

Just Like Us: Celebrity Gossip Magazines in American Popular Culture

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Communication)
in The University of Michigan
2012

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For my parents

Acknowledgements

I owe many thanks to everyone who supported me in the completion of this project. Special thanks to my mentor and friend Paddy Scannell, without whose unwavering faith in the importance of this topic and in my ability to do it justice, this book would not exist. Thank you to Susan Douglas, for her insight, enthusiasm, and sense of humor and for proving that academic writing can be a pleasure to read. Thank you to the department of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan, especially Aswin Punathambekar, the '07 graduate cohort, my inquisitive students, and all the amazing department staff. Thank you to June Howard, for sharing her passion for magazines with me. Thanks to all of my teachers, past and present, especially Paddy Graham, Michael Joyce, and Karen Robertson, for their wisdom, wit, and encouragement. To all of the participants who graciously contributed their time and personal stories, I cannot thank you enough. And to Scott, for his love and support, thank you and I hope you like it.

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Introduction:

Celebrity Gossip Magazines in American Popular Culture



Figure i: The Celebrity Gossip Magazine Genre

We see them in airports and grocery checkouts, lining drugstore counters and street-corner newsstands. They are laughed at, ignored, and purchased -- read, pored over, flipped through. Their hot pink headlines proclaim news of dates and diets, breakups and baby bumps. Whether you thumb through them or thumb your nose at them, celebrity gossip magazines are a ubiquitous part of the popular cultural landscape in the United States. Since their emergence in the early part of the 21st century, these magazines have gained popularity and power, earning millions of readers and dollars to match. But what are these magazines really about? Who reads them? And how have they sustained their success over the course of an economically tumultuous decade, despite the fact that their contents have remained remarkably uniform? This study

investigates these questions, examining the production, content, and readership of the celebrity gossip genre in order to understand why these magazines matter in contemporary American culture.

Despite their contemporary appeal, celebrity gossip magazines are not unique invention; rather, the genre culls together and incorporates techniques that have long been staples of the tabloid press. In the 19th century, for example, penny papers used a lurid, gossipy style to excite readers and, by the 1880's, the circulation battle between publishers William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer resulted in an ongoing contest to see who could print the boldest, most sensational, and scandalous news items (MacGill Hughes, 1940). In the 1920's, competition between the *New York Daily News*, *New York Evening Mirror*, and *New York Daily Graphic* resulted in feverish reporting of crime, sex, and celebrity news and the use of large images and bold headlines to grab readers' attention. More recently, paper tabloids like the *National Enquirer* and *Weekly World News* have fascinated supermarket shoppers with headlines like "Bat boy lives!," "The secret romance of Elvis and Barbara Bush!," and "World's Smallest Ape Goes to College!." Further, since the 1974 debut of *People Magazine*, a names-make-news approach to reporting and obsession with celebrity culture has permeated the American media landscape. Today's celebrity gossip magazines have much in common with their predecessors. They emphasize the sensational and the outrageous. They revel in bias and speculation. They, too, use large, garish images to catch the eye of potential readers.

But while celebrity gossip magazines take many cues from their historical counterparts, they differ in one fundamental way. The editorial focus of celebrity gossip magazines is precise and specific -- when they appear in bookstores and at newsstands, celebrity gossip magazines are not grouped alongside newspapers or fashion magazines, but amongst women's magazines. Celebrity weeklies, unlike their predecessors, are not only about famous *figures*, but about famous *females* who are depicted at a particular stage in their lives. In short, celebrity gossip magazines meld tabloid style and celebrity content with an emphasis on women: female experiences, female interests, and female emotions. Celebrity gossip magazines should therefore be considered women's magazines, magazines that are created for, tell stories about, and are enjoyed by women, particularly women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five.

In conceptualizing the genre in this way, a number of key themes emerge. First, celebrity gossip magazines are part of a broader set of popular cultural texts produced for, marketed to, and consumed by women, which I call the popular feminine. Other examples include romance novels, soap operas, and much reality television. These texts, most of which revolve around relationships and private life, are carefully designed to be appealing to women. And, unsurprisingly, many women enjoy them. But female audiences are damned for their taste just as these texts are mocked for their association with femininity and personal life. Thus, women and the popular are inextricably linked through a discourse that constructs female pleasure as a guilty pleasure. This discourse has many strands; this book examines popular discourses about women's taste, journalistic discourse around tabloidization, and the academic discourse of "mass culture" and ideology critique that, while valuable, also works to further marginalize female audiences and the texts they enjoy.

At the heart of this relationship between women and the popular lies a particular set of values around public and private life. As chapter one will show in greater detail, public life -- broadly conceived as politics, business, government, and national and international affairs -- has been viewed as a crucial source of information for informed citizens. Historically, public life has been constructed around, engaged in, and concerned primarily with the ideas and actions of men. Alternately, private life -- personal affairs concerning home, family, the body, and children -- has been understood as inappropriate, unimportant, or irrelevant to social concern. Of course, private life is also closely linked with women and female life; the ties between women and the private sphere have, throughout history, worked to exclude women, their voices and concerns, from public debate. Popular feminine texts, including celebrity gossip magazines, transform private topics into matters of public discussion. Further, by depicting the thoughts and actions that often go unmarked due to their private nature, the characters (or celebrities) within these texts create a knowable community through which female audiences can identify and communicate their own experiences and emotions.

But while many women take great pleasure in popular feminine texts, female audiences are not simply uncritical consumers. This book is based largely on data

collected through interviews with female readers, all of whom are acutely observant, actively pointing out those aspects of the magazines that they find amusing and that which they find offensive. Readers have, I found, a love-hate relationship not only with celebrity gossip magazines, but also with many popular feminine texts and the normative, gendered messages that these texts promote. In realizing the complex and deeply personal readings that women bring to bear on the popular feminine, the central question of this project shifted. While I once asked “why do women enjoy celebrity gossip,” I now asked, “Why (and how) do they continue to enjoy it despite rejecting many of its messages?”

The answer, I found, lies in the pleasure of conversation and textual play. The magazines, by setting out rigid, normative messages, provide female readers with an easy target, a tailor-made forum in which to divulge and discuss their aspirations and frustrations, both individually and with one another. And in speaking to magazine editors, I found that industry professionals were aware of and, in fact, catered to this desire for contestation and negotiation. Regardless of differences with one another, readers share one thing in common—they love dissecting, discussing, and disagreeing with celebrity gossip magazines. This was especially true in regards to one of the genre’s most popular narratives, the pregnancy story.

Indeed, my own interest in celebrity magazines was sparked by one such tale. While working at a museum in suburban New York, my female coworkers and I would spend our breaks and lunch hours debating the merit (or tragedy) of Jessica Simpson’s frocks, or empathizing with Jennifer Aniston, or lambasting Tiger Woods and his misdeeds. We were often most intrigued, however, by the genre’s depiction of pregnancy-- from bump patrol to Octomom to, my personal favorite, a story entitled *Bagel or Baby?* I was also struck, and troubled, by the genre’s depiction of Nicole Richie. A fan of Nicole since her performance in the reality show, *The Simple Life*, I had watched the magazines attack her for her weight (first too heavy, then too thin), her alleged drug use, and her run-ins with police. But then, in 2007 a magical thing happened -- or so the tabloids would have us believe -- Nicole Richie became pregnant. No longer portrayed as an anorexic party girl, Nicole had transformed into a bubbly earth mother complete with goddess gowns and arm jewelry.

Nicole was one of the first celebrity women, but certainly not the last, to undergo such a mommy makeover in the celebrity gossip press. This transformation narrative, which I viewed as a kind of contemporary fairy tale, was the starting point for my graduate research. In the early stages of this project, I tracked the magazines' portrayal of pregnancy and identified three main narratives: mothers were either presented as heroes, failures, or, like Nicole, transformed transgressors. I was troubled by the moral codes set out in these narratives, codes aimed at the genre's predominantly young, female readership. These pregnancy narratives seemed to insist upon a specific set of narrow, heteronormative rules and moralities about what it means to be a good mother, and thereby a good woman, in contemporary American culture.

But while this research revealed much about the ideological messages imbedded in celebrity gossip narratives, it did little to explain why women, even those media savvy women with whom I'd worked, continue to seek out, read, and enjoy these media texts. What I found, as a scholar, was quite different from what I had enjoyed as a fan. Once eager to read the magazines, I was now disheartened. Here were images of mindless women, obsessed with overpriced shoes, unfaithful men, and plastic surgery. Here the shame of cellulite, the success and (more frequent) failure of heterosexual romance, and the joys of motherhood, were neurotically discussed, week after week. Here were magazines about some of the most professionally successful, economically influential, and culturally powerful women in the world, and all we could talk about was their latest trip to Jamba Juice? Something, I thought to myself, was seriously wrong here.

Studying the Popular Feminine

To better understand the duality of my scholar-reader position, I turned to other feminist media scholars who had come before me. I was particularly moved by the work of Janice Winship, whose 1987 book, *Inside Women's Magazines*, critically examines the ways in which popular magazines teach their readers important lessons about gender. In the book's preface, Winship reflects on her own position as feminist, scholar, and reader:

On and off I've been doing research on women's magazines since 1969, originally for an undergraduate dissertation and then for a PhD. For about the same number of years I've also thought of myself as a feminist. It was never easy, however, to integrate those two concerns... 'Surely we all know women's magazines demean women and solely benefit capitalist profits. What more is there to say?' I experienced myself as a misfitting renegade who rarely dared to speak up for magazines, however weakly.

Yet I continued to believe that it was as important to understand what women's magazines were about as it was, say, to understand how sex discrimination operated in the workplace. I felt that to simply dismiss women's magazines was also to dismiss the lives of millions of women who read and enjoyed them each week. More than that, *I* still enjoyed them, found them useful and escaped with them. And I knew I couldn't be the only feminist who was a 'closet' reader (1987, xii).

Indeed, Winship is not alone. In her 1994 book, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, feminist cultural critic Susan Douglas comments on her own conflicted experience:

When I open *Vogue*, for example, I am simultaneously infuriated and seduced, grateful to escape temporarily into a narcissistic paradise where I'm the center of the universe, outraged that completely unobtainable standards of wealth and beauty exclude me and most women I know from the promised land. I adore the materialism; I despise the materialism. I yearn for self-indulgence; I think the self-indulgence is repellent. I want to look beautiful; I think wanting to look beautiful is about the most dumb-ass goal you could have. The magazine stokes my desire; that magazine triggers my bile. And this doesn't only happen when I'm reading *Vogue*; it happens all the time... On the one hand, on the other hand- that's not just me- that's what it means to be a woman in America (1994: 9).

These authors' words reassured me that my own conflicted relationship with gossip magazines was not some kind of bizarre anomaly, but rather typical of female fandom. Indeed, as this study will show, it is not only academic women, but female audience members from all walks of life, whose relationship to popular cultural texts, even those they openly embrace, is deeply conflicted and highly negotiated.

In taking up this nuanced and, at times, paradoxical relationship between audience and text, I position my own work in relationship to a larger body of scholarship that examines women's magazines. One strand of academic feminist scholarship on popular women's magazines has focused its investigation on the negative aspects of the genre,

arguing that these texts present a narrow, stereotypic, or conservative view of women and their social roles and therefore have the potential to stymie women's social and political progress (Ballaster et. al, 1991; Ferguson, 1983). Scholars working within this critical framework claim that celebrity gossip magazines problematically rely upon and reproduce narrow versions of normative femininity and point to necessarily problematic features of contemporary mass culture (Douglas, 2010).

As I conceived of this project, I recognized the importance of these ideology critiques, but made a conscious decision to bracket my own a priori assumptions about the stereotypic representations of femininity contained within the magazines. I made this decision for a number of reasons. First, this project aims to understand the popularity of celebrity gossip magazines, specifically, why it is that women, even women who reject the genre's feminine "norms," remain faithful readers. In order to answer this question, I had to confront the question of pleasure. To emphasize the inherent problem of the popular without addressing its potential promise is to ignore the ways in which audiences interpret and enjoy these texts, and to therefore produce a reading of those texts that does not account for the actual processes of interpretation and meaning-making that occur. In her 1985 study of *Dallas*, the Dutch cultural theorist Ien Ang takes the "admission of the reality of pleasure" as her starting point and organizes her investigation of the popular soap opera around a desire "to understand this pleasure, without having to pass judgment on whether *Dallas* is good or bad, from a political, social or aesthetic point of view" (1985: 12). By bracketing these judgments, Ang is able to raise, and answer, critical questions about the nature of soap opera viewing.

In this study, I follow Ang's lead. I strive to temporarily put aside my own judgments about whether celebrity gossip magazines are good or bad in order to understand how the magazines present themselves as pleasurable. By attending to the question of pleasure in its own right, by focusing our attention on the *love* side of our love-hate relationship with celebrity gossip magazines, we can begin to answer the following critical questions: What pleasures do readers gain from their experiences with these magazines? Are these pleasures specific to the experience of reading celebrity gossip? How do audiences exert control over their reading habits in order to enhance

their enjoyment? We can then once again take up the important question of ideology in a fresh and nuanced light. No longer assuming that these texts are necessarily “bad,” we can now attempt to understand why women who find the content of the magazines ideologically problematic continue to read and how the pleasure of the reading experience comes to outweigh any frustration that might be associated with the content of the magazines. In short, in order to understand the success of the celebrity gossip genre, we must not only interrogate the ways in which these magazines present and represent specific normative narratives around femininity and female life, but we must also seek to understand how these narratives present themselves as pleasurable to female readers, without first and foremost passing judgment on that pleasure.

Here, it is important to note that the question of value, of what is good or bad for audiences, is forever entangled with the popular feminine. The academic assumption that popular culture is inherently bad for audiences and the worry over how “ordinary people” will deal with the problematic popular has been in circulation since the Sociology of Mass Communication emerged in the early part of the 20th century (Scannell, 2007). This line of thinking ignores any potential motivation that audiences may have for their engagement with popular culture and fails to address the question of “why?” Why, if popular media texts are so bad, do audiences continue to seek them out? To neglect this question is to perpetuate the notion that individuals who enjoy popular culture are uneducated, uncritical dopes who thoughtlessly consume the product du jour simply because it exists while endlessly reproducing the superiority of the academic position. As a reader of celebrity magazines, I found this line of reasoning to be condescending and inaccurate. And while the field has developed more sophisticated theories about the relationship between media and audience, the assumption that the popular is culturally bankrupt, ideologically corrupting, and necessarily bad can often be found lurking just below the surface of academic debate. It is a stigma that I have faced in developing this project and it is a stigma that audiences are well aware of.

This study is therefore necessarily political in nature. It is not political in the obvious sense of the word; it does not deal with elections or war or governmental policy. What is at stake, however, is the highly contested definition of the popular. The

meaning and value of the popular has and continues to be fought over in the halls of the academy. This project has sparked controversy amongst my fellow scholars: Is it a legitimate study? But aren't the magazines silly? And musn't it raise the question of ideology? But why should it? These are the debates that circulate around this work; debates which, try as I might, I cannot shake off.

In taking celebrity gossip magazines as a serious subject of academic inquiry, I aim to retrieve these publications from the historical margins. In doing so, I challenge the notion that the popular feminine, the popular texts which women enjoy, are only valuable objects of study in that they teach us what is ideologically problematic about popular culture. As I will argue in greater detail in chapter one, this academic standpoint not only works to marginalize mass cultural forms, but also contributes to a disturbing discourse, a discourse that has historically been employed to link women and popular culture in a way that marginalizes and delegitimizes both. I therefore reject the idea that the popular is not a worthy subject of study. On the contrary, I argue that it is only by understanding that which resonates with millions of Americans that we can begin to understand our own values, identities, and culture.

Methodology

This study takes a three-pronged approach to the celebrity gossip genre, examining the production, content, and audience reception of the magazines. My thinking about these three elements draws from Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding, which recognizes that all mediated messages are necessarily influenced by two meaning structures: that of the encoder/producer and that of the decoder/audience. In his 1973 essay, *Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse*, Hall argues that these two meaning structures are not always identical, that the interpretation of the audience may be independent of the meanings implied by the producer. "The receivers of messages are not obliged, in this view, to accept or decode messages as encoded, and can resist the ideological power and influence of the text by applying divergent or oppositional readings" (Scannell, 2007: 210). Hall's model acknowledges that the shape of the message extends beyond the text itself; therefore, in

order to understand that message, one cannot simply look to the text, but must also investigate the relationship that producers and audiences have to that text.

In studying the production, content, and audience reception of celebrity gossip magazines, I draw from the work of Janice Radway and Julie D'Acci, whose scholarship weaves these three strands of inquiry in order to provide a holistic, triangulated account of the texts they investigate. Janice Radway's 1984 study of romance novels, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, was one of the first in the field of Communication Studies to examine the institutional processes that create popular texts, analyze the texts themselves, and provide an account of reader interpretation. Radway's detailed analysis of the romance genre makes a crucial distinction between text, reader, and the act of reading while illustrating the tensions between academic theory and participant voice. Similarly, Julie D'Acci's 1994 study of the popular television series *Cagney and Lacey* examines industry reports and letters written by viewers, crafting a meticulous snapshot of the challenges faced by the show's feminist writer and producer, Barbara Avedon and Barbara Corday, as they fought to make *Cagney and Lacey* a commercial and political success. D'Acci's careful documentation of the conflicts between the show's home network, CBS, and Avedon and Corday provides insight into the ways in which industrial practices have real and meaningful effects on media content. D'Acci's study also illustrates the way in which struggles over social issues and gender definitions play out within the media industry in a way that involves industry, text, and audience. This project uses the critical, three-pronged approach pioneered by Radway and D'Acci to investigate the production, content, and audience reception of celebrity gossip magazines.

Broadly speaking, I have approached my investigation of the celebrity gossip genre using qualitative techniques, which seek to achieve *verstehen*, or understanding. These magazines mean many things to many people in many different contexts; this study does not claim to account for all of those interpretations. It does, however, cull together information and interpretations from editors, readers, trade press reports, and the magazines themselves in an effort to provide a multi-faceted overview of the topic. I view my own role as a bricoleur and interpreter; my goal is to promote "dialogue

between the proponents of multiple narratives of social reality,” narratives that “materialize and circulate through mundane cultural practices of expression and interpretation” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002: 51). In doing so, I aim to not only contribute to academic research on female audiences, popular culture, and critical textual and industry studies, but to also address the interests and concerns of journalists and fellow readers.

Although this study does not focus exclusively on the textual content of the magazines, it does consider a careful examination of the text to be a critical element for investigation. Here, I draw from the work of the Italian semiotician and literary critic Umberto Eco, who likens the text to a crystal which, once created, has a stiffness, a form that cannot be changed, and yet can be seen through many facets (1978: 4). Like Eco, I argue that a text possesses certain immutable traits (it is so many pages long, uses certain types of words, contains particular images) and that, while there may be multiple readings of a particular text, these traits shape and limit the boundaries of those readings in meaningful ways. It is, therefore, necessary to understand the structuring features of the text in order to understand the possible interpretations that it may generate.

Eco also argues that any text is produced for a model reader and that, in order for the text to be effective, it must communicate to that reader. In chapter two, I characterize the celebrity gossip magazine’s model reader and show how the genre works to directly hail that reader. The relationship between text and reader is crucial because, as Eco writes, “the exactness of the textual project makes for the freedom of the Model Reader” (1978:10). That is to say, the specific nature of the text allows for a variety of experiences and interpretations. Celebrity gossip magazines are exact texts; the stories they tell, the images they highlight, and the aesthetics they value are highly uniform. By examining these features in greater detail, we can begin to understand how they produce the genre’s model reader and what types of interpretive possibilities they afford that reader.

I began this project by obtaining a year-long subscription to *Us Weekly*, *Star*, *Ok!*, *Life & Style*, and *In Touch* magazines (January-December 2009). These issues served as my sample, which I used to conduct close readings of the visual and textual content of the

magazines and to inspect the standard practices used to present information across publications. For me, these titles epitomize the celebrity gossip genre for a number of reasons; all emerged in the early years of the 21st century, all feature content and aesthetics that are, as chapter two will demonstrate, centrally concerned with and aimed at appealing to young women, and all tell stories about the “private” lives of young, female celebrities.

I chose to examine issues from a single year in order to compare themes, characters, and editorial decision-making across publications during a set time period. My decisions in sampling were also guided in part by the fact that most libraries (public and academic) do not subscribe to or maintain a collection of gossip magazines. Even the publishing houses themselves, according to company representatives and employees, do not maintain a collection of back issues. For these reasons, celebrity gossip magazines become a kind of cultural ephemera; they do not have an archival home. In order to study the textual features of the magazines, it was therefore necessary that I obtain my own collection of issues.

My analysis of the text was not only informed by my study of the magazines themselves, but also by conversations with editors and readers, who alerted me to and provided insight on some of the defining features of the genre. In the spring of 2010, I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with six former and current staff members at *Us Weekly*, *Star*, *Life & Style*, and *Ok!* and toured the offices of *Us Weekly*. All of the editors who participated in this study agreed to be interviewed and to have those interviews digitally recorded. Throughout this book, I have tried to quote, rather than paraphrase, participant responses for the sake of accuracy. Whenever possible, I conducted follow up interviews and member checks with participants to ensure that I was correctly representing their responses. In addition to the information provided in these interviews, I draw from data made public through reports and interviews published in the trade press. Publisher statistics, available via the magazines’ online media kits, were also instrumental in documenting trends in circulation and demographics. Taken together, these resources allowed me to triangulate the information provided by editors and to ensure consistency and accuracy.

I also conducted in-depth individual and focus group interviews with eleven celebrity gossip magazine readers, all of whom work together at a museum in suburban New York, which I will call The Cube. I chose to interview these particular women for a number of reasons. First, I felt it critical to speak with women who read the magazines on a regular basis. As a former employee at The Cube, I knew that staff members often read the magazines while on breaks or during their lunch hours. I also wanted to speak with women who fit the demographic profile of the magazines' model reader and The Cube's young, mostly female staff was a close match.¹ Finally, I was eager to understand how, when, and to what end women read celebrity gossip magazines in a group context. Again, I knew from my own experience at The Cube that communal reading was a common practice and so I returned to the museum for a weeklong visit in May, 2010. During this time, I spoke with readers, individually and in small groups, about their experiences with celebrity gossip magazines. Some of these women were former coworkers of mine, others I met for the first time; however, I consider all of the participants my equals and friends and the interview process reflected this paradigm. All of the reader interviews were conducted in a non-linear, semi-structured, conversational style. My goal, in both researching and reporting this topic, has been to respect the readers' authority and to treat them as experts in order to allow their experiences and opinions to shine through. Throughout this study, I refer to both readers and editors by their first names in order to signal that neither holds more or less authority than the other. In many ways, this project is inspired by the Cube women and their experiences -- as readers, as women, and as friends. I aim to present their colorful, heartfelt, powerful stories and, in doing so, shed light on the ways in which celebrity gossip magazine reading can, and does, impact readers' lives in meaningful ways.

