instance, refers to women's active

engagement in creating, negotiating and manipulating narratives in women's magazines, shaping and enjoying the choices and contradictions on offer.

Such a perspective is at odds with earlier second wave feminist critiques of women's magazines, which suggested that women's magazines offered aspirational merchandise and perfect lifestyles, which ultimately made women dissatisfied and disempowered. Contrary to Naomi Wolf's polemic against women's magazines, however, this research did not suggest that the medium promoted 'a raving, itching, parching product lust' (1991: 70). Indeed, this study's readers were more likely to relax into the text and the magazine, and the imaginary consumption it stimulated was, very frequently, a pleasurable end in itself.

This point is well illustrated by the case of Marie, who described how, as a young, unemployed woman, she would buy *Vogue* every month. This was a luxury that she was happy to spend a sizable portion of her unemployment benefit on, and she bore no resentment towards the lavish and unattainable lifestyles she saw portrayed in the pages of *Vogue*.

'I just loved—just loved looking at all these wonderful clothes, mostly designer stuff, and the beautiful adverts that would go with them, maybe a watch just draped elegantly or something—it was just the fantasy of something that I would never have.' (Marie)

Bridging the fantasy–reality gap

An important part of women's magazines' function has always been to provide expert advice and guidance to their readers, while ensuring that there is sufficient material also to inspire their dreams and fantasies. In this way magazines have sought to bridge the fantasy–reality gap for their readers and, historically, advertising has played a crucial role in this. As more consumer goods appeared on the market, editorial text offered advice and guidance, and the advertising text extolled women to

spend, spend, spend on desirable and aspirational lifestyle products. In the context of women's experiential consumption of magazines, advertising copy often merges with editorial copy, and this blurring may enhance the visual pleasure and imaginative stimulation associated with dipping into and browsing through the glossy pages of a magazine.

Women's magazines tease and inspire the shopping imaginary, not only through advertising, but also through special features, advertorials, promotions and so on. They group product assortments together, both visually in terms of copy design and verbally in terms of copy text, thereby creating consumption constellations (McCracken, 1988; Solomon, 1988), 'framing' the choices and 'evoking sets' for the reader. As producers of texts, women's magazines determine and control the options available to women consumers in the text, while simultaneously offering text that celebrates the possibilities and choices on offer to readers and their freedom to interpret such offerings in their own individual ways.

When interviewed, Katie explained how magazines stimulated her imagination, enabling her to envisage herself in certain attractive scenarios. In some cases there was a direct influence in terms of purchase behaviour. At other times her imaginings were acknowledged as escapist in nature, but sometimes her imaginings did become reality, as she translated inspiration into reality, changing things to suit her fresh aspirations.

'Things like room makeovers, or if there's a competition to win a thousand pounds, or say a makeover and a trip to London or whatever I would—I would picture myself, what I would be like, how different I might look, yeah, that would be nice, I'd probably feel happier about myself, somebody totally taking control of your life [on house makeovers] . . . in my head I would imagine what my room would look like with the same sort of colour scheme, or if I took bits out of a picture . . . I could give that a face

lift and change things . . . And then I would probably . . . go out and change things . . . especially if it was something like to make over something in your house . . . that would give me a lot of pleasure—and that certainly would have been worth buying a magazine for, because I would feel that I got a lot out of it . . . ideas and actually changing something.' (Katie)

Magazine consumption enabled Katie to 'picture' herself in certain, ideal scenarios, and through these pictures she re-envisaged her everyday life. The dreams that were realisable were realised, as magazines provided her with the necessary inspiration to improve her living environment, to change her world. In a consumer society where so much freedom to choose abounds, Katie revealed a desire for 'somebody totally taking control', to help her sort through the choices and edit them down. The magazine provided this function, giving her not just inspiration but authority, as it framed the choices available to her.

Similarly, Marie also enjoyed reading homes magazines for their inspirational and aspirational content. While she might never have the antique dresser described below, nevertheless, like Katie, she had a practical and creative response to ideas gleaned from the pages of magazines, translating what she saw in magazines into future practical projects in her own home.