Celebrity Gossip Magazines: A Feminist Media Study

This book exists at a crossroads of academic debate. Certainly it is an examination of a specific genre of popular magazines and therefore finds a home in my own field of Communication Studies, but it is also fundamentally a study about women and their relationship to popular culture, specifically, to those popular texts that are

produced for and enjoyed by a primarily female readership, which I call the popular feminine. This study, therefore, takes a feminist media studies approach to the topic of celebrity gossip magazines. Still, gender studies and media studies are each, in and of themselves, interdisciplinary fields; my research is therefore necessarily interdisciplinary in nature, drawing from multiple bodies of literature and various theoretical frameworks.

First, this study owes a great deal to the work of cultural critics Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, who, half a century ago, took seriously the value of the ordinary and the everyday and, in doing so, produced foundational work in the field of Cultural Studies. Debunking the authority of *official culture*, a top-down, elitist view of culture in which the idea of a working-class or mass culture is an oxymoron, Hoggart and Williams argue that culture “pervades all human artifacts and practices” (Scannell, 2007: 114). In this view, culture is not the province of the elite (the opera, the cinema, the sonnet), but rather the fabric of everyday life (the local custom, the inside joke, the neighborhood pub). Hoggart and Williams stake a claim for the importance of the popular, recognizing the value of the ordinary for its own sake, on its own terms. Had this claim not been fought for, this project would not be possible.

During the 1970’s and 80’s, as second wave feminist scholarship grew up in academia, feminist media scholars took up the project of the popular, with a specific focus on female audiences. Scholars like Angela McRobbie, Lynn Spigel, and Charlotte Brunsdon fought to gain recognition for the popular music, magazines, and television programs that mattered to women and to justify the value of the academic study of those texts.² Since that time, feminist media scholars have examined the production (D’Acci, 1994; Lotz, 2007), content (Douglas, 1994), and audience reception (Brunsdon, 1978; Hobson, 1980; Morley, 1986) of popular texts. This body of research reflects a tension between a desire to recognize and take seriously the interests and concerns of women and a critical awareness of the way in which the popular cultural products consumed by women often seem to encourage retrograde representations of gender and frustrate feminist goals. These contradictions are still alive and well today; as this study will make clear, audiences and academics alike continue to struggle with the relationship between personal pleasure and popular representations of females and femininity.

Struggle lies at the heart of this project, and struggle, I must say, is not too strong a word. The story of the popular feminine is a story rife with struggle: the struggle to acknowledge the value of the popular and of private life, the struggle that female audiences experience as they are torn between feelings of pleasure and feelings of guilt, the struggle between competing messages about what it means to be a young woman in contemporary American society. Throughout this project, I, too, have struggled to make sense of my own relationship to popular magazines, which my education and training tells me I should be wary of, but which I continue to gravitate towards. I have struggled to clearly convey the complicated and sometimes deeply fraught relationship that my fellow readers report having with the magazines. It has been an ongoing struggle for me to justify this project, both in and outside of the field of Communication Studies. But these challenges have led me to ask, and have helped me to begin to answer, the guiding questions of this study.

An Overview

This book is divided into four chapters, each of which examines a specific element of the celebrity gossip genre. Chapter one examines the way in which tabloid journalism has been historically marginalized, particularly due to its emphasis on private life, which, according to the Habermasian model of the public sphere, prevents these texts from being considered valuable to the common good. Examining key features of the celebrity gossip genre, I show how celebrity journalism effectively challenges long-held assumptions about what is newsworthy and what matters to the common good. I argue that celebrity journalism should not be viewed as a second-rate news source, but rather as an alternative forum in which issues that are often excluded from mainstream news by virtue of their “private” nature are debated and discussed. This chapter also examines the ways in which the tabloidization debate works to support a larger discourse, which equates women with popular culture in a way that marginalizes women and their concerns, constructs female pleasure as “guilty pleasure,” and reinforces the notion that popular feminine texts are trivial and unsophisticated.

Chapter two details the textual and visual content of the magazines and, through close reading and content analyses, provides a typology of the genre and its trademark features. This chapter also elaborates on the construction of celebrity gossip magazines as women's magazines or, more specifically, as magazines for young women facing the questions and challenges of young adulthood. By examining the ways in which celebrity gossip magazines work to hail a young, female audience, this chapter illustrates the ways in which that hailing produces individual women as part of a larger community of readers.

Chapter three expands upon the idea of the celebrity gossip community, with specific attention given to the depiction of celebrities. Specifically, this chapter examines the trope of the "ordinary celebrity" and investigates the way in which celebrity gossip magazines employ the concept of "ordinary stardom" in order to position themselves as gatekeepers and enhance the value of the celebrity brand. Through data obtained via interviews with editorial staff and readers and via an analysis of the visual and rhetorical strategies employed by the magazines, I trace the complicated relationship between magazine, stars, and readers, showing how each benefits from their involvement in celebrity gossip. In particular, I map the ways in which "ordinary" celebrities serve as a knowable community, which provides the genre's young, female readership with a way of thinking and talking about their own experiences.

Finally, chapter four investigates the notion of "truth" in relation to celebrity news in an effort to show how and why the genre emphasizes ambiguity. Drawing from interviews with the Cube women and using examples drawn from the magazines, I explore the ways in which the ambiguous nature of the genre encourages readers to grapple with their own conflicted opinions about the magazines and the normative moralities they proscribe, particularly in regards to gender, femininity, and motherhood. Further, this chapter expands upon the work of chapter three, continuing an examination of the specific ways in which readers relate celebrity gossip to their own lives and experiences and what impact these connections have on readers' own identities. Here, I argue that the ambiguity of the celebrity gossip genre and the conflicted readings that it produces help to explain why women, even those who disagree with the magazines'

claims, continue to engage with celebrity gossip. It is because the ambiguous nature of the genre invites reader to voice their own opinions and thereby exert authority not only over the magazines, but also over the feminine “norms” they re-present.

Throughout, I argue that celebrity gossip magazines play an important role, both in the lives of individual women and in our broader American culture. Despite their reputation as trivial fluff, these texts deal with serious issues that are seriously important to female readers. It is only by examining these texts seriously and on their own terms that we can begin to understand their impact and import. Celebrity gossip magazines are not only about famous couples and glamorous gowns, scandalous escapades and happy endings. At their core, celebrity gossip magazines are about the challenges and contradictions of female life. They are about the joys and sorrows, the fantasies and frustrations that American women grapple with every day. They are, in short, about us, and therefore deserve our attention.

¹ Although some of these women do fit the demographic profile of the celebrity gossip magazine reader, the participants in this study are not demographically representative of the breadth of the genre’s readership nor are these interviews meant to represent all of the possible ways in which the magazines are read. While these readers may not be a statistically perfect representation of the genre’s readership, they do provide insight into the types of reading practices that the magazines afford and because of the diversity of the Cube readers’ martial, racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, and professional identities. I feel strongly that their experiences provide a nuanced and truthful depiction of reading practices that other female readers will identify with, regardless of their own intersectional identities.

² Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, discusses popular women’s magazines and paves the way for a surge of feminist critiques on the topic.

Chapter I

What Matters to Us: Tabloidization and the Gendered Public

“Gossip is just news running ahead of itself in a red satin dress.”

--Liz Smith, the Grand Dame of Dish¹

In 2006, Bonnie Fuller was invited to speak at Columbia’s graduate school of journalism. Fuller had been recognized throughout the publishing industry as a powerhouse, an influential businesswoman credited with revamping and revitalizing a slew of magazines from *Cosmopolitan* and *Star* to *Marie Claire* and *YM*. She’d served as editor in chief at *Us Weekly*, editorial director of American Media, and had twice been named *Advertising Age*’s editor of the year (’97 and ’02). And yet Columbia’s invitation to Ms. Fuller stoked the ire of those at the very organization who had happily honored her over the past decade, prompting *Ad Age*’s Simon Dumenco and Ann Marie Kerwin to publish an article that exclaimed, “What the \$#&\$)*@???” and called for the reclassification of celebrity news reporting from journalism to “non-journalism.” “Can we just admit,” pleaded the writers, “finally, once and for all, that Bonnie Fuller certainly does something compelling and entertaining, but it is not, for the most part, journalism?” Meanwhile, gawker.com picked up the story, tweeting, “Bonnie Fuller to speak to Columbia j-school; j-schoolers to throw themselves into Broadway traffic upon realizing they spent all that money to train for this?”² Columbia’s invitation to Fuller was, it seemed, journalistic blasphemy.

But why such outrage over a simple invitation? What was so wrong with honoring a woman whose career had, without a doubt, shaped the publishing industry in profound and identifiable ways? The hubbub over Fuller's speech and the insistence that celebrity journalism is an oxymoron is part of a larger debate about what should and should not be considered news. Critics allege that Fuller's success is representative of broader shift in journalistic standards, a not-so-subtle slide towards "soft" news: celebrity gossip, infotainment, and human interest stories. Over the past decade, the popularity and financial success of celebrity news media has prompted many mainstream news organizations -- national newspapers, television news programs, and their accompanying websites -- to cover stories about the stars, fanning the flames of a debate over tabloidization that has been ongoing since the early part of the 19th century.

During the 1830's, the penny press emerged in the United States. These inexpensive papers quickly outpaced their higher-priced competitors in sales and readership while establishing their own distinct style; unlike their six-penny counterparts, penny papers emphasized the lurid, the scandalous, the human interest (MacGill Hughes, 1940, 11; Schudson, 1981). Additionally, the penny press were the first American papers made for and marketed to a working class audience, "a relatively unlettered class that had never had a newspaper before" (MacGill Hughes, 1940: 7). Since then, argues journalism scholar Elizabeth Bird, "the tension between a perception of tabloid style as representing the legitimate desires and voices of the people, or as representing a vulgarization of public discourse has been at the heart of the debate about tabloidization" (2009, 40). The term tabloid has evolved; originally used to refer to newspapers that are half the size of a standard broadsheet, today, it is used to characterize any media form that is primarily focused on stories that deal with the personal, the emotional, and the human interest. In his 2008 article, "Newzak: Entertainment Versus News and Information," Bob Franklin summarizes the arguments often made by those who claim that the tabloid style is eroding journalistic standards:

Entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgment has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more 'newsworthy' than the reporting of significant issues and

events of international consequence. Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; 'infotainment' is rampant (2008: 13).

Despite these allegations, celebrity magazines have, over the past decade, transformed the tabloid market from a "small dirty corner of the magazine rack" into "something far more mainstream and lucrative" (Carr, 2003). Meanwhile, the debate over tabloidization has gained momentum.

Until recently, coverage of celebrity stories was a rarity in the mainstream press -- newspapers, television, and news radio shows. According to former ABC news correspondent, Stephen Bell, audiences who tuned in to ABC, NBC, or CBS during the 1960's could expect only 15 or 30 minutes of reporting each evening, during which celebrity stories might be covered in 30 seconds, if they were covered at all. When, in August of 1977, NBC and ABC led their nightly newscast with the story of Elvis Presley's death, their decision sent shockwaves across the networks (Rosen, 2004). More recently, ABC's *Nightline* drew criticism in 2003 when producers decided to emphasize a story about pop star Michael Jackson's arrest over coverage of President Bush's trip to London. Although the episode became *Nightline*'s top-rated show of the year, critics cried foul. The "even-gasp-'*Nightline*'!" cries are indicative of a growing anxiety amongst journalists, who are being told to report celebrity stories in order to attract audiences. Rosen explains:

It's shame. It's self-loathing. It's the whole idea that by covering a Michael Jackson or a Kobe Bryant, the media are falling down on the job, somehow abdicating their responsibilities to be eternally highbrow, their noses buried in stacks of government documents. And that if they do stoop so low as to join the 'circus' or the 'feeding frenzy' or the 'spectacle,' they need to somehow distance themselves from the others elbowing one another in the morass, to find a way to say, as they're standing, palms sweating, in front of Neverland's gate, that 'yeah, I'm here, but it's not what you think.'

Journalists are wary of the shifting boundaries between "hard" and "entertainment" news; the later threatens to challenge the prominence of an industry that prides itself on rigorously monitoring which stories it covers and which it does not. "Hard" news journalists are, therefore, eager to distance themselves from celebrity reporters; however, it has become increasingly difficult for them to do so.

Celebrity news is some of the most sought-after and widely consumed content in the country and mainstream news sources, struggling to stay afloat in a marketplace that is saturated with information, are eager to cash in on the celebrity craze. Mainstream news outlets are embracing celebrity stories, argues Lauren Schutte, a former *Us Weekly* editor who earned a journalism degree from before beginning her career in celebrity news, because these stories have the power to reach mass audiences and draw big ratings; to ignore them is to risk losing valuable market shares. So when the rich and famous are caught driving drunk, abusing their spouses, and stealing jewelry, these stories, which might not ordinarily have found their way into the daily news, become lead news items. “If someone is arrested for rape, it may not make the local news,” argues Jill Rosen of the *American Journalism Review*; however if basketball star “Kobe Bryant is arrested for rape,” Rosen points out, “the national media won’t only trip over themselves to report the courtroom details, they’ll tell you the cut, color and carat of the ‘oops-I’m-sorry’ diamond ring he gave his wife afterward.” Celebrities give news a recognizable face and, doing so, transform tired news story into scandalous *new* stories.

But even journalists who attempt to avoid tabloid stories may find it difficult to do so; increasingly, the once self-contained celebrity world is seeping into legal, political, and otherwise public realms. A slew of celebrities, from Paris Hilton to Lindsay Lohan to Charlie Sheen, have faced serious legal allegations and even jail time, their notoriety transforming stale crime stories into sellable network news. Meanwhile, Austrian-born bodybuilder, model, and Terminator, Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected and re-elected governor of California in 2003 and 2006, and in 2010, following the nation’s devastating earthquake, rapper-turned activist Wyclef Jean attempted to run in the Haitian presidential election. In the U.S., two years after a 2008 Vice Presidential bid, former Alaska governor Sarah Palin debuted her reality television program on The Learning Channel (TLC); that same year her daughter, Bristol, appeared on ABC’s popular reality competition *Dancing with the Stars*. By 2011, pundits’ debates over whether or not mega-mogul reality show host Donald Trump would run for president rang were coated with a knowing nonchalance. As celebrities infiltrate facets of the public sphere that have traditionally been considered newsworthy -- politics, crime, and even foreign affairs-- journalists are torn between a responsibility to report the actions of the

influential and a desire to avoid the stigma associated with the tabloid press. Celebrity news, once at the fringes of mainstream journalism, is now at the center of an industry-wide debate.

In order to understand what challenges celebrity news poses to the mainstream we must first understand the basic tenets of professional journalism. The preamble to the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics attests that its members "believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues."³ In other words, the news media must be an independent monitor of power and must serve a crucial role in deliberative democracy, providing the public with information that will allow its members to make informed political decisions. In addition, journalists pride themselves on their relentless pursuit of the truth and aversion to bias. Good journalists verify their sources, check their facts, and avoid overly emotional reporting at all costs.

Celebrity news does not conform to these journalistic standards; in fact, it stands in sharp opposition to them. It celebrates the ambiguous and the uncertain, it veils its sources in a vague shroud, and, above all, it flaunts its opinions and revels in its own point of view. In doing so, celebrity journalism gives us pause, forces us to reconsider why it is that certain ideals are valued in mainstream news while others are disregarded. It also draws our attention to the way in which contemporary mainstream news has a habit of breaking its own rules; even the politically apathetic can easily match FOX and MSNBC with their corresponding political affiliations and in times of national strife, particularly since 9-11, "there has been a marked shift in the sheer amount of emotion in news narratives" (Kitch, 2009). It is no wonder, then, that celebrity news, which dissects, unpacks, and, at times, renders incomprehensible words like truth and bias, makes mainstream journalists seriously uncomfortable.

But perhaps the concept that celebrity news most deeply troubles is that of the public sphere.⁴ The public sphere is an imagined social arena in which individuals gather to identify and discuss social matters. Most contemporary versions of the public sphere are based upon the model put forth by the German sociologist Jurgen Habermas in his

book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. According to Habermas, the public sphere is a public arena, free from the interests of the state, the church, and business, in which private individuals engage in rational debate and discussion about matters of “common good.” Through participation in the public sphere, citizens publically monitor state authority through critical and informed discourse. The free press, therefore, is a foundational element of this public sphere.

The principles of the public sphere, which suggest that individual citizens must act as social watchdogs, have fundamentally shaped our contemporary understanding of the role of the news media. We now take for granted that it is the duty of the press to provide citizens with accurate and unbiased information so that they may engage in informed and reasoned debate (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). A look at the content of mainstream news reveals the way in which this emphasis on democratic enlightenment translates into news content. In his 1979 book, *Deciding What's News: A study of CBS evening news, NBC nightly news, Newsweek, and Time*, Herbert Gans provides a detailed account of the persons and activities that are considered most newsworthy in the mainstream press. Gans finds that, for television news and newsmagazines, presidents, politicians, criminals, professionals, protestors, crime victims, voters, and business leaders are the most popular subjects of news coverage. Furthermore, Gans details the types of activities that are most often covered in the mainstream news: government conflicts and decisions, government personnel changes, protests, crimes, and disasters. At the time of his study, human interest stories, such as biographies and reports about births, weddings, and deaths, appeared in less than ten instances. Gans' study shows how mainstream journalism emphasizes matters of political and public import. Since the time of Gans' study, news media have increasingly begun to embrace celebrity coverage but nevertheless remains invested in the ideals of the public sphere, as evidenced by their continued emphasis on politics, crime, and elections.

But while matters of politics and public life certainly warrant news coverage, the public sphere model privileges these topics at the expense of others. It has long been noted that the things that concern women, for example, lie outside the realm of the political public sphere, which was originally and remains to this day largely the domain of men. The political sphere of the late 18th century emerged thanks, in no small part, to

the growth of a newly literate reading public, the literary public sphere, which was forged in the early decades of the century. This reading public had two distinct strands: one oriented towards news and one towards amusement. The news reading public consisted of men who read and discussed the news in their coffee houses and clubs, from which women were excluded. The entertainment reading public was for women of the new social class who had time, leisure and money to spend on magazines and novels which they consumed in what Habermas calls the “intimate sphere” of the bourgeois household. Outside the home, men read to be informed. Inside the home, women read to be entertained. What concerned men was weighty, worldly and important. What concerned women was lightweight domestic and trivial. This gendered moral economy of what is serious and what is not has persisted in the popular discourse; it is, in many ways, a driving force in the debate over the tabloidization of the news.

This gendered moral economy is steeped in conceptions of public and private life. The news media, as responsible members of the public sphere, are meant to report on matters of public interest and concern. Politics, war, business -- these are public matters and therefore, the logic goes, concern everyone. Habermas’ public sphere, however, relegates domestic, familial, and bodily matters to the confines of the intimate sphere. These are not considered matters of public interest, but personal matters, private concerns of private individuals; their import therefore lies outside the public realm. Feminist scholars have, however, argued that this discourse of public and private is problematic, for it relegates important social issues, many of which directly impact women, to the political margins (MacKinnon, 1989). In her essay, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” Nancy Fraser argues that “there are no naturally given, a priori boundaries” between public and private concerns and that “only participants themselves can decide what is and what is not common concern to them” (1994: 129). Fraser uses the example of domestic violence to illustrate this point, noting that, until recently, “feminists were in the minority in thinking that domestic violence against women was a matter of common concern and thus a legitimate topic for public discourse” rather than simply a private, domestic issue (1994:129). For Fraser and other feminist scholars, conceptions of public and private, which are unstable, historically socially relative, and “affected by political powers and dominant ideological

systems” have been historically employed to undercut a wide range of issues pertaining to childcare, abortion, and domestic relations, which deeply affect women’s lives (João Silveirinha, 1992: 66).⁵

Indeed, this was the rallying cry of second wave feminists: “the personal is political.” This mantra challenged the rigid divide between public and private life by insisting that the discourse of the personal was a false construct, an ideological label used to relegate important social issues to the fringes of political debate. Since the 1970’s, feminist activists and scholars have sought to retrieve these “private” matters from the shadowy realm of the personal and reposition them in the public spotlight; however, despite their groundbreaking efforts, public and private, personal and political continue to serve as powerful defining categories. Today, these categories have become central to the tabloidization debate. Critics of “soft,” tabloid news employ and exaggerate these categories in order to delineate the boundaries of public discourse; in doing so, they continue to marginalize and trivialize many “private” topics.

Celebrity journalism exists at the crosshairs of public and private life and, as such, troubles the discourse which marks these two realms and distinct and immutable. As this study will show, celebrity gossip magazines transform personal topics into matters of public discussion. They feature stories about the “private” lives of celebrities who are, as Richard Dyer points out, “always inescapably people in public” (2004: 12). Even the locations in which the magazines are sold and read are ambiguous. The salon and the dentist’s office, the supermarket and the pharmacy are places where women have historically gathered to gossip, in public, about their personal lives, places where the personal, the domestic, and the feminine collide with the marketplace (Deutsch, 2010). In all of these ways, celebrity gossip magazines render notions of public and private meaningless and thereby “break the boundaries that have been drawn between that which can and cannot legitimately be discussed in public” (Connell: 1992, 74). By defying standard journalistic norms, the tabloid press disrupts prevailing ideas about what is newsworthy and what is not.

One key way in which the celebrity gossip genre fundamentally challenges the nature of the news is through its emphasis on the human interest story. The emotional, personal, human interest story, relegated to the fringes of the mainstream news, is the

beating heart of celebrity journalism. A narrative genre in which “personal experiences or feelings [are] calculated to elicit the interest or sympathy of readers,” the human interest story transforms nebulous social issues, such as crime, corruption, disease, and discrimination, into recognizable, comprehensible narratives.⁶ It achieves this by personalizing the political. In short, human interest stories give the news a recognizable face. “Ultimately, they are all alike,” writes Helen MacGill Hughes in her 1940 book, *News and the Human Interest Story*. “Their appeal is not in the nature of the subject, but in the light they shed on private life. The fundamental element of human interest is a curiosity to know what it is like to undergo those common personal crises and visitations of good and bad luck...suffered by persons who are shown to have essentially one’s own nature. In the end, human interest approaches the interest every man has in himself” (1940: 216). Celebrity gossip magazines function in precisely this way -- they collectivize for their readers the concerns of private life and, in doing so, shed light on the human condition.

But the magazines do differ from MacGill Hughes’ definition of human interest in one key way: they are not about the interest every man has in himself, but about the interest every *woman* has in *herself*. They are not about the human condition but, as we shall see in chapter two, about the female condition. As such, celebrity gossip narratives put a face and a name to female concerns. By personalizing topics that matter to women in this way, celebrity gossip magazines provide their readers with an opportunity to reflect on and debate about social issues that matter *to them*. “The best [human interest story],” writes MacGill Hughes, “is the one that can be recalled in the greatest variety of situations and told because, “that reminds me” (1940: 68). Celebrity gossip is ideally suited for this very purpose.

In the spring of 2010, I visited The Cube, a museum in suburban New York, and spoke to a group of female coworkers there, all self-described followers of celebrity gossip. At the time, one story that was especially salient for readers was the ongoing coverage of the relationship between pop singer Rihanna and her on-again, off-again boyfriend, rapper Chris Brown, who had been accused of physically assaulting Rihanna in early 2009. This story ignited intense debate about domestic violence amongst the Cube women. Stacey, a thirty-seven year old educator at the Cube, describes an

experience that she shared with her sister after the allegations against Brown became public:

My sister and I just went out to a club recently and she requested the song “Forever” and the DJ said, ‘I can’t play that anymore because people hate Chris Brown.’ And my sister was like, ‘That’s so true.’ We started getting in a conversation about [the] domestic violence with Chris Brown and what happens to his career now. It’s interesting how during that time the magazines spun that. [Rihanna’s story] probably was a vehicle for young girls to realize maybe that they weren’t in [healthy relationships]. I think [celebrity magazines] create dialogue about important issues by taking it away from something about you and placing it on other people, which makes it a little bit more comfortable or lighthearted having the conversation. But the root of [the topic] is still being discussed in some sort of way. I normally wouldn’t bring up domestic abuse in the staff lounge but if I’m reading a story about Rihanna like, ‘Oh my god, isn’t it horrible what happened to her!’ and someone will say, ‘Oh, I know somebody who that happened to’ and I think, ‘Oh, get out!’ So there is this dialogue that is sparked, important dialogue that women need to talk about.

Stacey’s narrative shows how stories about the personal lives of celebrities can prompt significant discussions about social issues that may otherwise be ignored in the media due to their “private” or “personal” nature. “Young girls are watching what Rihanna does more than they are watching the news to see what’s happening to everyday people,” says Amber, a twenty-seven year old college student and guest services manager, who feels that Rihanna’s story helped “shed light” on the issue of domestic violence. Thus, by bringing the private hardships of *individual* women into the public light, celebrity gossip magazines provide female readers with an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue about topics that are both personal and politically salient to *all women*.

Domestic abuse is not typically the primary focus of celebrity journalism, but rather one of many subjects, including family life, relationships, and weight, that are of critical concern to celebrity journalists. These topics deeply matter to the Cube readers. “I think women are obviously interested in things that have far more substance than gossip,” says Mary, a thirty-three year old manager, “but these topics in real life have substance. How you feel about your own body or your relationship and if you’re secure or whether or not your boyfriend or girlfriend is going to cheat on you? Those are pretty weighty topics.” By emphasizing topics like infidelity, body image, and self esteem, the magazines make these often trivialized, subjects available for debate and

discussion. In doing so, they provide their readers with a public forum in which to explore the experiences and anxieties that are seriously important to young women, but which are often diminished due to their “personal” nature.

The Politics of the Intimate Public

For this reason, there has been some debate as to whether or not tabloid journalism can be understood as an alternative public sphere (Fiske, 1992; Johansson, 2007; Örnebring and Jönsson, 2004). The idea of an alternative public sphere, an independent, discursive arena in which underrepresented groups can debate and discuss, in their own ways, issues that are of common concern to those groups emerges was pioneered by Fraser, who argues that the ideal of a single public sphere is neither practical nor preferable because that this monolithic model works to exclude many people and issues from public debate. In order to ensure that all citizens have a place in the public sphere, Fraser argues for the creation of multiple, subaltern counterpublics. These alternative counterpublics, which exist outside of the mainstream, engage participants and topics that are often neglected in the dominant discourse and do so in ways that differ from the mainstream in both form and style. In many ways, the tabloid press shares many of these characteristics. As Henrik Örnebring and Anna Maria Jönsson argue in their article, “Tabloid Journalism and the Public Sphere: A Historical Perspective on Tabloid Journalism,” the tabloid press “has the ability to broaden the public, giving news access to groups that previously have not been targeted by the prestige press ... to effect societal change by redefining previously undebateable issues as in need of debate ... and give rise to new forms of journalistic discourse that may be more accessible to the audience and less deferent towards traditional journalism” (2004: 292-293). While these arguments have focused on tabloid papers, from *The Sun* to the *National Enquirer*, they can also be applied to celebrity gossip magazines, which are also considered *tabloid* and whose contents and style share many similarities with their paper counterparts. Celebrity gossip magazines do challenge the conventional definitions of newsworthiness by reclaiming “private” issues and making those topics available for public discussion. The

genre also appeals to a non-elite audience with its chatty, personal style and its easily accessible content.

Nevertheless, celebrity gossip magazines cannot be considered an alternative public sphere. To define the genre thus is to suggest that the magazines have a political agenda. This is simply not so. Furthermore, according to both Habermas and Fraser, the debate which takes place within the public sphere(s) is intended to be reasoned and critical in nature. The conversation generated by celebrity gossip is not usually based on rational critique, but on emotional and personal investment in the narratives at hand. Additionally, in Fraser's model, alternative publics must exist outside of and distinct from the mainstream; while tabloid journalism exists at the margins of mainstream journalism, its popularity and financial success are located firmly within the cultural and economic mainstream. This is not to say, however, that the question of politics is irrelevant to the discussion of these magazines.

In her 2008 book *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Lauren Berlant argues that women's culture -- magazines, books, films, soap operas -- works to construct what she calls an intimate public, "a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general" (2008: viii). Within the intimate public, participants are linked through a shared "fantasy" of communal engagement, based upon "an expectation that consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience" (2008: viii). The promise of the intimate public is that it allows women "to feel that their emotional lives are already shared and have already been raised to a degree of general significance while remaining true to what's personal" (2008: ix). In short, the intimate public emphasizes the personal, the commonplace, the presupposed historical and cultural conditions that shape women's understanding of their own experiences in a way that creates, link by link, an imagined, but deeply felt, sense of connection and community. Furthermore, the intimate public serves as a realm in which norms, values, and attitudes about female behavior and experience are monitored and discussed, although this dialogue is not based on the kind of rational discourse that Habermas advocates for.

Unlike Habermas' public sphere or Fraser's subaltern counterpublic, the intimate public does not concern itself with issues of structurally inequality, although certainly its existence is influenced by those structures. Berlant explains:

Fraser distinguishes 'weak' from 'strong' publics to differentiate those that address themselves towards cultural flourishing from those that address questions of structural inequality mediated by the state and related institutions. The strong public is strong because it organizes its sense of belonging in a conventionally political register, whereas the weak public is not focused by or aspirationally mimetic of a civic orientation. In her lexicon, an intimate public would function mainly as a weak public: but this taxonomy underdescribes the dynamics of indirection and mediation that characterize even strong publics, while bracketing the difficult question of what kinds of views can be said to constitute the circulated 'opinion' that produces civil society as a force in institutional political life. Can absorption in affective and emotional transactions that take place at home, on the street, and between intimates and strangers be deemed irrelevant to civil society unless they are somehow addressed to institutions? (2008: 8).

Berlant suggests, and I echo her in firmly stating, that the answer is no. While the intimate public, of which celebrity gossip magazines can be consider a part, is not overtly political, its significance lies in its ability to provide participants with "anchors" through which they can endure, resist, overcome, and enjoy their experience of being female in concert with other women. This model, therefore, rejects the discourse of strong and weak publics in favor of a fluid understanding of the ways in which personal and political, individual and institutional, are both dynamic and inextricable. This rejection is a productive one in that it allows us to recognize and take seriously, on its own terms, the value of conversation and communal engagement that women's popular cultural texts provide to their audiences.

Still, the politics of what Berlant calls *women's culture*, a "mass-marketed intimate public... where a set of problems associated with managing femininity is expressed and worked through incessantly," extends beyond debates over the public sphere (2008: 5). For just below the surface of the tabloidization debate, beside the tension between fact and feeling, truth and ambiguity, there exists a greater contest -- a contest over the gendered nature of public life. The fear expressed by some journalists that the tabloid style is sneaking into the realm of hard news is, in many ways, a fear that the long-standing division between a public, masculine world based in politics, public

affairs, and “fact” and a feminine world of emotion, private life, and opinion has grown precariously thin. The tabloidization debate is not only about subject matter or style, but about competing value systems; it is, according to British tabloid scholar Sofia Johansson, “a struggle over the culturally gendered preserves of ‘hard,’ masculine, news and a ‘feminized’ realm of emotion and intimate life” (2006: 345, also see Bonner & McKay, 2007). This debate is steeped in a social discourse that not only marginalizes women and their concerns in regards to their news value, but also trivializes women’s popular culture and the pleasures women find in that culture whenever they appear. The politics of celebrity gossip, therefore, is not just a politics of representation, but also a politics of pleasure.

Pleasure and the Popular

“*Us* is ‘a deep-fried Twinkie’”

Claire Connors, Entertainment Director of *Redbook* Magazine⁷

In her 1980 study, “Housewives and the Mass Media,” Dorothy Hobson interviewed female radio and television audiences in order to learn more about their preferences; she discovered that her participants enjoyed soap operas, talk shows, and serials but disliked news, sports, and documentary programs. Despite the fact that they enjoyed soaps and talk shows, Hobson’s participants described their contents as “silly.” Alternately the women rejected the masculine viewing world as “depressing” and “boring,” yet tended to apologize for not being interested in those male-oriented programs, which they regarded as “alien, yet important.” Hobson’s study lays bare a popular understanding that is deeply engrained, but rarely articulated; namely, that men and women are interested in different things and that those things that interest women are considered, even by the women who enjoy them, to be silly and trivial.

More than three decades since Hobson’s study, the Cube women, like Hobson’s housewives, reject the masculine media world, especially television news, because they

find its contents to be overly partisan, boring, and depressing. “I don’t even like watching the news,” says Amber, a twenty-seven year old African American college student who works in the guest services division at The Cube. “It depresses me. Depressing story after depressing story.” Another reader, Stephanie, a thirty-three year old African American executive assistant and mother of three, who referred to TV news as “murder-death-kill,” says she prefers E! News to “actual news shows.” The Cube readers not only dislike the contents of mainstream news, but also its tone, which they regard as dry, imperturbable, and unemotional. Taken together, the ceaseless coverage of violence, strife, and death combined with a stoic, unwavering reporting style is repellent to them. Nevertheless, the Cube women are not disinterested in traditional news; on the contrary, they are a highly informed and engaged group of citizens who care deeply about politics, crime, war, and social justice. Many of the Cube readers continue to engage both print and television formats, intentionally setting time aside to stay informed about local news, politics, and international affairs. Their willingness to consistently engage with mainstream news media, despite the fact that they do not feel as though these forums speak to them, challenges the discourse that limits women and their interests to the realm of private life. It also points to the way in which women continue to value the masculine world despite their alienation from it.

What is problematic about the experiences of both the Cube readers and Hobson’s housewives is not that they take seriously the world of public affairs, but that they diminish the media texts that they find enjoyable. For the Cube women, celebrity gossip magazines represent a welcome relief from the *if-it-bleeds-it-leads* mantra of the mainstream. Not only do the magazines focus on topics that personally matter to them, they also present these topics in way that is snappy, sassy, and opinionated. Celebrity news, unlike mainstream journalism, thrives on emotion and opinion-- it can be sympathetic and heartfelt or wry and arch, overly dramatic or dramatically sober. The Cube readers enjoy this style of reporting, which is, for some, one of the most exciting and appealing aspects of the genre. Sasha, an African American educator who declined to reveal her age, explains:

[The magazines] go a little further than the actual news of a daily paper because they give you more color. You get a little more personal about the story. The

magazines give a little bit more umph to it. I like that personal aspect of it. That's a big selling point for me and why I even indulge in them. They do get a little deeper. The journalists from these magazines may give a little more twist or even make a little dig or something, make it more personal. I do like that because [I feel like I'm] learning more about the situation. ... The rag magazines, they just bring a little color to the story. Is it really needed up against the news? If you had to do away with one or the other? The rag magazine, you would stick a fork in it, it would be done.

Chatty, and bold, gossip magazines offer their audience information with an attitude, which, unlike the stoic tone of "serious" news, the Cube women find appealing and refreshing. Nevertheless, Sasha and other readers continue to diminish their own enjoyment of celebrity news, despite their preference for this style of reporting.

While the Cube women enjoy celebrity gossip and are eager to discuss their reading practices, they nevertheless characterize the magazines in negative terms, referring to them as rags, items meant to be used and then thrown away or as addictions, unsanctioned habits that will ultimately lead to overconsumption and harm. One of the readers even likened the experience of reading a gossip magazine to that of eating fast food. But by far the term most often used to describe the magazines was trash:

Mary: I think they're all trash.

Cynthia: I would describe the magazines as trashy.

Danielle: The magazines [are] sometimes trashy entertainment.

Some readers argue that celebrity gossip magazines are "trashy" because they incessantly scrutinize women's bodies, pit women against one another, or present a view of women that is seriously lacking in diversity and depth. These are important critiques, set forth by conscientious readers who are unwilling or unable to reconcile their pleasure and dissatisfaction with the gossip press. For other women, however, the notion that celebrity magazines are trash stems not from a personal discontent with the nature of the genre, but rather from an imagined male critique of the magazines:

Helena: Ugh, [my boyfriend would] be like, 'That's crap.' He'd say something like, 'It's crap. It's a waste of your time. Why do you read that?'

April: I don't think my boyfriend would want to hear it. He'd say, 'They're so stupid. I hope you didn't spend money on that.'

Cynthia: Men would like looking at the bodies of the women but I don't think that they would find any other thing in there interesting. Men? I don't think so. Even if they do read them, they wouldn't tell anybody.

The Cube readers' imagined male counterparts argue that gossip magazines are trashy, trivial, silly, and unworthy of attention. Even those women who do not personally define the magazines as trash often hear these types of critiques ringing in their ears. The Cube readers anticipate a negative male response directed not only at the magazines, but at any woman silly enough to enjoy or (gasp!) purchase them. Their ability to generate this imaged male response with ease and consistency reveals the extent to which the readers have internalized a powerful gendered discourse which marks women's popular culture as illegitimate and unimportant.

Soap operas. Chick flicks. Romance novels. Scholars have traced the way in which a wide range of female-oriented texts have historically been defined as both distinct from and less important than their male-oriented counterparts (Brown, 1989; Tuchman, 1978; Radway, 1984). All of these texts emphasize the "intimate sphere"-- the home, the family, relationships, and the body, they all are marketed to and consumed by a (primarily) female audience, they all collectivize and speak to female concerns, and they have all been dismissed and derided as "low" culture within the popular discourse. Berlant groups these texts together under the term *women's culture*, a concept that is useful in that it seeks to collectivize and characterize the popular texts that define, represent, and express women's ideas about their own experience as women; however, this term fails to address the historical link between women and popular culture and the ways in which the two have been systematically linked, resulting in a devaluation of both female audiences and the texts they enjoy. In order to make this historical link explicit, I refer to these texts as the popular feminine.

In his 1986 article, "Mass Culture as Woman," Andreas Huyssen traces the link between the popular and the feminine to late 19th century discourse. Huyssen makes explicit the ways in which popular texts and their audiences were characterized in pejoratively feminine terms during this period. As the industrial revolution produced

major advances in printing and new books and periodicals emerged to meet the demands of a growing population of literate workers, serial novels and family magazines became increasingly popular with a newly literate cohort of women. At the same time, these texts were condemned by bourgeois critics, who alleged that these forms of “mass culture” were unworthy substitutes for “true literature” (Huyssen, 1986). The critiques aimed at the popular press were often gendered in nature; as Huyssen writes, “a specific traditional male image of women served as a receptacle for all kinds of projections, displaced fears, and anxieties (both personal and political), which were brought about by modernization and the new social conflicts” (1986, 52). For example, in an 1855 letter to his publisher, writer Nathaniel Hawthorne complained of “the damned mob of scribbling women”-- popular female authors whose books often outsold his, reaching hundreds of thousands of readers. Thirty years later, prominent journal editor Michael Georg Conrad wrote that literature needed to be emancipated from the “tyranny of well-bred debutantes and old wives of both sexes” (Huyssen, 1986: 50).⁸ In order to guard themselves against the threat of the newly literate population, elite men held tight to traditional high cultural forms, contrasting literature, classical music, and the avant-garde with a bawdry, feminine mass culture in order to assert the former’s legitimacy. In this way, the ideology of mass culture became inextricably linked with the devaluation of female culture in turn of the century America.⁹ Since that time, this ideology has been used to trivialize and marginalize everything from harlequin novels to *Days of Our Lives*.

The ideology of mass culture remains in place to this day; it also remains tightly woven into the discourse of the popular feminine. It is from this ideology that the rhetoric of *trash* emerges. Celebrity gossip magazines (along with a slew of reality television programs, “chick flicks,” and talk shows) are consistently referred to as “trash.” The term *trash* works to stigmatize both the content and audience associated with women’s popular culture and to undermine the cultural and economic power of texts like soap operas and women’s magazines (Holmes, 2005: 23; Johansson, 2006). Mary Ellen Brown, whose research investigates soap opera and female culture, argues that *trash* is not merely a casual dismissal, but a systematic attempt to undermine and debase female pleasure while reinforcing a dominant, patriarchal value system. According to Brown, this discursive trashing works to characterize female-oriented texts as “that which ought

to be discarded, a sort of instant garbage... superficial glitter designed to appeal to those whose tastes are ill-formed according to the dominant perspective” (1989: 174). The discourse of *trash* not only undermines the validity of the texts themselves, it also works effectively undercut a wide range of topics that matter to women. Further, this rhetoric also suggests that women are passive, tasteless consumers, who, given a choice, will consistently select the most worthless and trivial texts.

It is, perhaps, unsurprising then, that women are often eager to distance themselves from the popular texts that they enjoy. “The ideology of mass culture... does not offer a flattering picture of [fans]. They are presented as the opposite of ‘persons of taste,’ ‘cultural experts’ or ‘people who are not seduced by the cheap tricks of the commercial industry,” writes Ien Ang in her study of the popular melodrama, *Dallas* (1985: 103). In order to avoid being characterized in such an unbecoming way, women develop what Ang describes as a “strained attitude” towards the norms of the ideology of mass culture. This strained relationship prompts Ang’s viewers to repeatedly justify their enjoyment of *Dallas*; they do this by acknowledging that the show is “bad” (1985: 105). This is the same acknowledgment put forth by Hobson’s housewives (soap operas are “silly”) and by the Cube women (gossip magazines are “trash”). By acknowledging their awareness of the mass culture critique and then positioning their own enjoyment in relationship to that discourse, female audiences are able to shield themselves from the negative glare of the popular feminine.

But while these justifications may allow audiences to distance themselves from the mass culture critique, they also prevent women from acknowledging and embracing the pleasure that they find in popular texts. The “strained attitude” that Ang describes often results in feelings of guilt (Ang, 1985; Radway, 1984), as reported by a number of Cube readers:

Stacey: There was a sense of guilt about me, like I really shouldn’t continue to spin this in society. I don’t really feel guilty anymore. Well, I do a little bit because I find in the economy it’s an extra little thing. On the food line ... sometimes when I’m cutting back, this is the thing that I think, ‘Ooh do I really need to get that?’ But I do find that just for the hour or two that I get to flip through it and can pick it up and leave it there and pick up where I left off, that it’s enjoyable.

April: It's kind of a guilty pleasure. Definitely ... I would never pay money for it but if it's in front of me I'll read it.

Stephanie: It's not something that I'd buy. I definitely wouldn't buy it. But if I see it I would pick it up and check it out, look at it. That's why I hurry up and read it before I get to the cash register. Because I don't want to buy it. I'm not taking it home with me! But I'll definitely engage it if I'm in a doctor's office and it's there or in the staff lounge and I have time to spare. I'll pick it up while I'm waiting for my food to heat up. I guess there is a small sense of guilt.

Although they find celebrity gossip enjoyable and relaxing, Stacey, April, and Stephanie associate the magazines with feelings of guilt. The women are not, however, particularly apologetic about reading the magazines. What they feel guilty about is purchasing the magazines, an act that all three avoid. They are not the first women to feel this way. In her study of romantic fiction readers, Janice Radway finds that "many... women feel guilty about spending money on books that are regularly ridiculed by the media, their husbands, and their children" (1984: 54). Why do women feel guilty about buying books and magazines that are interesting to them? Perhaps it is because the act of purchase establishes the buyer as an active, purposeful consumer and thereby makes that individual susceptible to mass culture critiques. By not purchasing the magazines, the Cube readers distance themselves from the "silly," "tasteless" women who "actually buy these things." Therefore, the Cube women often seek out the magazines when they appear in public places, like the staff lounge, the doctor's office, or the nail salon; they also pass copies between friends. They are not the only ones who engage in these negotiations; in 2010, every issue of *Us Weekly* purchased was read by an average of seven people.¹⁰

These feelings of guilt are, however, not only experienced by female readers. Asked to reflect on the reading habits of their male counterparts, many of the Cube readers report that their husbands, boyfriends, and male friends are interested in the magazines, but reluctant to admit it:

Stephanie: My husband picks them up if I have them around and he's like, 'I can't believe you read this' as he's looking through it. 'I can't believe you read this!' as he's going through the entire magazine. [Laughs].