'I love to see, for example, a dresser filled with blue and white, and I aspire to that in my own home . . . Country Living—that type of thing . . . give me solid wood . . . I'm quite a practical person but I still need guidance, you know, I'm sort of a bit hesitant with DIY, but once I get stuck in, you know, I quite enjoy that . . . but the other aspect of those magazines, particularly the more sort of what I call the traditional style of them, the Country Living, all that sort of thing, I like the sense of timelessness of them, that something has been there for a long long time, it hasn't been tinkered about with, it hasn't been, you know MDF-ed and made over, and all that, I just cannot abide that . . . like some of my furniture is second-hand but well loved, and it has that patina of, you know, of having been looked after. I like that.' (Marie)

For Marie, the consumption of a magazine such as *Country Living* evoked a lifestyle and a tradition that were dear to her heart. The images of idyllic country life were also within her reach; she too could acquire furniture that was 'well loved', enabling her to imagine a continuity with the past, of having possessions that had been 'looked after' and cherished. At the same time, she looked for guidance in actioning and achieving this lifestyle; she gave credence to and had faith in the expertise of the magazine to help her realise her dreams.

The pleasure of just looking

Room settings were not the only images that inspired the shopping imaginary. Advertisements could also be a source of considerable pleasure for their aesthetic qualities and idealised images. Isabelle, for example, enjoyed looking at images of women in advertisements, finding them a source of inspiration in terms of how she would like to be perceived.

'Maybe I try to look—try to visualise myself when I look at the pictures . . . In some adverts I see all these women who are loaded with jewellery and dark glasses . . . they are rich, I think, oh my god, I don't want to be like that . . . Then I would see another advert, like natural beauty products like Clarins, where you actually see a woman who is 35 who is looking natural, and that's what I would like to be—looking natural, elegant. I think that's the kind of look I am trying to get out of these magazines; it has helped me a lot . . . I am starting to reinforce that idea when I was reading the advertisement for Clarins or Clinique or some product from the South of France like Lavender, which I would tend to be more attracted to than Christian Dior cream.'
(Isabelle)

So an advertising image may appeal in the sense that it can enable the reader to visualise herself looking like that or having that image. Some images clearly resonate more than others, which are quickly discarded as being impossible for the reader to imagine herself as.

The ability of images in magazines to stimulate the shopping imaginary cannot

be underestimated. During the in-depth interview with Katie she paused, as she flicked through a copy of a woman's magazine. An advertisement or, more specifically, the image of the woman in it had struck her:

'I think that's how I imagine myself. It's not what I'm like at all, it's how I imagine myself—and the way she was dressed, I liked the way she was dressed, the big baggy sexy man's white shirt, and the way her hair was—all tousled and sun-streaked . . . Maybe it was more what she was wearing and I thought it was quite a sexy picture, tanned shapely legs, it was more her profile, I couldn't really see her face, it was more I thought I'd like, I'd quite like to look like that—I'm certainly a different shape! [laughs]'
(Katie)

Like Isabelle, Katie found herself transported by the right image in a magazine. She 'imagined' herself into the text and, like Isabelle, she was able to 'visualise' herself being there, in that situation, looking a certain way. Katie was aware that the woman resembled her, but she regarded her as primarily an aspirational image. Nevertheless, the image was close enough to Katie's reality to enable her to imagine herself in that place, in that space. The point, for her, was that the advertisement appealed to her, resonated with her and stimulated her imagination.

Erin also was able to 'visualise' herself when she saw the right image of a product. She shared Isabelle's liking for the 'glossy' appeal of advertisements. Furthermore, she then usually bought the products she had seen advertised, and these luxury skincare products were regarded as very precious, indeed too precious to use, as the following extract shows.