Stacey: My boyfriend, he wouldn't admit this, he finds himself gravitating towards them as well. ... I think my boyfriend will say, 'This is such nonsense.'

This is ridiculous. Who are these people? It's so ridiculous that you even buy these.' But in the same regard, he can't help reading them. Sometimes they have men in the magazines or they'll have them with no shirt on. My boyfriend will make a comment like, 'Oh, I used to look like that in my younger days.' And I think, 'Oh, you do the same thing women do.'

Mary: Sometimes my boyfriend will read them with me. He'll lean over and start reading over my shoulder and then take it away from me. He won't admit that he enjoys them. But he'll sit there and read through them. It's considered to be a girly thing. It's not a manly activity. If it was *Sports Illustrated*, he would be fine with admitting it.

Stephanie, Stacey, and Mary's partners have developed a nuanced and contradictory relationship with the magazines; although they vocally reject celebrity gossip, they are actually interested in reading the magazines. The men's rejections, then, are not rooted in a personal dislike of the genre (in 2008, between 15 and 27% of the magazines' readers were male and, according to Lauren Schutte, the pass-along rate to men is "enormous") but in an understanding that the magazines are "girly things."¹¹ Men are aware that the magazines are "for women" and, therefore, view their own enjoyment as taboo, which prompts them to hide or explain away the pleasure they find in reading.

For both men and women, then, the pleasure derived from reading celebrity gossip magazines is flecked with guilt. The experiences of both the Cube women and their male counterparts speak to the fact that pleasure associated with celebrity gossip is culturally unsanctioned, not because of the magazines' content, but because the genre is for and about women. The pleasure that audiences associate with celebrity gossip magazines, much like the pleasure of the soap opera or the romance, is a guilty pleasure because it is a female pleasure, a pleasure derived from the "highly feminized, and therefore despised, Venus's-flytrap of pop culture" (Douglas, 1994: 239). Thirty years after Hobson's study, the popular feminine remains stigmatized; both men and women who find pleasure in its offerings still feel compelled to justify or explain away their enjoyment.

Critics of tabloidization contribute to and validate mass culture critiques by insisting on the superiority of the rational and the public in a way that necessarily devalues the emotional and the "private." In doing so, they contribute to a discourse that

marginalizes and trashes the popular feminine. But the politics of pleasure are not limited to this particular discourse. Academics have also contributed to an understanding that the pleasure of popular culture is suspect. While ordinary people have viewed mass media as a form of entertainment and enjoyment, academics have seen the mass media as a problem. Since the 1930's, when millions of Americans began tuning in to the new medium of radio, scholars have considered the question of pleasure -- where does it come from, what effect does it have, and who gets to have it? The conclusions they drew were often disheartening. In her 1941 study of radio listeners, Herta Herzog asserted that the pleasure of radio was an illusory, compensatory one, a pleasure that helped housewives manage the drudgery of their own lives. Meanwhile, Frankfurt School critics like Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Antonio Gramsci argued that the pleasure of the mass media was a false pleasure, designed by the culture industries to spread a political agenda (Scannell, 2007). By the 1970's, Stuart Hall had extended this argument, theorizing that pleasure was an ideological tool, meant to produce dominant ideas as "common sense." The question of pleasure, for its own sake rather than as a pernicious political mechanism, did not begin to be raised in earnest until the 1970's, when feminist critics of the media began to explore what women liked and why they liked it. This scholarship, much of which grew out of the emerging field of cultural studies, examined the popular texts -- the magazines, music, and television show-- that women and girls found exciting and enjoyable (Brunsdon, 2000, Hobson, 1984; McRobbie, 1991; Modleski, 1982).

But even then, much of the feminist scholarship surrounding women's popular culture, particularly women's magazines, has reproduced the aforementioned academic critiques, treating the pleasure of these texts as a problem, rather than a promise. Critics have argued that women's magazines, and the pleasure associated with them, are problematic because they emphasize patriarchal values and insist upon tired feminine stereotypes (Ballaster et al., 1991; Douglas, 2010; Friedan, 1963; Ferguson, 1983). Although these critiques point to serious and noteworthy problems, they also fail to address the way in which audiences experience these texts. Ang summarizes the argument put forth by this school of scholarship, and its impact:

Unfortunately, a lot of mainstream feminist criticism seems to be inspired all too easily by the paternalism of the ideology of mass culture. Especially in the case

of the mass media, much energy is spent in obsessively stressing how 'stereotyped', 'role-confirming', and 'anti-emancipatory' the images of women in the media are. This is usually the result of a content analysis that bears all the limitations of empiricist realism, so that the firm conclusion is reached that such images reflect sexist or patriarchal values. Combined with a mechanistic conception of the effect of such representations on the behavior and attitudes of women, this leads to a total condemnation of [the texts] as reinforcers of the patriarchal status quo and the oppression of women. Women are therefore seen as the passive victims of the deceptive message of [the texts], just as the ideology of mass culture sees the audience as unwitting and pathetic victims of the commercial culture industry. In this context an ideological atmosphere arises containing an almost total dismissal of and hostility towards narrative genres which are very popular among women (1985: 118-119).

Ang's analysis points to the three crucial problems posed by these types of critiques: they contribute to the discourse which insists that the popular feminine is bad, even dangerous, they fail to explain why audiences engage these texts, and they suggest that ordinary women are simply cultural dopes, unable or unwilling to recognize their own repression. Ultimately, these critiques reinforce the long-standing moral economy between the male and female cultural worlds. Alienated from the male world and told that their own interests are damaging and problematic, these critiques, however well intentioned, leave women culturally bankrupt.¹²

Even scholars who *have* acknowledged the pleasure of the popular feminine find themselves attempting to justify this pleasure in political terms. The feminist writer Michele Barrett, for example, argues that feminist scholars must understand why women enjoy things that are "politically bad for them," not because she wishes to validate that enjoyment, but because she hopes to activate it in the service of feminist goals, to "widen the purchase of feminist ideas" (1982: 56). Although Barrett's recognizes the importance of pleasure, she nevertheless views it as a political tool, suggesting that women's popular culture cannot simply be pleasurable for its own sake, but that it must serve a larger political agenda if it is to be meaningful. Ang wisely responds to Barrett's critique, asking whether or not the pleasure of the popular can really be made politically useful, but a deeper question remains unanswered (1985: 132). Should it be? Must pleasure be politically useful in order to be validated? Should we privilege the pleasure women find in feminist zines and *Ms.* over that which they find in *Us Weekly* and *Life &*

Style? Should *Star* strive to look more like *Spare Rib*? To answer “yes” is to ignore the way in which pleasure is multiply and dynamically located within a text, to ignore the fact that readers can take just as much pleasure in debunking (or reveling in) the feminine fantasy of *Vogue* as they can engaging with a text that they find politically meaningful.

Barrett’s pursuit of a broader feminist audience, while admirable, also fails to acknowledge the way in which the text speaks for itself (*res ipsa loquitur*). Celebrity gossip magazines are intentionally designed in such a way as to render themselves enjoyable to their readers. As chapter two will show, the magazines look a particular way and are read and enjoyed in specific ways because publishers, editors, artists, and writers have carefully constructed the magazines in ways that will allow for specific types of reading experiences. The pleasure that women find in the magazines -- a pleasure which is often highly negotiated and rife with contradictions -- is not a mindless, hedonistic indulgence. It is, rather, a specific response that is derived from and exists in relationship to the celebrity gossip magazine. Therefore, to suggest that the magazines should be altered in order to advance a feminist goal is to put forth ideas about the thing, but to ignore the thing itself.

In his 1967 book, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Harold Garfinkel argues that, by overemphasizing the theoretical and social scientific, “one can theorize out of existence the way the person’s scene, as a texture of potential and actual events, contains not only appearances and attributions but the person’s own lively inner states as well” (1967: 72). In this way, Garfinkel argues, researchers run the risk of constructing their subjects as cultural dopes. Feminist scholarship that insists upon the importance of ideology and politics while discounting the value of audience enjoyment theorizes out of existence the genuine pleasure that female readers attain from their engagement with popular texts. Followers of celebrity gossip, and I count myself among them, are not cultural dopes who absorb, in their entirety and without question, the norms and values presented in the magazines or, for that matter, in any media text. The Cube women are, as chapter four will clearly demonstrate, well aware of the staid critiques, which contend that these publications are detrimental to women’s self esteem and distract from pressing political matters; however, they do not experience the reading process in these terms. They are

quick to point to the ways in which the magazines facilitate and promote negative and narrow views of women, but their own reading practices allow them to negotiate and interpret these images in ways that are ultimately pleasurable. For these readers, the magazines and the gossip they invite are a way of managing fear and anxiety, of bonding with friends and coworkers, and of caring for one another's emotional well-being.

Millions of women do not, week after week, simply seek out these magazines for the fashion or the stars (or because they are dopes).¹³ They read because the magazines provide them with an opportunity to discuss and debate with, and therefore relate to, an entire cohort of women who share the same interests, anxieties, and dreams. The pleasure of celebrity gossip, then, is not a false pleasure, but a real and heartfelt enjoyment that audiences experience as they participate in an ongoing conversation with other women about topics that matter *to them*. Just as we must be wary of representations of women that are stereotypic and narrow, we must also be suspect of critiques, whether popular or academic, that diminish, condemn, and otherwise render worthless female pleasure, for these critiques perpetuate divisions between men and women that are as false as they are long-standing.

Celebrity gossip magazines are not, first and foremost, political texts -- they are not intended as such by their producers, nor are they experienced as such by their readers. They do, however, provide audiences with an alternative forum in which topics that have traditionally been excluded from mainstream discourse can be debated and discussed in alternative ways. The next chapter examines the celebrity gossip magazine as a woman's magazine, and therefore as a part of the popular feminine, in order to show how the editorial focus of the magazines works to retrieve women and their concerns from the shadows of the private sphere and reposition them squarely in the spotlight of public debate. In short, it shows how the celebrity gossip genre redefines *public interest* as *female interest* and, in doing so, challenges the prevailing discourse that has for so long insisted that women and their "private" concerns are not newsworthy. This challenge is, in and of itself, a political coup.

¹ Retrieved from <http://www.great-quotes.com/quote/957517>

² Retrieved from <http://gawker.com/#!149788/media-bubble-the-post-cant-handle-the-truth>

³ Retrieved from <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

⁴ The guiding principles of the Society of Professional Journalists also find their historical roots in the ideal of “the fourth estate,” a term coined in the late 18th century to describe the press’ role as a watchdog of the other three estates: the Church, the nobility, and the townsmen.

⁵ I do not mean to suggest that topics like childcare and domestic abuse do not affect men; on the contrary, I wish to challenge that assumption by calling attention the way in which constructions of “public” and “private” life have been used to mark certain issues as “private” and therefore outside of the scope of men’s interests or as “public” and therefore not of concern to women. This dichotomy affirms the dominance of the political, the public, and the masculine at the expense of the personal, the domestic, and the feminine; it also wrongly suggests that the interests of men and women are distinct and unrelated.

⁶ Oxford English Dictionary Online. Retrieved from <http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/89262?redirectedFrom=human%20interest>

⁷ Fine, J. (2002, October 21). Editor of the Year. *Advertising Age*, 73(42), S3, S10.

⁸ <http://www.scribblingwomen.org/intro.html>

⁹ See the writings of Theodore Adorno for an additional critique of mass culture from this period.

¹⁰ MRI 2010.

¹¹ MRI Fall 2008.

¹² Also see Modleski, T. (1982). *Loving with a vengeance. Mass produced fantasies for women*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books.

¹³ In 2010, 69% of *Us Weekly* readers (compared to only 56.1% of Americans) had some college education. MRI Doublebase 2009; 2010 United States Census. www.census.gov.

Chapter II

For Us, About Us: Celebrity Gossip Magazines and the Female Reader

Celebrity gossip magazines are about who's getting married, who's with who, couples, weight. 'I lost 36 pounds with this awesome deal!' Read the magazine and you'll figure it out! It's love. It's hot dates. Who lost weight? A lot of surgeries too. Did she get Botox? Is that real? Her without makeup! Babies too, lots of babies. Baby here, baby there. It's a lot about aging... There are women all over them. They have four women here, ten here. You have maybe one good-looking guy. It's just basically her and her baby. It's all women.

–Helena, a 21-year old psychology student

Us Weekly, In Touch, Life & Style, Star, and Ok!. These are the publications that constitute the celebrity gossip genre. As such, they share a set of specific, defining characteristics that make them distinct from other magazines. All of these publications emerged in the early part of the 21st century, featuring an aesthetic formula that emphasizes bright colors, bold headlines, and large, glossy images, often supplied by paparazzi photographers. But the key binding element amongst these publications is the narrative content, which consistently revolves around the “ordinary,” “private” lives of famous women. This chapter examines the ways in which the celebrity gossip genre constructs itself as a narrative realm in which female celebrities take center stage. In addition, this chapter also works to show how the magazines are constructed in specific ways that hail female readers, stitching those readers into their narratives through the strategic use of visual and textual cues.

The initial emergence of the celebrity gossip genre can be traced to the entertainment magazine *Us*, which, in March 2001 announced that it would undergo a major redesign. In hopes of boosting lagging sales, *Us* transformed from a monthly entertainment magazine to a celebrity-focused weekly. *Advertising Age* dubbed the \$50 million transformation “the largest re-launch in a decade,” and Terry McDonnell, former editor of *Men’s Journal* and *Esquire*, was named editor in chief.¹ The revamped *Us*, promoted itself as a “cultural newsweekly,” featuring celebrity news stories designed to attract female readers ages eighteen to thirty-four. Though critics cringed and initial sales disappointed, by the end of the year, *Us Weekly* had reported a 12% increase in circulation and a 34% increase in advertising sales.² Two months later, Bonnie Fuller, the Canadian media executive credited with spicing up *Glamour* and *Cosmo*, was tapped to replace McDonnell.³ Fuller injected a dose of winking irreverence into the magazine, raking in readers, fueling a cultural obsession with celebrity, and transforming *Us* into an industry darling while earning herself the nickname, “gossip’s godmother.”⁴

By the summer of 2003, *Us Weekly* had outpaced all other mass magazines in growth for the year, increasing its readership by 55.3%. *The New York Times* proclaimed that “the medium has transformed the message;” writer David Carr noting that the weekly’s new format had transformed scandalous tabloid themes into attractive stories, encouraging “thousands of new readers, some of them pretty far upscale.”⁵ But as *Advertising Age* celebrated *Us Weekly*’s 18.5% circulation increase and praised Fuller for transforming the magazine into a “cultural touchstone,” the editor made a controversial exit, leaving *Us* to become the editorial director of *Star*⁶

Previously a paper tabloid known for its no-holds-barred celebrity coverage and *Enquirer*-style covers, *Star* was to undergo a twenty-million dollar makeover in order to compete with *Us* in the glossy, weekly market.⁷ American Media, the tabloid’s parent company, hoped that Fuller and her “upbeat,” “energetic” spirit would place *Star* at the center of the growing celebrity weekly industry.⁸ The industry was, in fact, expanding. As Fuller took her place at the helm of *Star*, Bauer Publishing debuted two new celebrity weeklies, *InTouch* and *Life & Style*, both featuring content, format, and aesthetics nearly identical to those of *Us*.⁹ Then, in August, 2005, British media mogul Richard Desmond

and his company, Northern & Shell, launched an American edition of the popular British tabloid *Ok!*. The celebrity gossip genre was born.

As the celebrity weekly industry grew, sales continued to climb, silencing critics who continued to predict that the market was oversaturated and doomed to fail. In 2003, Janice Min replaced Fuller as *Us Weekly's* editor in chief. The following year, *Us'* newsstand sales rose 47.3% to 745,887 copies and the median household income of its readers grew 40.4% to \$83,365.¹⁰ Meanwhile, *Advertising Age* named *Us* 2004's "Magazine of the Year:"

Roll your eyes; purse your lips and shake your head; slip it inside your bag so your smarty-pants friends don't see it. But resistance is futile. Thanks to its unprecedented fusion of newsstand heat, advertiser interest and- most incredibly- the way it's found a younger and wealthier audience, *Us Weekly* is *Advertising Age's* Magazine of the Year.¹¹

And *Us* was not the only one cashing in on the weekly craze. In 2006, advertiser spending in *Us*, *In Touch*, *Life & Style* and *Ok!* reached \$565 million, proving that gossip could sell, and sell big, to the coveted young, female demographic.¹² All the while, countless blogs, television programs, and even newspapers were revamping their content in an attempt to court celebrity-obsessed audiences. By the middle of the decade, glossy, weekly celebrity gossip magazines had carved a prominent and profitable niche in the growing celebrity industry, becoming an integral part of popular culture in the new millennium. "Like it or not," writes Jon Fine in a 2004 article for *Advertising Age*, "*Us Weekly* has become a cultural reference point, if not an entire world view."¹³

Us's competitors are also selling their worldview. Each celebrity gossip magazine has a mission statement; whether the goal is to combine "honest and accurate reporting" with a "fun, irreverent format" (*In Touch*), to "highlight Hollywood's timeliest trends and help readers translate their favorite stars' styles into their own lives" (*Life & Style*), or to be "the magazine the stars trust" (*Ok!*). But despite these self-described goals, all celebrity gossip magazines share a fundamental similarity, a singular mission. They are united by their content, which, unlike that of other women's or celebrity-focused magazines, is not about entertainment (these magazines rarely discuss the films,

television shows, or musical careers of celebrities), or fashion (they do not feature or advertise high-fashion designers and their products), but about life experiences. All publications within the celebrity gossip genre share a single-minded emphasis on documenting the personal lives of young women. From breakups to baby bumps, dates to diets, friendships to feuds, celebrity gossip magazines investigate and celebrate the excitements and challenges facing women during their early adult lives.

A content analysis of seventy-seven *Us Weekly*, *In Touch*, *Life & Style*, *Ok!*, and *Star* magazine covers published between September and December 2009 provides a detailed picture of the genre's editorial focus. Within this sample, romantic relationships, in good times and bad, emerge as the primary topic of discussion, with forty-two instances of relationship troubles or breakups, thirty-one mentions of dating and romance, thirty-one stories about weddings and engagements, and twenty-eight references to infidelity. Narratives concerning pregnancy, childbirth, and, less frequently, children receive a great deal of attention, with thirty-four stories addressing pregnancy and twenty-eight reporting on childbirth and the lives of the children themselves. Self image, weight, and plastic surgery (33) also prove to be popular topics and while stories about physical and sexual abuse (10), illness and death (9), debt or other financial issues (7), and drug abuse (5) appear less frequently, they remain a noteworthy feature of the genre. This content analysis demonstrates the way in which celebrity gossip magazines understand and represent the concerns of their readership. It is important to note what is absent from the magazines; questions of career or politics do not appear here, despite the fact that these too matter to young women.



Figure 2.1: Cover Story Content 9/09-12/09

This content is tailored to address the concerns of a specific reader whose demographic profile is constant across publications within the genre. Women make up 73 to 85% of the celebrity gossip readership and approximately 65% of these women are between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four.¹⁴ A closer look at *Us Weekly's* readership paints an ever more detailed picture: *Us'* readers have a median annual household income of \$70,465, 74% are employed, and 66% have had at least some college education. While 45% of readers are married and 52% have children, almost as many (43%) are single. The median age for *Us Weekly's* readership is between 32 and 33 years.¹⁵ While 75% of readers are white, 16% identify as Spanish or Latino, 12% as black, 4% as Asian, and 11% as "other."¹⁶ And ninety percent of readers reside in a metropolitan core-based statistical area.¹⁷ These statistics craft a very specific image of the celebrity tabloid reader; she is an urban, educated woman, typically white, who has a significant degree of disposable income and, most importantly, she is in her twenties or early thirties.¹⁸

The editorial agenda of the celebrity gossip magazine clearly addresses a specific set of concerns and anxieties facing women at this particular life stage. These publications do not address the concerns of teens (how to get a date, how to deal with acne) or of older women (how to raise adolescent children, how to manage a long-term

marriage) but are specifically tailored to young, adult females. According to the magazines' editors, young women are very interested in reading about personal topics. "Weight, babies, weddings, any time we can get in anything like that, we'll do it," says former *Life & Style* photo editor Susanne Rieth, who reports that these types of stories are specifically targeted to women between the ages of eighteen and forty. Former *Us Weekly* editor Lauren Schutte agrees, "We definitely cover weddings, babies, weight loss. Those are all pretty major themes. If there's a cute baby, we'll run it." By presenting their readership with these types of stories, the editors argue that they are, quite simply, giving readers what they want. Across the genre, editors report that focus groups, letters, and online comments from readers all strongly suggest that women are interested in reading about these topics. "What we've noticed is that women tend to be interested in women and not so much in men," says Valerie Nome, a self-proclaimed "fan" who used her fascination with celebrities (she auditioned for the Mickey Mouse Club at age twelve) to launch herself into a position as editor and red carpet blogger at *Ok!* magazine. "We tend to focus on fashion and weight loss, dieting, because those are things that women care about."

While other women's magazines focus only on certain aspects of personal life--parenting *or* fashion *or* relationships--celebrity gossip magazines emphasize all of these topics and, in doing so, establish themselves as a unique forum in which young women's complex and multiple concerns are addressed. Still, the genre's editorial focus is not all-inclusive. These magazines do not address the professional, political, or cultural concerns of young women. Instead, their attentions are dedicated to a specific set of concerns having to do with personal life: relationships, body image, children, and family. As we will see in greater detail in the following chapters, this narrative focus allows the magazines to act as a kind Greek chorus for female readers, providing insight into important decisions (Should I get married and have a child? Should I leave my cheating partner? How do I feel about my body and my self?) and giving voice to the questions and concerns that impact women during their twenties and thirties. And while these are not representative of the full scope of female concerns, these subjects are nevertheless deeply important to many young women, regardless of their ethnicity, education, or socioeconomic status. Celebrity gossip magazines can therefore be understood as

women's magazines -- products that are created for and designed to attract a young, female reader.

Hailing the Model Reader

According to the Italian literary critic Umberto Eco, all texts rely upon “a series of codes,” which work to make those texts communicable. In order to ensure that a reader will be able to interpret these codes, Eco argues, “the author has to foresee a model of the possible reader ... supposedly able to deal interpretively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them” (1978:7). In other words, when creating a text, the author(s) must anticipate a model or ideal reader who can understand the text; in the case of the celebrity gossip magazine, the model reader is a young woman. The authors (writers, editors, and publishers) of these magazines use a variety of techniques to create a text that effectively communicates with this model reader. Everything about the magazine, from how it looks, to how long it is and how many pictures there are, is the result of specific choices made with that reader in mind.



Figure 2.2: *Ok!*, 3/30/2009; *Star*, 1/26/2009

One of the primary ways in which the magazines communicate to their model reader is through the use of photographs. Images of women are prominently featured throughout the magazines, their faces displayed in large, glossy photos. These photos inform readers that the genre's narratives are about female life, told from a female perspective. For example, the cover of a March, 2009 issue of *Ok!* features photographs of four smiling stars, three of whom are allegedly pregnant, one who has dropped two dress sizes. Meanwhile, a small photo of a nervous, frightened Jane Goody appears in the upper right-hand corner. Jane, a reality star who was suffering from terminal cancer during the time of this report, appears tense, her hands folded as if in prayer. Similarly, a large photo of an angry Jennifer Lopez dominates the cover of a January, 2009 issue of *Star*; inside the magazine, the headline blares, "She's sick of it!" These images work to establish the celebrity gossip genre as an arena in which female experience and female emotion are paramount.

The photos featured, however, are not of just any celebrity women, but of famous females who are demographically similar to the genre's model reader. A content analysis of thirty-nine magazine covers published between November and December, 2009 shows that female celebrities between the ages of twenty-nine and thirty-two appear most frequently -- 81.75% of the women depicted were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four. By featuring celebrity women who are, like readers, in their twenties and early thirties, the magazines establish themselves as a forum in which young women and their concerns take center stage.

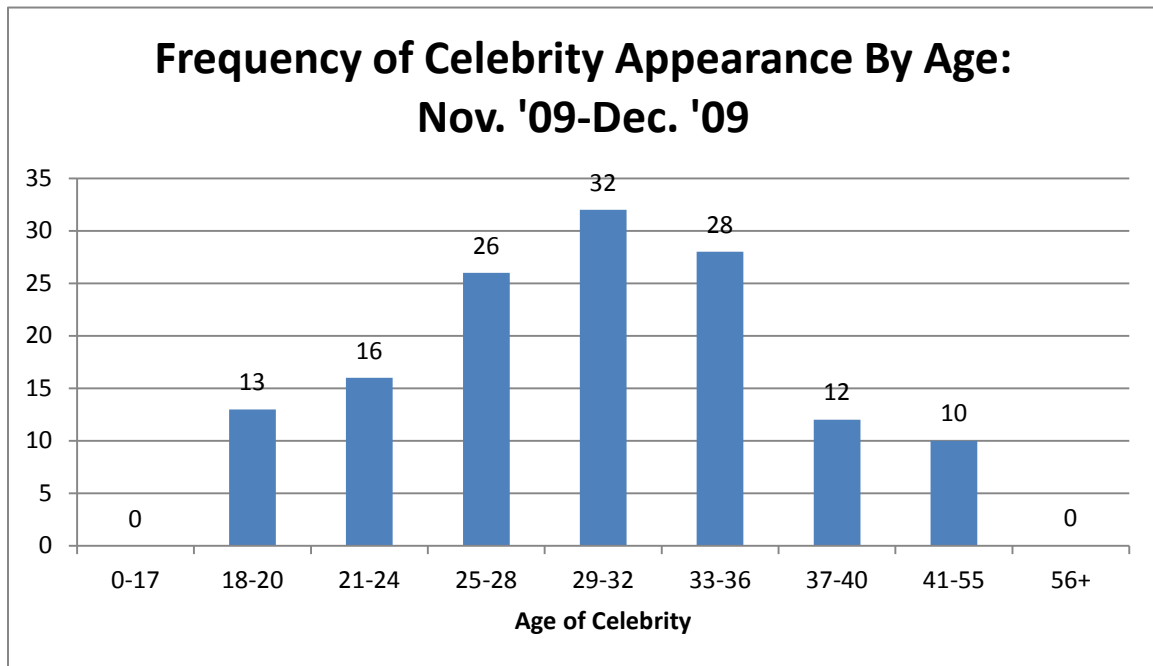


Figure 2.3: Frequency of Celebrity Appearance by Age 11/09-12/09¹⁹

These images also encourage readers to identify with celebrity women. Scholarship in the field of audience studies suggests that identification occurs when audiences recognize themselves in and adopt the thoughts, goals, or emotions of particular characters, in this case celebrities (Cohen, 2001; Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004). In addition, a particular type of identification, similarity identification, occurs when audiences recognize that they share one or more characteristics with a particular character and therefore feel an affinity with that character (Feilitzen & Linne, 1975). By prominently featuring young, female celebrities, the magazines hail their model reader, encouraging her to identify with and participate in the gossip narratives. Furthermore, when readers experience similarity identification, they may recognize their own emotions and experiences in their celebrity counterparts; this identification is, as we will see in chapter three, a key element of reader enjoyment.

Like photos, color is also used to emphasize the feminine nature of the celebrity gossip genre. “There’s a color palette that our design team works with,” says Lauren Schutte of the vivid shades that brighten *Us Weekly*’s front page. “Our art department and our art directors are very mindful of the different color combinations. You’re pretty much only ever going to see blue, yellow, pink, green on our cover. Lots of yellow, lots

of pink.” *Us* is not the only magazine with this aesthetic; all celebrity weeklies use hot pinks, canary yellows, and bright blues, enhancing the genre’s playful, upbeat persona. These colors also work to further gender the genre since, unlike men’s magazines, which rely heavily on primary colors and blacks, women’s magazines often feature saturated brights: neon pinks, blues, greens, and yellows (King, 2001). Coupled with photographs of female celebs, this specific color palette works to visually alert potential readers to the feminine-focus of the genre.



Figure 2.4: Color Design: Men’s Interest vs Women’s Interest

Color also plays an important narrative role within the magazines. Images are often color-coded so that particular hues become explanatory mechanisms through which narrative intricacies are made visually apparent. As Judith Williamson argues in her analysis of visual meaning-making, color serves as an important communicative tool, linking people, objects, and ideas within a visual text and creating a narrative structure through these linkages (1978: 20-25). An example of this type of color coding can be seen on the November, 2009 cover of *Us Weekly*, whose headline proclaims, “Fergie Betrayed.” A large image of singer Fergie and her husband actor Josh Duhamel spans the cover. A smaller, inset photo in the lower, right hand corner shows a blonde woman wearing a blue and white bikini, seated provocatively on a bed. The *Us* logo is bright yellow, mirroring the canary yellow dress worn by Fergie. Meanwhile, a hot pink box, directly situated between Fergie and Josh’s faces, cries “Cheating Shock;” another box,

the same shade of pink, hangs above the photo of the woman in a bikini, identifying her as “The Stripper.” The blaring pink alerts readers to Josh’s alleged misdeeds, visually connecting the image of “The Stripper” to the horror of the “Cheating Shock.” Not only does color help to establish a narrative arc, it also works to emotionally position the reader in relationship to the story. Dressed in black, Josh appears guilty and sullen, his eyes averted from the camera. In sharp contrast to her husband, Fergie’s eye contact connects her with the reader; her shocking yellow dress visually links the singer with the magazine’s logo, thus identifying her as one of “us” and encouraging readers to position themselves as Fergie supporters before ever reading the story.



Figure 2.5: *Us Weekly*, 11/16/09

Here, we see the color yellow used to interpellate the model reader as one of “us,” an individual who is aligned both with Fergie and with the magazine itself. We also see how the genre uses personal pronouns to directly address its audience. “I,” “you,” “we,” and “us”-- these words do not only imply a model reader, they directly hail that reader, rhetorically insinuating her into the narrative of the gossip story. These personal pronouns are a staple of the genre, used throughout the magazines to continuously stitch readers into the narrative. As they hail the model reader, these pronouns also work to once again gender that reader as female. When *Life & Style* proclaims, “I want those shoes for less,” for example, the shoes that are desired are women’s shoes; the “I,”

therefore, is a female I. In this way, the magazines actively and purposefully engage their model reader in a conversation that is about women, between women.

The use of personal pronouns also allows the magazine to establish a direct connection with the model reader. Words like “you” and “us” imply an interaction between magazine and audience and work to establish the magazine as a guide to the celebrity world. This intimate, chatty tone invites readers to think of the magazine as a gossipy friend, a personal guide to the latest tidbits and happenings (Douglas, 2010). Further, these pronouns work to link readers in what Joke Hermes calls an “extended family.” In her 1995 study of women’s magazine reading, Hermes describes how women’s magazines engage their readers in the repertoire of the extended family. The extended family repertoire, explains Hermes, “engenders a highly personal form of address in which solidarity and connectedness resound... [It] simply draws a wide circle of people into a person’s private life by discussing them intimately. On an imaginary level, this creates a form of community” (1995: 298, 302). Celebrity gossip magazines interpellate their readers as members of an extended family, hailing them as participants in a larger, imagined group of gossipers and gossipees. This sense of community is intentionally crafted by writers and editors; commenting on the title of the genre’s flagship publication, Lauren Schutte explains that *Us* refers to the relationship between stars, readers, and the magazine itself. *Us* is about “you and I,” says Lauren. “We’re a group. I think [the magazine] is everybody’s story.”

The extended family repertoire is further emphasized through one of the genre’s hallmark visual techniques: arrows. These arrows, brightly-colored pointers superimposed over specific areas of visual interest, are designed to draw reader attention to and provide a visual commentary on particular aspects of the narrative. These visual cues serve as an explanatory mechanism, providing additional information about the narrative while establishing a particular editorial point of view. For example, an October, 2009 cover of *Ok!* features a lead story which alleges that Jennifer Aniston is “Pregnant at 40!” A large photo of a smiling Aniston fills the center of the page; meanwhile, to the left, a smaller inset photo of the actress, clad in a form-fitting silver dress, has been adorned with a bright yellow arrow, pointing to her midsection. The text beside the arrow reads, “It’s a bump!” The arrow supposedly confirms Jen’s pregnancy by alerting

any readers who might have missed it to the visual “proof” of the “bump.” Here, we see how arrows literally point out important narrative details to the reader. These visual cues work to place the magazine in direct conversation with that reader, pointing out, as would a friend, what to look for and where to look.



Figure 2.6: *Ok!*, 10/5/09

Just as personal pronouns work to imply a dialogue between the magazine and the reader, they also create a sense of conversation between readers and celebrities. *Us Weekly*, for example, often features an interview entitled, “25 things you don’t know about me.” In it, (usually female) celebrities divulge personal information about themselves: their favorite colors, meals, books, and pastimes. The entire interview is told in the first person, from the star’s point of view. In a June, 2009 issue, for example, Kathy Griffin confides in readers, “Joan Rivers always picks up the tab at our dinners” and “I have switched from granny panties to sexy underwear.” This style of direct address, a trademark feature of the genre, creates a sense of intimacy between celebrities and readers, linking them, through this personal divulging of secrets, in an extended family.



Figure 2.7: Direct Address
 Top Row: *In Touch*, 7/20/2009 (left); *Us Weekly*, 6/29/2009
 Bottom Row: *Life & Style*, 8/10/2009

The magazines also place readers in conversation with one another, inviting them to imagine the responses of fellow (unknown) audience members. This mediated reader-to-reader interaction is perhaps most apparent in the interactive polls and questionnaires which are a mainstay of the genre. For example, the “Who Wore It Best?” poll (a version of which appears in every publication), presents photographs of celebrities wearing similar or identical outfits and invites readers to judge the subtle differences between the two images in order to decide which celebrity “wore it best.” At *Us Weekly*, *Ok!*, and *Life & Style*, these images are coupled with the results of a public poll -- the celebrity who received the majority of the votes is deemed the winner. Not only does “Who Wore It Best?” encourage readers to interact with the magazine, it also places them in conversation with other imagined readers, inviting them to anticipate the responses of fellow audience members and to position their own judgments in relationship to those of

their anonymous peers.²⁰ In this way, interactive polls work to establish a sense of connection and camaraderie between an imagined family of readers.

Nowhere does the discursive construction of these familial bonds appear more clearly than in the letter I received in the spring of 2010 as my subscription to *Us Weekly* neared its expiration. The hot pink envelope, which was sealed with a magenta “kiss,” read, “We’re about to BREAK UP!” The contents of this envelope, which included an “anti break-up form,” urged me not to “let us come to an end” and pleaded, “We need to hear from you right away” -- “Don’t keep us waiting.” The anti-break up form makes explicit the way in which the celebrity gossip magazine produces an extended family; through it, we see how a subscription not only affords the reader access to the magazine, but also a relationship with a broader community of readers and celebrities. By ending my subscription, I was not merely discontinuing my purchase of a weekly gossip magazine, but was, in fact severing my relationship with “us” and rescinding my membership in the gossip family.



Figure 2.8: *Us Weekly* Subscription Notice, 2010

The celebrity gossip magazine, therefore, not only produces itself for a single model reader, but for an entire cohort of readers. It hails those readers simultaneously, inviting them to participate in an extended family that is created and sustained through the text itself. This imagined network is, crucially, a female one -- both the celebrities and

the readers who participate in it are young women, between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four. In this way, celebrity gossip magazines offer their readers the opportunity to feel connected to millions of women, both known and unknown, famous and ordinary. This sense of connection is one of the primary affordances of the genre. Women's magazines, writes media critic Naomi Wolf, "offer an electrifying feeling that women are too seldom granted, though men in their groups feel it continually, of being plugged in without hostility to a million like-minded people of the same sex" (1991: 76). As we will see in chapters three and four, readers take a great deal of pleasure in connecting with and relating to other women vis-à-vis the contents of the magazines. The fact that celebrity gossip magazines offer their readers this opportunity for connection is not a happy accident, but rather the result of strategic choices, made by writers and editors, designers and publishers, which produce the genre as a forum in which topics that matter to women are articulated and made available to female readers.

Up to this point, this chapter has traced the way in which celebrity gossip magazines work to hail their model reader using specific visual and linguistic cues. In order to make themselves communicable to that reader, the magazines develop what Eco calls "an ensemble of codes" (personal pronouns, bright colors, large photos of female celebrities), which function as communicative tools (1978: 7). As they address the model reader, week after week, these codes also work to establish the brand identity of the genre; they become hallmark features of the celebrity gossip magazine. In this way, the codes of the text not only hail the model reader, they also work to create a text that is recognizable to that reader.

Celebrity gossip magazines are highly predictable. Not only do they draw upon the same visual and linguistic codes, their content, and the way this content is presented, is highly consistent across publications and over time. All publications within the genre frame their narratives using identical categories, as demonstrated in figure 2.9. Each week, a select handful of stories are transformed into "features," cover stories which command between two and eight pages; the remainder of the magazine consists of

themed sections, many of which appear in every issue. Sections like “Diva or Down to Earth,” and “Star Shots” document the “everyday” lives of celebrities while others like “Up Close” and “Loose Talk” claim to give readers a glimpse of the stars’ most personal thoughts and actions. Although the specific contents of these section changes from week to week, their basic structure remains the same. Even the names of these categories vary only slightly -- the fashion comparison, called “Who Wore It Better?” at *In Touch* and *Ok!*, is entitled “Who Wears It Best?” at *Life & Style*. The consistency with which content is presented allows the reader to instantly recognize magazines that belong to the celebrity gossip genre and to predict the type of reading experience she will have. Once again, we see that the magazines rely on a series of codes that, as Eco points out, work to make the text accessible and communicative to the model reader.

Section Theme	Us Weekly	Life & Style	In Touch	Ok!	Star
Fashion Comparison	Who Wore It Best?	Who Wears It Best?	Who Wore It Better?	Who Wore It Better?	Double Takes
Behavior Judgment	Stars- They’re Just Like Us!	Diva or Down to Earth	InTouch with their Real Side	Ok or Not Ok?	Stars- Are They Normal or Not?
Photo Stories	Hot Pics	Week in Photos	Up Close/ Closer Look	Ok Snaps/ New Pics	Star Shots
Trends and Products	Us Style/ Beauty This Minute Hot Stuff	Style Weekly	The Buzz/ In the Know	Ok! Buzz/ Life on the A-List	Hot Sheet/ Star Style/ Star Beauty
Celebrity Quotes	Loose Talk		Last Laughs	They Said What?	Overheard
Fashion Criticism	Fashion Police	Oops, What Were They Thinking?	Fashion Trauma		Worst of the Week

Figure 2.9: Weekly Sections by Publication

The predictability and accessibility of the celebrity gossip genre is essential, because these characteristics produce the magazines as *readable* texts. The fact that these publications are easy to read is an effect of the consistency with which textual codes are

employed throughout the genre. And, indeed, the magazines are designed to be easily consumed -- skimmed, scanned, and flipped through. Bonnie Fuller, the editor who helped transform *Us* and *Star* into industry leaders, has been accused of building her career on the mantra “Nobody likes to read;” the magazines often reflect this paradigm, their colorful images, short stories, and bite-sized captions provide for a relaxing reading experience.²¹ Indeed, the magazines are so easy to read that audiences often engage the magazines without actually reading much of them at all. “You sit in the subway and you watch somebody read the magazine and it’s a story that you spent six hours composing and they literally read the captions, look at the pictures, and do this [flips the pages],” says Lauren Schutte. Celebrity journalists, however, do not consider this type of reading a bad thing. The magazines “take twenty minutes to read and it’s twenty minutes when you’re having ‘me time,’” says Lauren. “We definitely craft [the magazine] to be that part of your week that’s for you.” Lauren’s former colleague, *Us Weekly* editorial assistant Sarah Grossbart agrees, noting that many readers enjoy the magazines while getting a manicure or relaxing on the beach. Like a trip to the salon, the magazines are designed to provide readers with a break from the everyday, a way of taking time out to care for one’s self.²² By providing audiences with a reading experience that is predictable and accessible, celebrity journalists ensure that their readers ‘me time’ will be an enjoyable escape.

Scholars in the field of mass communications understand the type of “escape” provided by magazines and other media texts as *transportation*. Green, Brock, and Kaufman define transportation as “an experience of cognitive, emotional, and imagery involvement in a narrative” during which an audience member is immersed in an alternate world (2004, 311). Transported readers escape their own “mundane reality,” entering a narrative world in which “the stress of personal concerns, problems, and contexts that elicit social anxiety” disappear (2004, 317). Gossip magazines are intentionally designed to facilitate this type of transportation; their predictability and accessibility allow readers to easily immerse themselves in the narrative world of the text. This immersion provides for an experience that is relaxing and enjoyable.

In addition, readers who are transported may begin to develop a personal affinity with a text’s fictional characters. Scholarship suggests that transported audiences may

more easily identify or develop parasocial relationships with those characters (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004). Parasocial relationships occur when audiences develop an “illusion of intimacy” with fictional persons, treating those characters as they would real people in real life (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In the next chapter, we will see how celebrity gossip magazine readers do, in fact, develop these types of relationships with celebrity “characters.”

Further, and most crucially, according to Green et al., audience members who experience parasocial interaction “are able to use characters’ situations and experiences to understand their own lives” (2004: 319). Celebrity gossip readers do just that, using their parasocial engagement with celebrities as a way of considering and evaluating their own life experiences. Thus, the predictability and accessibility of the genre not only work to produce the celebrity gossip magazine as a readable text, or even as a pleasurable escape, but also as a text that allows young, female readers to consider their own life experiences and concerns. This is key, because it is this personal engagement that readers find captivating; indeed, as the next chapter will show, it is one of the primary reasons that women continue to seek out and engage with the celebrity gossip genre.

But it is not only the predictable content or the accessible format, the impossible-to-miss paparazzi photos or the blaring headlines that allow readers to connect their own lives to those of famous females; this connection is also crucially dependent on the genre’s treatment of celebrities. As the magazines show Jen walking her dog, Britney slurping a Starbucks, and Angelina playing at the park, they invite us to imagine our own experiences, to relate *our* pets, *our* lattes, and *our* playground follies to those of famous women who are, the magazines insist, “just like us.” And so female celebrities become part of our extended family not only by virtue of their age and gender, but because their experiences are presented as typical, understandable, and shared. The link between reader and celebrity (and between reader and text) is therefore reliant on a powerful motif that has come to dominate the contemporary cultural landscape in the United States. Here and now, celebrities are no longer held at a distance. They peer out at us from our televisions and laptop screens. They wave at us from the red carpet. They tweet to us. Once our idols, the stars are now our friends. Celebrities have become ordinary.

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- ¹ Kerwin, A. (2000). Bet is set for 'Us Weekly' as showtime approaches. *Advertising Age*, 71(11), 3-22.
- ² Carr, D. (2003, August 4). Gossip goes glossy and loses its stigma. *The New York Times*, pp. 1E.
- ³ Carr, D. & Manly, L. (2002, February 27). Editor coming to Us Weekly may turn up the sex and glitter. *The New York Times*, C1.
- ⁴ Traster, T. (2007). 100 most influential women: Bonnie Fuller, celebrity gossip's godmother. *Crain's New York Business*, 23(40), W16.
- ⁵ Carr, D. (2003, August 4). Gossip goes glossy and loses its stigma. *The New York Times*, pp. 1E.
- ⁶ Fine, J. (2003). 'Us Weekly,' 'Yoga Journal' saw circulation soar in 2002. *Advertising Age*, 74(8), 16.
- ⁷ Granatstein, L. (2004). Star's studded debut. *MediaWeek*, 14(2), 24-25.
- ⁸ Fine, J. (2003). Fuller faces fresh hurdles as she enters world of tabs. *Advertising Age*, 74(30), 4-29.
- ⁹ Author Unknown. (2004) Bauer can't get enough of celebrities. *MediaWeek*, 14(19), 58.
- ¹⁰ Fine, J. (2004) Magazine of the year: *Us Weekly*. *Advertising Age*, 75(43), S1-S12.
- Granatstein, L. (2004). Captive audience. *MediaWeek*, 14(22), 32.
- ¹¹ Fine, J. (2004) Magazine of the year: *Us Weekly*. *Advertising Age*, 75(43), S1-S12.
- ¹² Ives, N. (2007). Shocker! *Us* claims rivals lied to readers. *Advertising Age*, 78(19), 3-42.
- ¹³ Fine, J. (2004) Magazine of the year: *Us Weekly*. *Advertising Age*, 75(43), S1-S12.
- ¹⁴ MRI Publisher's Statement: Fall 2008, Fall 2009
- ¹⁵ MRI Spring 2011
- ¹⁶ Mediamark Research & Intelligence Report: Fall 2009
- ¹⁷ The United States Census Bureau defines a metropolitan core-based area as a metropolitan area and surrounding communities that are highly economically and socially integrated into that core area. Retrieved from www.census.gov/www/metroareas.
- ¹⁸ In 2010, 69% of *Us Weekly* readers (compared to only 56.1% of all Americans) had some college education. MRI Doublebase 2009; 2010 United States Census. www.census.gov. <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2010/tables.html>
- ¹⁹ See Appendix C for a more detailed breakdown of the data from this figure.
- ²⁰ According to former *Us Weekly* intern, Joy Wood, the results of the "Who Wore It Best?" poll appearing in the magazine are the result of a survey of 100 people in Times Square. Wood, who was herself responsible for conducting this survey during her time at *Us*, would approach passersby with the two images on placards and ask them to rate the dueling looks. Nowhere in the magazines is this practice made explicit and the readers with whom I spoke often questioned the results of these polls, wondering how these statistics had been tabulated and who the participants in the survey were.
- ²¹ Newman, J. (2005, March 14). Cover girl. *Brandweek*, 46(11), SR8-SR12.
- ²² See Radway (1984) for a discussion of how romance novels provide readers with a similar experience.