'Those products being advertised . . . I would have it on me and would be experiencing the works, just for a sec, and that's me . . . it would be skincare and stuff like that . . . the glossier the better—Clarins and Lancome, all of them, you know? Great! I'd be away up in heaven . . . I do sign up to buying products too . . . I have all the products but I don't use them; the more products I have the nicer—I like to look at

them! It's wonderful! I've got bottles and bottles! And then I don't want to use them because I love looking at the products; I mean they're so nice, and I dust them! [general laughter]' (Erin)

Erin described the initial stimulation of seeing certain products in magazines and then proceeded to describe the whole process, from imaginary consumption through to actual consumption. Within a matter of seconds she could imagine herself 'there' enjoying the product, transported to great heights (heaven, no less) by the anticipation of purchasing such luxurious products. Furthermore, she subsequently did buy such products. In terms of actual consumption, however, the products may not be consumed in an obvious, tangible way. Indeed, such was their appeal that she arranged them like *objets d'art* in her home, displaying them because she liked 'to look at them', admiring their aesthetic qualities and enjoying their appearance because 'they're so nice'. Erin's relationship with these products recalls Belk *et al.*'s (1989) work on the sacred properties with which products may be endowed.

DISCUSSION

Through the above extracts the authors have illustrated the nature of the shopping imaginary in the context of women's magazines. Essentially, this is a woman's space that celebrates just looking and browsing, and indeed it is a medium that is designed to encourage just that, as the findings demonstrate. The findings also underline the importance of the 'consumer gaze' in relation to this experiential realm of imaginary shopping, or shopping as leisure and pleasure. Central to the pleasure inherent in these 'feminine spaces' is the visual stimulation they afford. The allure of this kind of shopping cannot be interpreted simply as a necessary precursor to the purchase of commodities; rather, it is often an end in itself, an intrinsically pleasurable pursuit, like other forms of leisure

shopping, which may or may not result in purchase (Bloch *et al.*, 1989). As well as inviting and indeed invoking certain purchase behaviour, women's magazines are ideal vehicles for the consumer imagination, legitimising flights of fancy and blurring the boundaries between fantasy and reality, a place where impossible imaginings and wishful thinking coincide with practical day-to-day realities and real lives. Women readers seem to negotiate this terrain with ease and with pleasure, empowered by the very form of the magazine to dip into, browse, skip over, flick through and close the magazine when they want to.

It is apparent from the findings that women's magazines facilitate a certain kind of consumption that is experiential, vicarious and at times voyeuristic. Like leisure shopping, magazines offer women a feast for their eyes, tantalising their imaginations and stimulating their desires. It is widely recognised that 'just looking' and 'shopping around' are integral parts of the pleasure women get from contemporary consumption (Bowlby, 1985; Campbell, 1997). Belk (2001) likens the pleasure of feasting one's eyes on consumer products and their imaginary consumption to a form of consumer autoeroticism, and the authors have also noted the autoerotic aspect of magazine consumption in another study (Stevens *et al.*, 2001). Clearly, then, there are obvious parallels between magazine consumption and pleasure.

The consumer gaze has a key part to play in stimulating consumer imaginations, and much of the allure of women's magazines lies in the visual pleasure afforded by them. Magazines offer women a private space, an opportunity to indulge in the pleasure of looking, the pleasure of textually and visually consuming seductive lifestyles. They enable women to enter a world that is inherently pleasurable, one that presents women with possibilities and offers them the freedom and the opportunity to explore and indulge their

imaginings (Moore, 1986, 1988). Above all, in relation to the shopping imaginary, magazines are a source book for desirable consumer goods, goods that may proffer a key to a better, fuller and more pleasant life. The imagination is an under-explored area of consumer research, particularly in relation to textual consumption, and the authors hope that their study has gone some way to address this deficiency. While this study has concentrated on women consumers, future research could look at male readership, for example, men's glossies are now emulating women's glossies in terms of style and content and comprise the fastest-growing sector in the market (Gauntlett, 2002).

To conclude, this exploratory study has considered the parallels between browsing in department stores and browsing in women's magazines, two important 'women's spaces' in consumer culture. It addresses the power of the imagination within these shopping spaces, what has been termed the 'shopping imaginary'. This imaginary stimulates and articulates consumer desires and is about the desire to desire, to find new things to want (Belk, 2001). In this study the authors hope that they have conveyed how women's magazines evoke the promises and pleasures of consumer culture and the role of the 'shopping imaginary' in this context.

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