Chapter III

Just Like Us?: The Ordinary Celebrity



Figure 3.1: W Magazine, November 2010

The November, 2010 cover of *W magazine*, designed by conceptual artist Barbara Kruger, features a photo of Kim Kardashian, nude, hands on hips, covered only by three red strips that read, “It’s all about me/I mean you/I mean me.” Inside the magazine, Kardashian explains how she manages her business ventures -- her website, boutiques, perfume brands (she even has a line of designer lollipops) -- all the while emphasizing her close relationship with her fans, whom she views as sisters and friends. And indeed, Kardashian has built her business empire on her ability to represent herself as a kind of everywoman (she is, as writer Lynn Hirschberg points out, “the star of a reality show... which means she’s famous for being herself”) (2010: 110). Kardashian’s success is

indicative of our contemporary celebrity culture, which applauds stars not for their outstanding talent or honorable achievements, but for their ability to be “down to earth.” Today’s celebrities are human -- no longer idols, they are now our friends. Gossip magazines are a part of a growing celebrity industry -- which also includes talk shows, reality television programs, and blogs -- that has succeeded by insisting to audiences that celebrities are ordinary people. But why has this approach to fame has been so successful? Surely it has allowed Kardashian and others to enhance their stardom and their bank accounts but is the motif of the ordinary celebrity really all about them, or it is also, as the *W* cover suggests, about us?

Fame has always been a bundle of contradictions, requiring those who possess it to occupy a curious middle ground between the exceptional and the common place. According to Leo Braudy, who traces the historical roots of fame in his book, *The Frenzy of Renown*, the idea that “a famous person has to be a socially acceptable individualist, different enough to be interesting, yet similar enough not to be threatening or destructive” has existed for centuries (1986:8). This is was as true for Caesar and Prince Albert as it is for Oprah. Throughout history, well known figures have intentionally shaped their image so as not to appear so very different from their public. In the mid-19th century, for example, Napoleon III and Queen Victoria distributed photographs of themselves wearing everyday clothing as a way of representing themselves as middle class and, therefore, less distant from their subjects (Hamilton and Hargreaves, 2001: 13). Their actions point to the paradox of the ordinary celebrity.

Over the course of the 20th century, the ordinariness of celebrities has been amplified thanks, in large part, to technological innovations. Photography, for example, has played a crucial role in the construction of fame since its invention in 1839. Through the mass distribution of images, public figures were transformed into famous faces, recognizable by a mass audience. By the early 1900’s, advances in cinematography allowed filmmakers like D.W. Griffith to employ ‘close up’ shots, providing cinema goers with an unprecedented view of the movie star and thereby facilitating an intimate encounter between the two, all the while enhancing the star’s aura (Walker, 1970: 21).

When radio emerged as a new medium of the American household in the 1920's, audiences reported feeling a connection to the popular singers of the day, whom listeners felt were speaking directly 'to them' (Merton & Lowenthal, 1946). But perhaps the greatest change in the relationship between audience and celebrity can be traced to the 1950's, as television brought the faces and voices of actors and actresses into the living rooms, and daily lives, of millions of Americans. The domestic nature of television viewing created a sense of intimacy and familiarity between actor and viewer, which worked to break down the aura of the star, making her ever more accessible to audiences (Marshall 1997: 119-122).

If early television helped to break the celebrity aura, the proliferation of reality television shows and participatory websites like Facebook and YouTube have shattered it. Today, "whole media formats are now devoted to, and the contemporary media consumer has become increasingly accustomed to, following what happens to the "ordinary" person who has been plucked from obscurity to enjoy a highly circumscribed celebrity," argues Graeme Turner, who calls this shift the demotic turn (2004:12). Demotic media (DIY-websites, talk shows, and reality television) emphasize the ordinary and the popularity of these genres has, since the 1980's, led to the proliferation of "ordinary celebrities" -- the cheerleader turned model, the part-time blogger turned journalist, the family dog turned YouTube sensation. Today, even traditional stars -- actors, musicians, and politicians -- are increasingly portrayed as "normal," everyday people. But has celebrity *really* been democratized? Or have contemporary stars, like their historical counterparts, simply discovered a new technique, a strategy for enhancing their fame in a media landscape where the line between star and audience is ever thinning?

The Ordinary Celebrity

Realness and authenticity carry much weight in the celebrity world. As celebrity scholar Su Holmes notes, "The illusion of access and intimacy remains the dominant structuring force in celebrity texts" (2006: 54). Even for savvy fans, the celebrity's

perceived authenticity remains an essential component of enjoyment; therefore, stars must appear authentic and ‘real’ in order to appeal to fans and remain popular. For this reason, Joshua Gamson argues, “the question of who and what celebrities really are must be answerable” (1994: 171). In recent years, celebrities have employed the motif of the ordinary to exert control over how the question of self is answered. *Who am I?* The stars simply reply, ‘*I am just like you. I am ordinary and therefore you already know the real me.*’

Increasingly, celebrities have taken an active role in the construction and maintenance of their public persona; they hire publicists, agents, stylists, personal assistants -- a veritable army of helpers -- to assist them in maintaining an “ordinary” image (Gamson, 1994). In the contemporary marketplace, one of the key sites of image production is the celebrity gossip press. For this reason, many stars have become active participants in the production of gossip narratives, providing journalists with carefully choreographed information about themselves. According to magazine editors, celebrities will often relay “private” information or official comments to journalists via their handlers, publicists, and managers. Former *Us Weekly* editor, Lauren Schutte explains:

Nine times out of ten, celebrities or those who work directly for them confirm stories before they are sent to the printer. The people who are in this magazine on a weekly basis want to be in this magazine. They may not publically want to let it be known that they want to be in this magazine, but if you’re on a red carpet every night and you’re eating out at restaurants in which paparazzi live, you’re doing those things because you want to get photographed. And if you want to get photographed it’s because you want to be in here. ... We’ll have people call and basically say, ‘What do I need to do to become interesting to you? Do you want a baby? Do I need to get married?’”

Like Lauren, *Life & Style*’s former senior photo editor, Rob DeMarco, who describes celebrities as “complete publicity hounds,” argues that the stars are active participants in the creation of celebrity gossip. “You see the same people over and over and over again. If I see another picture of Audrina [Patridge] walking out of Starbucks with a cup of coffee I’m gonna scream,” says Rob, who argues that stars who make themselves available to the press are intentionally courting media attention in order to enhance their public profile.

According to celebrity journalists, much of what appears in gossip magazines is carefully controlled by celebrities and their teams, who strategically tailor their behavior in order to bolster their persona or to draw attention to their latest film or television show. And while some stars may try to avoid the paparazzi and the gossip press, others take advantage of it. In a 2007 interview with LX TV, then-editor-in-chief of *Us Weekly*, Janice Min had this to say about the relationship between celebrities and the media:

Does the media get invasive in celebrities' private lives? Yes, they do. Do celebrities go along with it and often offer up information and access and play an active role in their own media? Absolutely. ... Let's not forget also, when you're a celebrity, you're not in a race to cure cancer, you're in a race to be publicized. If you're a celebrity, you cease to exist if your photo isn't in *Us Weekly*. You cease to exist if no one is talking about you. And that's the end of your livelihood. That's it. So with celebrities it's part of the game to say you don't like so much attention and it's definitely a bigger part of the game to seek the attention.

In a media landscape that is saturated with information and fascinated by the ordinary, celebrities have increasingly begun to develop innovative strategies for attracting media attention. Rob DeMarco explains:

One of the things is that at the Halloween time of the year, the people want to make sure they get their pictures taken with their kids. They all show up at this particular farmer's market in L.A. that sells pumpkins and they have a slide. It's like a photo op. They know they're going to get photographed. They don't try to dodge it at all. Sometimes they tip certain paparazzi in advance that they're going to be there. This is strictly for a setup so that they get their pictures in the paper. They dress up nicely and the kids are there. They actually try to look informal but it's very, very posed. So it's photo ops that are basically set up by the celebrities. They go to parks. They do the same thing, pushing the kids on swings. Some celebrities, they walk their dog every day at the same time of the day. And many, many of them do tip the paparazzi in advance. Like, 'I'm going to be over at a certain store tomorrow if you want to get pictures.' Or they have their people tip them. So there's tons of cooperation. You can even tell by the type of shots that we get. They almost look like they're set up.

There are certain celebrities that actually contract paparazzi or photo agencies to set up shoots. They might do shots on the beach, they might do loving couple shots, things of that nature. In which case, many times, they get a cut of the money for what the pictures sold for. So they're even in on it from a monetary standpoint sometimes.

Also, if a certain tabloid runs a story that the [stars] find to be negative like, ‘We haven’t seen these two together in three weeks. Are they having marital problems?’, the next day they’ll be out on the street posing together to try to make that story look fake. Even if it’s right, they want to control the publicity the way *they* want to control it. They try to diffuse certain stories by photo ops and that, many times, is very contrived as well. Celebrities work with the system to get pictures in [the magazines] on a daily basis. Let there be no mistake.

Rob’s comments not only reveal the ways in which celebrities work with the tabloid press, but also point to the way in which “ordinary” life is, for the stars, a bargaining chip that can be used to gain publicity and control one’s public persona. The “genuineness” of the star is not only a tool for enhancing the symbolic power of the star, but also for enhancing her economic value, for it is through the performance of authenticity that celebrities enhance their appeal and thereby strengthen their ability to sell themselves and their brand.¹

According to Adrienne Lai, whose research examines the role of authenticity in celebrity photography, celebrities’ willingness to participate in “the economy of tabloid images” speaks to “the currency of the real” (2006: 220). Because audience enjoyment depends upon the star’s ability to appear authentic, celebrities must appear sincere, genuine, and “real” in order to remain in the good graces of the press and the public (Gamson, 1994). Sincerity, genuineness, and reality are, however, slippery concepts; therefore, celebrities must develop concrete strategies that will effectively convey these traits. The trope of the ordinary provides a solution to the question of authenticity (Holmes, 2006). An individual who is genuine, down to earth, and authentic does not have a chef, a driver, or a maid; she cooks her own dinner, hauls herself around town, cleans her own bathroom. A celebrity whose life is defined by the banal and the everyday, a celebrity who is ordinary, is, therefore authentic.

Still, the notion of the ordinary celebrity remains a paradoxical one because the lives of the stars are, by definition, exceptional (Dyer, 1998; Ellis, 2000). How can celebrities, who are, in reality, very different from their fans, present themselves as pedestrian? The solution lies in the realm of private life. Celebrities, like those Rob describes, strategically provide the press with photographs and information about their “private” lives so as to appear ordinary. Rob’s account, however, makes clear the fact

that the everyday lives of the stars are, in actuality, far from ordinary and anything but private. One celebrity who has built her brand and career on a careful, public performance of private life is Paris Hilton. Every aspect of Hilton's personal life -- from her pet Chihuahua, to her favorite catchphrases, to, some speculate, her sex tape -- are a part of the heiress' image. In the documentary film *Paris Hilton Inc.*, film makers show how Paris provides the press with an itinerary of her comings and goings and explain that the socialite changes outfits between each activity in hopes that photographers and magazines will more readily print multiple photos of her if she is wearing different attire.² Hilton's acute awareness of how she will be portrayed in the media and the elaborate steps that she takes to provide the press with a strategic image of her daily activities points to the way in which, for some stars, private life is, in actuality, a complex performance designed to promote and manage the celebrity brand.

For celebrities like Hilton, the line between private life and public persona has become increasingly blurred, creating what Joshua Meyrowitz calls a middle region or sidestage performance (1985). Meyrowitz's sidestage emerges from the theory of interpersonal communication developed by sociologist Erving Goffman. In his 1959 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman argues that individuals actively work to produce a desirable public self, which operates on the frontstage, while concealing their hidden, inner workings backstage, behind the scenes. According to Goffman, all people, famous or not, engage in a process of frontstage management, carefully presenting themselves in particular ways so as to mitigate the complexities of social relations. While the frontstage functions as a public performance of our self as we wish others to see it, the backstage is a private self, a self that is only known to a select few. In contemporary celebrity culture, however, the dividing line between front and back stage has become increasingly blurred. What was once backstage is no longer a private space, but a supplemental performance area or sidestage in which "private life" is publically enacted.

On this side stage, celebrities and their teams have become increasingly involved in what Gamson calls the processes of fabrication (the fictional creation of images, stories and personas) and blurring (the molding, manipulation, and management of these

images, stories, and personas), strategies which allow stars to appear ordinary and authentic while retaining control over their public image (1994: 172). Thus, while celebrity journalism claims to throw open the curtains, bring up the house lights, and give audiences a peek into the private, backstage lives of the stars, the backstage is now, in actuality, a sidestage, increasingly monitored and managed by the celebrities themselves. Sidestage performances of ordinary life afford celebrities the opportunity to control their image and enhance their authenticity. In this way, the motif of the ordinary celebrity, the willingness of the star to be just like the rest of us, the “warts-and-all authenticity” is, in reality “ a strategy to propel [the star] to great celebrification, far, far away from such ordinariness” (Redmond, 2006: 28).

Between you and me: The magazine as mediator

Celebrity gossip magazines provide the stars with a forum in which to perform their “ordinariness;” however, they do not do so as a favor to celebrities, but as a way of ensuring their own success. The genre claims to give readers the opportunity to know the stars as they “really” are, to afford them access to “the truth and the inside scoop about celebrities.”³ In order to fulfill this promise, however, there must be a real, authentic star that is available to be known. This poses a problem for the genre because, as we have seen, celebrity is a complicated chimera, a blend of fact and fiction, reality and performance, back and front stage work. To provide readers with access to the “real” star is not to simply report on a person as she actually exists, but to create a version of that person that appeals to a particular audience. And so, in order to provide readers with access to the authentic celebrity, the magazines must first construct a version of celebrity that appears real. In order to do this, the genre draws upon the motif of the ordinary celebrity because, as we have seen, the ordinary, everyday is a useful, tangible heuristic for authenticity. By presenting celebrities as ordinary people, the magazines not only create the star as real and authentic, they also establish themselves as gatekeepers through whom access to the “real” star becomes possible. As they claim to give readers access to the ordinary lives of celebrities, the magazines position themselves as know-it-all friends,

gossipy insiders, and indispensable guides. In order to understand how this occurs, we must examine the strategies used to produce the star as ordinary.



Figure 3.2: Constructing the Ordinary Star
 Left, Stars- They're Just Like Us (Us Weekly, 2/ 9/2009: p 33)
 Right, Stars- Normal or Not? (Star, 10/5/2009: p31)

The production of the ordinary celebrity is most apparent in one of the genre's trademark features, the "Just Like Us" photo montage. Consisting of candid photographs of celebrities engaging in humdrum activities like pumping gas, grocery shopping, or playing with their children, these images provide readers with visual evidence of the stars' alleged normalcy. At *Us*, it is called, "Stars- They're Just Like Us!," at *Star*, "Are They Normal or Not" and at *Life & Style*, "Diva or Down to Earth" but whatever the title, these sections all reinforce the idea that celebrities are ordinary people. In some magazines, this section also contains photos of stars acting *abnormally*- wearing kooky costumes, eating bizarre foods, or interacting with strange animals. Within this editorial framework, however, depictions of celebrities behaving in abnormal ways -- as NOT normal or as Divas -- further reinforces the idea that stars *should* be ordinary. The "Just Like Us" photo montage epitomizes the ordinary celebrity ideal and clearly illustrates the way in which celebrity gossip magazines are invested in and actively work to construct this ideal



Figure 3.3: *Star*, 12/14/2009: p 4

While “Just Like Us” photos explicitly mark celebrities as “normal,” the construction of the ordinary celebrity is not limited to this particular section, but occurs throughout the magazines. Celebrity weeklies use a variety of visual and linguistic cues to remind readers that stars are “just like them.” One of the cheekiest ways in which the genre achieves this is by depicting celebrities reading the very magazines in which they are featured. A December 14th, 2009 issue of *Star*, for example, features a photograph of *Gossip Girl* star Kelly Rutherford pushing her daughter, Helena, in a stroller. Poking out from over the top of the stroller’s basket is a copy of *Star*; a giant white arrow alerts the reader to the presence of the magazine while an enlarged image of the issue leaves readers with no doubt that, like them, Kelly Rutherford reads *Star*. These types of star-as-reader images, which frequently appear across the genre, work to erase the boundary between actor and audience. If stars read the magazines, so the logic goes, then they are no different from you, dear reader, who are, at this very moment, reading the magazine. In this way, star-as-reader images emphasize the ordinariness of the celebrity, furthering the notion that celebrities are “just like us,” while reinforcing the status of the magazine itself.



Figure 3.4: *Us Weekly*, 10/12/2009: p 38-39

The similarity between celebrity and reader is further emphasized by the organization of advertisements within the celebrity gossip magazine. Editorial features are often juxtaposed with advertisements whose products match or mirror the contents of the story. Typically, the left page of the magazine contains information about celebrity life while the right page contains a corresponding advertisement. When the reader opens the magazine to that spread, she will encounter this carefully paired content. For example, an October, 2009 issue of *Us Weekly* featured a story about “Hollywood’s Hottest Hounds,” containing images and captions that describe celebrities’ relationships with their pets. This story was paired with an advertisement for 9 Lives cat food. Similarly, an October 5, 2009 issue of *Life & Style* reported that leggings were a new trend for fall, and featured photographs of celebrities sporting the style -- the opposite page contained an advertisement for Fila athletic wear, the model donning black leggings like those worn by the stars on the opposite page. Not only are these juxtapositions a clever advertising strategy, but they also work to imply a direct relationship between reader and star that is based upon an ethos of consumption. The “Hollywood Hound” story, for example, invites readers to imagine the relationship that celebrities have with their pets; they walk their dogs, play with them and, like all pet owners, feed them. In this

way, the strategic placement of advertisement and editorial content encourages readers to feel that they are engaged in consumption practices that are similar to those of famous women. Halle Berry feeds her pet, just like I do. Nicky Hilton buys leggings and so might I. Through these implied similarities, the magazines cast celebrities and readers as doppelgangers, individuals who share common life experience. This strategic advertisement placement reinforces the idea that celebrities are similar to readers and, therefore, are ordinary. Furthermore, this strategy works to encourage audiences to identify with and relate to celebrity women, whose experiences are presented as being not unlike their own; this identification, as we will see later in this chapter, is a crucial aspect of reader enjoyment.

In addition to these visual techniques, the magazines also use linguistic cues to invite readers to identify with the stars. The most notable of these is the use of first names -- Jen, Jessica, Britney, and Katie -- within the genre, celebrities are almost always referred to on a first-name-only basis. This simple yet powerful technique hails both readers and stars as participants in an ongoing conversation; last names need not be included because, the magazine implies, readers are already familiar with these celebrity women. Thus, the use of first names implies a relationship between star and reader that predates the reader's engagement with any particular issue of the magazine. As media critic Susan Douglas argues, "calling them by their first names or nicknames, addressing them in such a personal fashion... the strategy is to cultivate the notion that we have an ongoing relationship with these stars, that we are in on their lives and thus should engage with them pretty much the same way we do with people we know" (2010: 248). In this way, the ordinary celebrity is always already known by the reader; this knowability, as we shall see, is a crucial feature of audience enjoyment. Furthermore, because surnames are often used as a sign of respect and deference, the fact that readers and celebs are on a first-name only basis suggests that theirs is a relationship between equals and friends.

This implied relationship is further emphasized by the use of personal pronouns. On the cover of an October 5th, 2009 issue of *Life & Style*, for example, Khloe (Kardashian) gushes, "I'm so in love" while Jen (Aniston) proclaims, "I want a baby now!." Here, direct quotations and the word "I" are used to convey the celebrity's point of view, while implying an ongoing, personal conversation between reader and star. This

conversation, however, is possible only through the magazine. Thus, these linguistic cues not only establish the celebrity as a peer, as an individual who is just like the reader and is, therefore, ordinary, but they also help to establish the magazine as a gossipy, mutual friend who facilitates the conversation between star and audience.



Figure 3.5: *Life & Style*, 12/16/2009: p 72-73

Despite their insistence that the stars are “just like us,” the magazines do, at times stray from the motif of the ordinary celebrity, drawing readers’ attention to the “fabulous” and “glamorous” aspect of celebrity life. Such narratives do not often emphasize the stars’ fame, but their wealth, illustrating their spending habits in great detail. This conspicuous consumption, however, is often coupled with articles containing strategies for readers hoping to model the lifestyle of their favorite stars, on a budget. A December, 2009 issue of *Life & Style*, for instance, instructs readers on how to achieve “Star Style For Less.” The article, which quips, “These Finds Only Look Expensive,” compares the designer fashions worn by famous women with similar items purchased from department stores and bargain retailers. While the article positions famous women as objects of envy, it also works to diminish the economic differences between reader and star by insisting that, regardless of income, all women can, with a bit of savvy, achieve the latest style. These types of articles not only temper the financial disparities between

readers and celebrities, but also establish the magazine as an important secret keeper who provides the reader with strategies, solutions, and insider know-how that will allow her to bridge the gap between herself and the star.

While the “look for less” story is a popular staple of the celebrity gossip genre, other types of narratives also focus on the financial success of the stars in ways that reinforce the magazines’ gatekeeper status. The “tour” narrative, for example, claims to give readers a glimpse into the “real” lives of the stars, literally bringing readers inside the world of the rich and famous -- their homes and closets, nurseries and pantries. The February 2, 2009 issue of *Star* magazine contains one such tour narrative; in it, an eight page spread takes readers “inside” “Celebrity Cribbs.” The story consists primarily of large photographs of living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, and swimming pools -- all looking remarkably well styled, clean, and devoid of any personal objects -- which are coupled with images of the homes’ smiling inhabitants. Indeed, these types of “tour” stories often contain posed photos of the stars, looking flawless and happy as they show off their possessions. While these photos, on the surface, appear quite different than the candid, “just like us” shots, both types of images actually serve the same purpose. According to journalism scholar Karin Becker, posed photos of celebrities, like candid shots, suggest to viewers that they are seeing the stars as they ‘really’ are:

The plain photograph of the person posing at home ... [is] arranged in the same manner that characterizes the pictures of non-famous people. ... These people all appear relaxed and happy. The obviously domestic environments naturalize the stars. ... At the same time, through angle and eye-contact with the camera, they are brought down to the viewer’s level. The photographic construction which presents the private person as someone ‘just like us’ accomplishes the same task when framing the public figure (2008: 89).

Thus, posed photos work to produce the stars as ordinary people, despite their obvious wealth. Furthermore, tour narratives also use captions to further diminish the economic difference between star and audience. While the “Celebrity Cribbs” story emphasizes the opulence of the stars’ properties, noting their multimillion dollar price tags and luxurious amenities, it also works to produce these homes and their inhabitants as ordinary and banal. Captions explaining how Ashley Olsen can “whip up feasts for herself” in her kitchen and predicting that Vanessa Hudgens will “enjoy bubble baths galore” in her spa

tub insist that celebrities, despite their wealth, are no different from readers. Additionally, by leading a virtual tour of the stars' "real" lives, the magazines once again cast themselves as knowledgeable guides and critical gatekeepers, without whom these arenas would remain off limits.



Figure 3.6: *The Tour Narrative, In Touch, 11/2/2009: p 58-59*

In this way, even those narratives that emphasize the economic differences between celebrities and readers ultimately work to produce the star as ordinary (i.e. real) while establishing the magazine as a critical mediator who provides the audience with access to that real star. The motif of the ordinary celebrity is crucial to the success of the celebrity gossip genre, then, because it is through this motif that the magazines produce the celebrity as a knowable entity and is therefore able to fulfill its promise of providing readers access to the star as she really is. But the motif of the ordinary celebrity not only ensures the genre's status as gatekeeper, it also invites readers to develop a parasocial relationship with famous women by producing celebrities as individuals with whom readers can relate and identify. As demonstrated in chapter two, celebrity gossip magazines are not entertainment magazines, but women's magazines; their content revolves around topics that matter to women at a particular life stage, topics that are often considered personal in nature. The ordinary celebrity, the celebrity whose "personal" life is made available to the public, therefore speaks directly to the concerns of their readership.

Audiences and the Ordinary Celebrity

It is all so much the same as it used to be in my young days. *Modern Society* and *Tit Bits* and all the rest of them. A lot of gossip. A lot of scandal. A great preoccupation with who is in love with who, and all the rest of it. Really, you know, practically the same sort of thing that goes on in St. Mary Mead. And in the Development, too. Human nature, I mean, is just the same everywhere.

-Jane Marple, as told by Agatha Christie⁴

As we have seen, both celebrity gossip magazines and the stars themselves are invested in and benefit from the motif of the ordinary celebrity. But why should readers be concerned with whether celebrities are presented as idols or as friends? It is because celebrities as friends, as ordinary people, perform a function that celebrities as idols cannot -- they serve as avatars who publically enact, and thereby make knowable, the experiences of young women. The cultural critic Raymond Williams argues that one of the key features of the English novel is its ability to depict people and their relationships in a “knowable” way. According to Williams, the novel does not merely reflect social relations as they exist, but personalizes these relations, articulating them in ways that make them knowable and communicable, thus creating a knowable community (1970). Celebrity gossip magazines function thus for contemporary readers. By constructing celebrities as ordinary people, the magazines create for their readers a knowable community, which collectivizes and articulates the concerns and anxieties of young women. Celebrities are ideally suited to perform the functions of the knowable community because, in their ubiquity, they are innately knowable, despite the fact that they are not actually known. “If the United States is high school,” explains former *Us Weekly* editor Lauren Schutte, “celebrities are the popular kids. They are who you want to know about, but you already know them.” Still, in order to be *knowable*, celebrities must not only be well known, but must also be people whose thoughts, emotions, and experiences are comprehensible because they are not so very different from our own. In other words, stars must appear to be ordinary human beings.

One of the key features of the knowable community is its ability to make people and their relationships knowable, to collectivize elements of the social world by personalizing them, by giving them a face and a name. In their role as ordinary people, celebrities perform precisely this function for the magazines' young, female readers. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the majority of the stars featured in celebrity gossip magazines are, like readers, between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. For this reason, stories about the ordinary lives of celebrity women, their personal emotions and experiences, provide readers with a recognizable manifestation of their own feelings and affairs and, in doing so, encourage readers to identify with the stars. I think people see themselves in celebrities," says Valerie Nome, celebrity editor for *Ok!*. "You see Kim Kardashian going through a break up and you think, 'I went through a breakup' and what that was like? How did she get over it? What can I apply to my own life?" Valerie's comments point to the ways in which ordinary celebrities provide readers with an opportunity to experience similarity identification and to use celebrity narratives as a lens through which to consider and negotiate their own experiences.

Indeed, many of the Cube readers do report identifying with celebrities in this way. Lisa, a thirty-year old Caucasian educator, Sasha, an African American educator who declined to reveal her age, and Stacey, a thirty-seven year old Italian American program coordinator, recall instances in which they felt stories about celebrities had a personal connection to their own lives:

Lisa: I really enjoy celebrity wedding photographs. I am looking forward to getting married eventually so that is something that I'm looking into myself. I want to see who was there, look at dresses, look at flowers.

Sasha: They go behind the scenes with these people and they find out things about their world and put it in the magazines. So if you like this [star], you'll zoom in and you'll say, for example, myself I'm a big animal activist and lover, 'Oh! She likes dogs! I [like] this girl because I read in the magazine that she likes dogs.' I do connect that way.

Stacey: I think you are fascinated [by] or comment on things that obviously have somewhat of a selfish connection to your life in some way. I always find it interesting when they do comparison diets of the day. I'm constantly dieting and things like that. And I do find that if somebody's in the room who's getting

married or something or having a baby or know somebody who's having a baby, [stories about pregnant stars] sparks conversation.

Lisa, Sasha, and Stacey all recognize aspects of their own lives in celebrity narratives. As they engage in similarity identification with these famous women, the readers use celebrity narratives as a lens through which to consider and negotiate their own experiences.

This type of identification may lead readers to develop parasocial relationships with celebrities. According to Horton and Wohl (1956), media users develop parasocial relationships when they interact with and respond to mass mediated representations of people, like celebrities, as though engaged in an actual social relationship with those figures. As we have seen, celebrity gossip magazines invite readers to develop precisely these types of relationships with the stars, calling them by their first name and using direct address and personal pronouns. The Cube readers respond accordingly, describing their own relationships with celebrities in parasocial terms:

Nikki: *I was upset when Jen and Brad broke up. I was like, "Nooo!"*

Amber: *Yeah, I was too. I was too. And for that reason I do not like Angelina Jolie. [laughs]. Can't stand her. I cannot stand her. I mean hard core. I can't stand her.*

Stephanie: *Jen, I feel bad for Jennifer Aniston. They're constantly putting her on the cover talking about her and babies and whether she wants babies. 'Oh is she pregnant? I'm like, "Leave her alone already!"*

The Cube readers feel deeply and personally invested in the lives of celebrity women, with whom they relate and identify. Through these parasocial relationships, readers not only develop a sense of connection with famous women, but also a sense of solidarity with a larger female cohort. Stacey, for example, notes that celebrity stories "create a little bit of common ground," "allow readers to "share in people's joys and sorrows," and connect "to the human spirit." Similarly, Sasha argues that "as a woman," she feels an emotional connection to famous females, regardless of her personal opinions about those stars. The Cube readers enjoy the idea that women across the country (regardless of where they live, how famous they are, or how much they earn) are reading and talking

about the same topics, week after week sharing an “intimate common world” in which women are the central actors and in which female experience is highlighted (Hermes, 1995: 132).⁵ In this way, famous women serve as a knowable community, collectivizing the concerns of female readers, reassuring them that their own experiences are not singular, but shared.

The knowable community not only provides readers with the opportunity to consider and evaluate their own experiences, it also provides them with tools for articulating those experiences. As Stacey’s comments suggest, celebrity stories do, in fact, prompt readers to think, and talk, about their own lives. Up to this point, I have traced the ways in which celebrity gossip magazines hail readers as participants in an ongoing conversation between members of an extended family; however, recent scholarship suggests that, while audiences do use the magazines as a way of participating in conversation, this dialogue occurs not between some imagined individuals, but between real women -- friends, siblings, and coworkers-- who use celebrity stories as a way of sparking conversation with those who are physically and emotionally closest to them (Feasey, 2008; Johansson, 2006). In her study of the British celebrity magazine *heat*, Feasey’s participants describe celebrity trivia as a type of “ice-breaker,” a tool for creating conversation amongst like-minded, sociable people (2008: 692). In short, celebrity narratives provide audiences with a common topic about which to gossip.

The term *gossip*, derived from the Old English “*godsibb*,” meaning a godparent, was originally used to describe an individual whose membership in a family was bestowed, not born into, and who thereby possessed intimate details about family life, despite his or her outsider status (Tebbutt, 1995). Over the years, the term has evolved, and has been used to denote friendship, companionship and, eventually, talk. Today gossip is most often defined, not as convivial chit chat, but as trivial, petty, or malicious conversation, most often pursued by women. Despite its sordid reputation, gossip is also an important part of women’s oral culture, as Deborah Jones puts it, a way of talking “between women in their roles as women,” which allows participants to share secrets, form bonds, and collectively express dissatisfaction (Jones, 1980: 194). Still, in order to gossip, one must have something, or someone, to gossip about. By providing readers

with a knowable community of celebrities about whom to gossip, celebrity magazines afford women the opportunity to engage in the type of talk that Jones describes.

The Cube readers consider celebrity gossip magazines to be fundamentally sociable texts which, unlike novels, newspapers, and fashion magazines, encourage readers to interact and engage with one another. Stacey explains:

I would think it would be rude, right now, if I picked up a book and started reading while you were in the room. But if I started reading a gossip magazine, it's viewed as a little bit more socially accepted because it's something you can have more of a dialogue over. It's not as individual of an activity.

As Stacey points out, reading celebrity tabloids in public often ignites conversation and dialogue, which transforms the act of reading from an individual pastime to a social and communal engagement. Fiske calls this type of talk, "when the meanings made [by fans] are spoken and shared within a face-to-face or oral culture," *enunciative productivity* and argues that it is this in this process of articulation and enunciation that the pleasure of fandom lies (1992: 37-38). Indeed, much of the pleasure that the Cube readers find in celebrity gossip is located not in the magazines themselves, but in the discussions generated by the act of reading. The mere mention of a recent headline sparks instant debate amongst the Cube women:

Mary: Anytime that I'm in the staff lounge and there's more than one person reading the magazines, it sparks conversation. Somebody will say, 'God, look at that person' or 'Ooh, this is a cute dress.'

Sasha: I tend to talk about the magazines with the people around me. I engage in long, intense, and serious conversations about different things in the magazines. Absolutely. ... My fellow females, they're right on it, all over it. First couple of words, they know what I'm talking about. They're right there indulging with me.

Amber: In social situations like at happy hour, maybe the conversation will drop for a second and then I'll say, 'Oh my god, did you see what Lindsay Lohan did?'

The readers' comments illustrate the way in which gossip about the knowable community of celebrities serves as a common point of entry into discussions between women, allowing them to socially engage their peers in an enjoyable way.

While some of the Cube readers are hesitant to discuss their own personal lives or to gossip about friends or family members, those same readers view gossip about celebrities as a harmless conversational tool. “You’re not going to hurt anybody in this magazine,” explains Mary, a thirty-three year old manager at the Cube who views conversation about celebrities as a “safe” form of gossip. “They’re not going to hear you. They don’t know what you’re thinking. They don’t really care as long as you’re going to the movies they’re putting out.” “Celebrity gossip is,” as Gamson argues, “a much freer realm, much more game-like than acquaintance gossip: there are no repercussions and there is no accountability” (1994: 176). Gossip about knowable celebrities, therefore, provides readers with a unique conversational opportunity; it acts as both springboard and shield, allowing readers to share their opinions and experiences while avoiding the potentially undesirable outcomes that may be associated with gossip about friends and acquaintances.

That is not to say, however, that celebrity gossip and personal gossip are two distinct entities. Because readers identify with famous women, they use celebrity gossip as a way of interpreting and understanding their own lives. The Cube readers report that conversations about celebrities often lead into deeper, more personal conversations about individual experiences and opinions. Danielle, a thirty-three year old director of West Indian descent, recalls one such instance:

Sometimes conversation about the magazines leads into conversation about real life. Oh yes, it does. Even the other day we were all in there talking about Sandra Bullock, Tiger Woods and all that stuff and Taj blurts out ‘Well you mean to tell me you never flirted with somebody or something that would make your significant other jealous?’ And then it gets into these personal things about how people really feel and what they’ve really done... I don’t think these conversations would come up without the magazines [since there was a] diverse group of people that happened to be there at the time. I really don’t think we would gather together to gossip about stuff if there wasn’t something to spur that on.

While gossiping about the lives of celebrities, the Cube women share their thoughts and feelings and learn about each other’s opinions in a way that is communal and comfortable, sociable and safe. The Cube readers viewed celebrity gossip as a social tool, a bonding mechanism, and a way of getting to know friends and coworkers in a way

that might not be possible, as Danielle points out, without the help of the magazines. Furthermore, because the narrative content of the magazines often revolves around issues that are deeply personal or private, the conversations generated by celebrity gossip magazines often address serious topics, such as infidelity or abuse. The Cube readers welcome the opportunity to explore these serious issues in a lighthearted manner. Celebrity gossip magazines provide audiences with a safe and lighthearted forum in which difficult topics-- topics that are salient to young, female readers-- may be raised and discussed. This is one of the genre's crucial affordances and, I argue, a key reason for the magazines' success.

The personal conversations generated by celebrity gossip often revolve around emotion - - how the star feels, how readers feel about the stars, and how readers would feel if placed in the situation that the star is facing. The Cube readers enjoy discussing their emotional reaction to the gossip at hand and they often express strong feelings towards the celebrities that they "love," "hate," or love to hate. At one point in our group interviews, Amber, a twenty-seven year old, African American manager and Nikki, a twenty-eight year old, Hispanic assistant, became engrossed in a deep discussion about the relationship between film stars Rachel McAdams and Ryan Gosling:

Amber: If you see two celebrities and you don't like them together, you're going to say, 'Oh no, he shouldn't marry *her*.'

Nikki: That is true.

Amber: If you don't like the celebrity woman who he's with you are going to say, 'Eh, I don't like them together.' For whatever reason, you've already formulated your opinion about that person... And then you decide whether or not you like them together. I know I do that. Or if you get used to two people together and then they break up and start a new relationship, you still want them to go back to that person. I know **I** did. I was very upset with Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams because I wanted them to live out *The Notebook* together.

Nikki: How cute were they together?!

Amber: I couldn't handle it when they broke up! [laughs] And I did **not** want to see them with anybody else. I did **not** like whomever else they were dating. I just didn't like it.

As they engage in this type of emotion-driven gossip, Nikki and Amber develop an empathetic relationship, not only with celebrities, but with one another. Through this conversation, the two friends continuously reaffirm their solidarity with one another; Nikki's interjections, while brief, serve to support Amber's opinions and to establish that the two women share similar opinions about the stars. The exchange between Nikki and Amber is about much more than celebrity gossip; it is about legitimating each other's experiences, strengthening their friendship, and caring for one another's emotional well being.

In her research on soap operas, Mary Ellen Brown finds that the conversation generated by the soaps enables audiences to participate in what she calls a "feminine cultural community of fans." Soap operas are not so very different from gossip magazines; they highlight the personal, the emotional, and the feminine while providing viewers with a knowable community, a recurring cast of characters, which collectivizes and articulates the concerns of female life. Brown finds that, for viewers, the pleasure of soap operas lies not in the text itself, but in the conversation and kinship with other fans that the text affords. Brown writes:

The process of being a soap fan, however, is not always just the process of watching. For long periods at a time, some fans miss watching the soap but "keep up" with it through conversations with other fans. ... The pleasure is not just the pleasure of seeing women's interests and concerns represented on the screen: rather it lies in the active and selective use of these representations in women's everyday lives and shared social experiences. The representations are only pleasurable insofar as they can be activated in this way (1989: 169-171).

For the Cube women, as for Brown's viewers, the pleasure of the celebrity gossip magazine is primarily derived from the conversation and kinship that result from the purposeful use of the text, not in the particular celebrity, story, or magazine.

Celebrity gossip, then, is not primarily about the brightest stars and the juiciest gossip, but about the validation of women's relationships, pleasures, and concerns. The ordinary celebrity is critical to audience pleasure, not because she implies that anyone can be a star, but because she teaches us that *the star can be anyone*. The specific celebrities do not matter-- Britney and Khloe, Jessica and Jen all serve the same purpose; they are a

tabula rasa onto which readers can project and interpret their own experiences and emotions. What is important about the stars,” argues celebrity theorist Richard Dyer, “is their typicality or representativeness” (1998: 47). As publically knowable representations of specific social types, “ordinary” celebrities provide readers with a lens through which to view themselves. Gossip magazines are not, at their core, about the celebrity “them,” but, rather, as the title of the genre’s flagship magazine suggests, about *us*. Readers enjoy relating the experiences of celebrity women to their own lives, using gossip as a tool for reflecting on their own experiences and for discussing their concerns and emotions with other women in a way that, as Brown notes, creates a feminine cultural community of fans. It is for this reason that readers, like the stars and the magazines themselves, are invested in the maintenance of the ordinary celebrity. For the Cube women, gossip stories are not about Jen and Angelina, but about their own lives -- *their* relationships, *their* children, *their* struggles. These stories, *their* stories, deeply matter.

Still, while they enjoy reading about, discussing, and identifying with the experiences of famous females, the Cube women do not always agree with what the magazines have to offer. While they find some of the genre’s narratives appealing and enticing, they find others ridiculous and insulting. This is the contradictory nature of the magazines -- and, indeed, of the popular feminine -- that Douglas describes. Yes, we enjoy the escape but still we feel guilty. Sure, we take pleasure in the gossip but we’re a bit fed up with all those catfights. And of course we identify with these stars but why are they all white, heterosexual, and obsessed with babies?? Up to this point, we have explored the pleasures of the celebrity gossip genre. Now, we see the paradox of the popular feminine laid bare. Celebrity gossip magazines, like *Dallas* and *Oprah* and this week’s *Lifetime* movie, address women’s contradictory experiences with female life and femininity and provide a safe space in which discussions of these experiences are encouraged. But these experiences are not always positive ones and the popular feminine often re-presents them in ways that are stereotypic, narrow-minded, and morally twisted. Nevertheless, by displaying those experiences in all their specific peculiarities, their garish colors blaring, these texts give women the opportunity to grapple with and thereby exert control over them. This is the problem and the promise of the popular feminine.

¹ See P. David Marshall (1997) *Celebrity and power: Fame in contemporary culture* for a discussion of the semiotic value of celebrity and Hamilton, P. and Hargraves, R. (2001) *The beautiful and the damned: The creation of identity in nineteenth century photography* for a discussion of the relationship between celebrity, value, and photography.

² Turner, J., & Banks, C. L.(2007). *Paris Hilton Inc.: The selling of celebrity*. [Motion picture]. Canada: cbc.ca.

³ www.okmagazine.com/about, Retrieved 4-22-2010

⁴ Christie, A. (1962). *The mirror crack'd*. New York, NY: Pocket Books, 180.

⁵ Berlant's discussion of the intimate public also resonates with this idea of the intimate common world described by Hermes. See Berlant, L. (2008, viii-ix).

Chapter IV

Really Us: Truth, Ambiguity, and Authority

“Shame on Lindsay!” blasts the cover of *Life & Style*’s September 28th, 2009 issue, which scolds twenty-three year old starlet, Lindsay Lohan for allegedly introducing her teenage sister Ali to “drugs,” “diet pills,” and “plastic surgery.” The story, which condemns Lindsay for “ruin[ing] her own life and now... endangering baby sister Ali’s,” is paired with a photo of actress Angelina [Jolie] looking “scary skinny” and a fashion story toting “fall’s lipo jeans,” designed to make you “look 10 lbs. slimmer!” This cover is indicative of the celebrity gossip genre’s penchant for emphatically proscribing contradictory messages about how female celebrities (and readers) should behave. Week after week, the magazines present guidelines, specific rules and instructions, aimed at ordinary women and the starlets who are “just like us.” Be thin, but not too thin. Be fashionable, but be yourself. Have fun, but don’t get into trouble. Enjoy sex, but don’t be too promiscuous. As Douglas argues, “Celebrity journalism drives home the message that the gender tightrope for women is gossamer-thin and precarious. And celebrity journalism claims to tell women-- the visible famous ones and the invisible rest of us-- how to walk it” (2010: 246).

Readers are deeply aware of these standards of femininity and often find themselves comparing themselves to the “norms” presented in the magazines. Mary, a thirty-three year old manager at the Cube, explains:

I think women are looking in these magazines for barometers of what’s normal or what they should expect in their own lives ... Who doesn’t like [it] when you drive past a house with the windows and blinds open and the lights on? Who’s not going to look in? This is your way of looking in [on] people ... People want to know that what they’re doing is ok, isn’t far out of the realm of traditional, mainstream normalcy. These magazines, with the privacy broken down, give that, possibly fake, look into other people’s lives for you to see whether or not you measure up. ... You want to see if you’re normal like they’re normal.

The trouble is that, despite the motif of the “normal,” ordinary celebrity, gossip magazines emphasize and glorify extreme versions of femininity. In many ways, celebrity gossip magazines can be understood as fables, moral tales not unlike those told by Aesop or the Brothers Grimm (Bird, 1976; Brewer, 2009). “Not only are [tabloid stories] revealing tales,” writes Ian Connell, in his analysis of celebrities in the popular media, “but also tales which set out to teach moral lessons by exposing unworthy and unbecoming actions” (1992: 77).

Nowhere is the morality of the celebrity gossip magazine more clearly articulated than in the pregnancy narrative. Stories about pregnant celebrities, one of the genre’s most popular tropes, aim a sharply discerning eye at expecting mothers. Because “pregnancy, as socially portrayed, epitomizes femininity,” these narratives not only shape our popular understanding and expectations for expectant mothers, but for all women (Graham, 1976). Celebrity gossip magazines produce a powerful popular discourse around pregnancy, motherhood, and the pregnant body and, in doing so, deeply impact contemporary understandings of femininity writ large. These narratives are especially salient for the genre’s readership, many of whom may be pregnant or thinking about the possibility of pregnancy since the average age for a woman to become pregnant with her first child in 2008 was twenty-five, an age which directly correlates to the median age of the genre’s readership.¹

Many pregnancy narratives work to convey a specific moral lesson about what it means to be a “good” or “bad” mother; the tone of the pregnancy narrative depends on the degree to which the expectant celeb adheres to or fails to meet the moral standards set out by the magazine. While some behaviors, such as avoiding alcohol and tobacco and eating nutritious foods, are essential to the health of mother and child, other personal choices are not innately positive or negative, although the magazines consistently present them as such. Women who adhere to the moral codes of the magazine are depicted as heroic mothers; those who fail to meet these strict standards are criticized and portrayed as failures.

<u>Heroic Mothers</u>	<u>Failed Mothers</u>
Married/Monogamous	Single/Promiscuous
Ideal Weight	Overweight/Underweight
Happy	Troubled
Wealthy	Poor ²
“Mild”	“Wild”
Selfless	Selfish

Figure 4.1: Heroic vs Failed Mother

Within the celebrity gossip genre, pregnancy narratives often focus on the mother’s appearance, weight, romantic relationships, and lifestyle choices. Stories featuring heroic moms emphasize the woman’s healthy lifestyle choices, her physical appearance and weight, her monogamous (most often heterosexual) relationship, her happiness, and her desire to be a good mother. Alternately, stories about failed mothers focus on the woman’s poor choices, weight gain or loss, unhappy romances or infidelity, recklessness, and selfishness. Heroic mothers are celebrated, praised, and doted upon; failed mothers are criticized, mocked, and condemned. In this way, pregnancy narratives serve as a powerful moral tale. They teach readers about which behaviors, physical features, and emotional responses garner respect and admiration, and which deserve punishment. Juxtaposed with those celebrities who manage to negotiate the tricky terrain of “appropriate” female behavior, failed mothers serve as a warning to all women: follow the rules or you too will be scorned.

This moral framework is further emphasized by a third type of pregnancy narrative, a Cinderella story of sorts, which tells of a woman who is, through her pregnancy, transformed from a selfish, unattractive, party girl to a selfless, beautiful, sophisticated woman. This particular narrative has been in circulation since the genre’s inception: celebrities like Nicole Richie, Angelina Jolie, and Lily Allen have all been presented as transgressors who, through pregnancy, have “turned their lives around” and “found happiness.” A September, 2009 issue of *Us Weekly* clearly outlines this transformative process, featuring interviews with pregnant reality stars Kendra Baskett

and Kourtney Kardashian, both of whom have allegedly undergone a mommy-makeover. The introduction to the article reads:

What a difference a pregnancy makes. Ten months ago, Kendra Baskett, 24, was a Playboy model cavorting nude inside Hugh Hefner’s legendary mansion. Flash to today: She’s preparing for the arrival of her first child (Henry Baskett IV) with NFL player husband Hank Baskett, 27, whom she wed June 27. Kourtney Kardashian did a similar 180. Her life as a single Miami party girl came to a screeching halt when she learned she was expecting with her on-again beau, entrepreneur Scott Disick, 26.

Accompanying photographs show the two women embracing their partners, referred to as “Doting Dads-to-be” and trading Porsches for minivans, alcohol for bed time snacks, and Playboy mansions for, well, regular mansions. Once “wild,” now “mild,” Kendra and Kourtney have allegedly given up the bad habits of yesteryear and embraced their role as mothers; in doing so, they have achieved both personal satisfaction and public respect. In this way, the transformation narrative reinforces binaries around appropriate and transgressive behavior while suggesting that all women, regardless of their past misdeeds, can become heroic mothers (re good women) if only they, too, engage in particular, socially sanctioned behaviors.

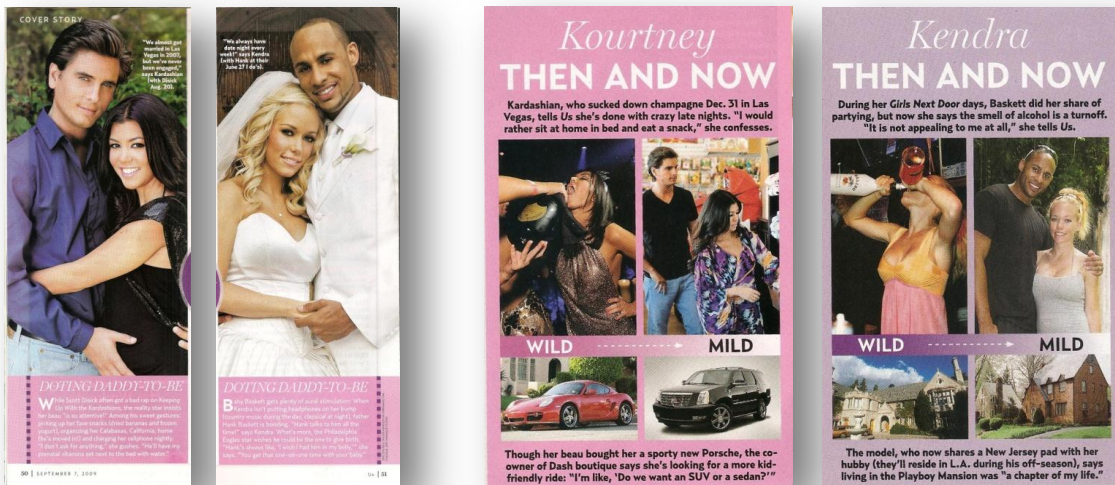


Figure 4.2: Transformed Transgressors
Us Weekly: 9/7/2009: p 48-53

Pregnancy narratives therefore epitomize the conservative moral world of the celebrity gossip genre, a world in which a rigid, largely unobtainable version of femininity is presented as the norm. But these moral codes are not unique to the pregnancy narrative, or even to the celebrity gossip genre. They are, in fact, indicative of a broader cultural discourse around appropriate (and inappropriate) femininity. These narratives cull together and make explicit many of the rigid codes of femininity that permeate contemporary American culture. In making these codes clear and available to the reader, celebrity gossip magazines reinforce the idea that ordinary women -- remember, celebrities are, in the context of these narratives, "ordinary" -- must be constantly wary of their own appearance and behavior lest they be caught making the "wrong" choices. The message here is clear: you, dear reader, are, like Kendra and Kourtney, being judged at all times.

The Cube readers are not immune to these codes and, at times, report attempting to "measure up" to the standards set by celebrities. They look to the magazines for fashion advice and diet tips, comparing themselves to the images they see. Nevertheless, they also express a knowledge that these depictions are not, in actuality, representative of ordinary women and that the moralities set out by the magazines are often deeply flawed. This awareness leads the Cube readers to develop a contradictory relationship with the celebrity gossip genre. Stacey, Amber, and Sasha describe their own contested feelings towards the magazines' treatment of weight, surveillance, and women of color:

Stacey: I *hate* when they take pictures of these poor girls' cellulite! [hitting the table]... They could be sitting the wrong way and it's like, they create major, major body issues for the celebrities and for women. And I just don't like that ... Even though you're drawn to looking at whose butt is that with the cellulite! [Laughs] You just feel like, '*Really?* Did they deserve that?' They probably were just sitting and the sun was glaring on their leg. Everybody has some. It makes us crazy, women crazy.

Amber: I think they should just leave people alone in certain situations. But it's a catch-22 because I like to read about it, but I think it's wrong. I *hate* that they're stalking Sandra Bullock. I hate that. But I read every little article I see about how they're stalking Sandra Bullock! [Laughs].

Sasha: There is diversity in celebrity gossip magazines but I would like to see more. When I open the magazine, I always scan to see if there's a woman of

color in the line-up because usually there is *not*. They could have ten slots and not one of them will be a woman of color or maybe *only* one will be. So it's quite natural for my eyes to go right to that person of color, even if it's a Caucasian woman with a very deep tan. I will read her article first because I find that I need to connect with something that's about *me*. I feel like, if they really want people like myself to read more of them, they need to give more of that. To be fair, I *am* seeing more diversity. Back in the late 80's, you didn't see a lot of that. It was sporadic. But now I do see it more. I turn to a page and there's pretty Halle Berry. You have this girl Zoe who's coming up and Jennifer Hudson is all over the place and she's quite chocolate. So yeah, I do feel that it's diverse but it could be more.

Despite their own attraction to the magazines, the Cube readers express frustration with the way in which the celebrity gossip genre insists upon a feminine ideal that is overwhelmingly white, wealthy, heterosexual, and thin.

One of the ways in which readers deal with this frustration is through *schnadenfreude*, taking pleasure in the misfortunes of others. In her study of gossip magazine reading, Hermes finds that women use stories about the misfortunes of celebrities as a way of commiserating and of comforting their own sense of self (1995: 300). The Cube readers, aware of the impossibly high standards to which famous women are held and frustrated by their own inability to live up to those standards, revel in instances in which the stars are presented in an unflattering light, as fallible individuals rather than as glossy idols. "We almost want to see them look bad because they always look so good," explains Cynthia, a divorced mother of three. "We want to say, 'Oh, she got a nose job' or 'Oh my god she looks terrible in that' or 'Oh, she got fat' because we would all really like to be in their position in life. So we tend to criticize because we're jealous. There you go." Mary and Nikki shared similar reactions:

Mary: In some ways, it makes me feel good that people who are supposedly successful and who are held up by society as being models are struggling with the same issues that I am... I know that the magazines are catering to that piece of everybody that wants to hear the problems. Because we've got problems too.

Nikki: We talk about who's going to jail. Who's having a nervous breakdown. I enjoy hearing about those. Failures. It makes my life seem a lot better. It also seems that I'm not as crazy.

Still, while the pleasure of schandenfreude allows readers to bolster their own self esteem, this pleasure does nothing to challenge the standards against which the Cube women are resisting, but rather pits women, the famous and the ordinary, against one another in a constant scramble. The outcome of this type of gossip is highly polarizing: it leaves some women (the richest, prettiest, most desirable and therefore closest to fitting the so-called-norm) at the top, and the others (those who fail to meet those criteria) at the bottom. In reality, however, this equation does not produce success for any women, but rather reproduces a constant form of surveillance and judgment, of both one's self and of other women, that assures no woman can ever truly measure up. Despite this, the Cube readers and millions of other women like them continue to seek out and enjoy celebrity gossip. Why is this? How is it possible that the reading experience can remain pleasurable, even for readers who reject the genre's skewed moral compass? The answer lies in the play of the text.

Ambiguity and Authority in the Celebrity Gossip Press

In 2007, *Us Weekly* began featuring an editorial segment entitled "All the News That's Fake," designed to call out competitors who had printed untrue, inaccurate, or misleading stories. *Advertising Age*, who winkingly called the allegations, a "shocker!" reported that "if beauty is truth and truth beauty... then *Us Weekly* thinks it's pretty."³ But *Us* was not the only publication with such illusions. While *Us*' editor in chief, Janice Min, decried the celebrity magazine industry's willingness to accept "fiction," Bonnie Fuller, editorial director of *Star* magazine, had this to say to LXTV:

The New York Times does not fact check. Most newspapers do not fact check. We not only fact check, we have to have multiple sources on big stories. Everything is read. Every single thing is read-- every caption, every article, by an in-house legal team-- to make sure that we really do have it and that the sources are good sources. We take tremendous care with our work. We can't just put in things. If we are going to report rumors, we'll say, 'This is a rumor we heard.' But when we're reporting a story, we present you with what we've learned and it's been stood up by sources. We often get sources to sign legal agreements saying they'd go to court and attest to what they're saying is true.⁴

Across the industry, editors and publishers were speaking out, defending the credibility of the celebrity gossip genre. But were they schizophrenic? Or just plain delusional? How could they claim credibility when the stories they print, more often than not, turn out to be exaggerated or entirely fabricated? How could they claim journalistic integrity while reporting that Jennifer Aniston was about to have *yet another* baby, or that Brangelina were on the verge of their umpteenth breakup? Despite their professed commitment to Truth with a capital “T,” celebrity gossip magazines actually revel in ambiguity and opinion. This ambiguity is, in fact, designed to provide their audience with a reading experience that allows readers to talk back to the feminine “norms” that the magazines present. By presenting these codes of femininity in their most undiluted form, as a fairy tale presents a moral lesson, the magazines make these codes available for comment and critique, allowing -- even encouraging -- readers to contest their ideological message. In order to understand how this works, we must take a closer look at the process of editorialization.

Editorialization: Speculation vs Fabrication

Across publications, celebrity journalists insist that the stories they report are based on facts, that they are true. At *Us Weekly*, editors Lauren Schutte and Sarah Grossbart contend that every story printed in the magazine is cross-checked with a representative of the star involved. Similarly, Rob DeMarco insists that *Life & Style* undergoes rigorous fact-checks and that, in order to gain legal approval, a piece of information must be confirmed by one, two, or three witnesses or sources. Still, Rob admits, “the genesis of some of these stories can be something very simple. A simple thing that’s said or a nuance you pick up on, those kinds of observations are in many ways what news, or speculative news, is about. It’s really editorializing things more than straight reporting the news.” Celebrity gossip magazines are constantly involved in a process of translation and speculation, known in the industry as editorialization. This process involves a complex blend of data collection, interpretation and opinion-formation. Each week, celebrity journalists consider a wide variety of informational cues in order to develop ideas for the upcoming issue. Details of past events, quotes from the

stars themselves, and even tidbits from a performer’s film or music career can be molded into a new story. Through the process of editorialization, writers and editors act as translators, interpreting and communicating information to their readers in a way that transforms opinion and assumption into news.

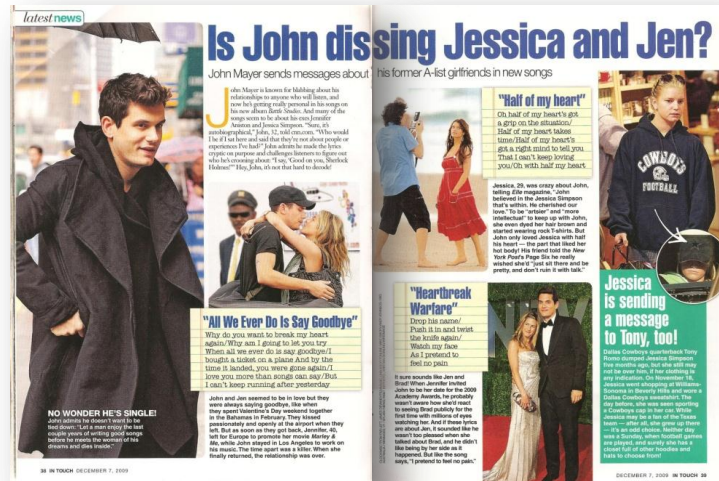


Figure 4.3: *In Touch*, 12/7/2009: p 38-39

Take, for instance, a December, 2009 story in *InTouch* entitled, “Is John dissing Jessica and Jen?” The story speculates as to whether song lyrics written by pop star John Mayer contain coded messages about Mayer’s past girlfriends, Jessica Simpson and Jennifer Aniston. Its opening paragraph reads:

John Mayer is known for blabbing about his relationships to anyone who will listen, and now he’s getting really personal in his songs on his new album *Battle Studies*. And many of the songs seem to be about his exes Jennifer Aniston and Jessica Simpson. ‘Sure, it’s autobiographical,’ John, 32, told CNN.com. ‘Who would I be if I sat here and said that they’re about people or experiences I’ve had?’ John admits he made the lyrics cryptic on purpose and challenges listeners to figure out who he’s crooning about: ‘I say, ‘Good on you, Sherlock Holmes!’ Hey, John, it’s not that hard to decode!

Here, we can see how an unremarkable comment by a pop musician is transformed into an entire article, wherein the writer explicates the “true” meaning of Mayer’s lyrics using insider knowledge and the aforementioned sleuthing skills. The article goes on to

interpret ambiguous lyrics, like “push it in and twist the knife again” and “why do you want to break my heart again” as clear references to Simpson and Aniston. Photos and information about the two women and their relationship with Mayer appear alongside the lyrics, as further evidence of the writer’s comments. In addition, a side panel, which proclaims “Jessica is sending a message to Tony, too!,” features a picture of Simpson wearing a Dallas Cowboys hat and sweatshirt. From her choice of apparel, the writer infers that Jessica has not recovered from her relationships with quarterback Tony Romo, who “dumped” her five months previously.

This story makes the editorialization process explicit, clearly demonstrating how celebrity journalists work to cull together and decode information in a way that creates an original narrative. Furthermore, “Is John dissing Jess and Jen” models these interpretive decoding techniques for the reader, encouraging her to put on her sleuthing cap, connect the clues, and suss out her own theory about what John is *really* singing about. In doing so, this story, and others like it, equip readers with what Gamson calls “viewing tools,” strategies and techniques that allow readers to “peel away the veneer” of the celebrity and thereby access the real star (1994: 48). The editorialization process, therefore, not only allows the magazines to generate content and enhance their role as celebrity gatekeeper, but also provides readers with a feeling of authority, a sense that, with a keen eye, they too can figure out the “truth” about their favorite celebs.

Indeed, that keen eye is critical because so many of the clues provided by the magazines are visual ones. In case readers feel that the claims of celebrity “insiders,” “friends,” and publicists are unreliable, the magazines offer images as irrefutable proof, documentary evidence of stars’ “real” feelings and actions. Still, these images are often quite ambiguous themselves. Photographs are often manipulated in ways that create a story where little news exists. Susanne Rieth explains that, during her time as photo editor at *Life & Style*, she was responsible for seeking out images about which editorial inferences could be made. The smallest details of a photograph-- a new ring on an actress’ left hand, a slight bunching in the mid-section of her sweater, a warm glance between costars-- would be transformed into a storyline. “Maybe there’s something in it, maybe not,” says Rob, Susanne’s former colleague. Nevertheless, Rob points out, “any observations that you can make editorially or any kind of conjuring of what you think is

going on here [can become a story]...Did she do something with her hair? Her face? Her nose looks bigger. Her nose looks smaller. We're constantly looking for that stuff, all day long. We're looking for every one of those little things... We can make a proverbial mountain out of a molehill." As Susanne and Rob's comments make clear, while a photograph may serve as a form of visual evidence, just *what* that image proves depends largely on the deductions and decisions of celebrity journalists.



Figure 4.4: *The Glory Shot, the Guilt Shot, the Grief Shot*
In Touch, 2/23/09; *Star* 2/23/09; *Star* 2/9/09

Editors often strategically pair images with stories to which they are not related in order to produce the desired dramatic effect. Photographs of stars looking angry or distressed are used to enhance allegations of a feud or breakup while images of gorgeous, smiling celebs are paired with stories about romance and success. At times, the images chosen have little, if anything, to do with the story at hand, but are carefully selected from a vast archive in order to convey a desired emotion. Three types of images repeatedly appear to bolster the credibility of the celebrity gossip narrative. I call these the glory, guilt, and grief shot.

Each shot embodies a specific set of characteristics, which makes it instantly recognizable as that particular image-type. The glory shot, used to enhance a story about a celebrity's success or happiness, consists of a posed, sometimes professional

promotional, photograph of the star looking her best, smiling, and making direct eye-contact with the camera. Alternately, the guilt shot, which typically accompanies stories about infidelity, backstabbing, or feuds, is a candid, paparazzi photograph of the stars caught off guard. In a guilt shot, celebrities appear tense, upset, or gloating -- in short, they appear guilty, as though they have done something wrong. Often, the guilt shot consists of two images spliced together, implying a romantic relationship that may or may not actually exist. Finally, the grief shot is a candid photo of a star looking upset, flustered, or distraught; these types of shots are used to convey a sense of despair, and are often coupled with narratives in which a celebrity has experience infidelity, abuse, addiction, or death. On their own, these images provide very little information-- indeed, it is often it is difficult to tell whether a star is upset or simply squinting, caught mid-sentence by a relentless photographer -- however, when paired with the genre's emotional narratives, these images become highly compelling "proof" of the stars "true" actions and emotions.



Figure 4.5: *Us Weekly*, 10/12/09

Another type of visual manipulation that is standard within the industry is the image splice, wherein two distinct photos are edited in such a way so that they appear to actually be one in the same. This type of splicing is used to imply an interaction between celebrities, even when that interaction may have never occurred. Susanne explains that, for legal reasons, editors are careful to ensure that these types of composites are

obviously faked; however, she notes, there are times in which photos are edited in a way that is intentionally misleading:

If they're going to actually fake it, they legally have to put 'photo composite' written in little letters on the side. Of course, very few people might see those little letters that are there. When I was at *Star*, one magazine had bought the exclusive, first pictures of Brad and Angelina together and they were on the beach. This magazine had bought them for a lot of money; they probably paid like 100 grand or something. But *Star* made a fake picture of them on a beach, and they wrote 'photo composite' on it.

In this instance, *Star's* tactics helped the magazine to sell copies and avoid being one-upped by a competitor who had paid top dollar for exclusive image rights. More routinely, however, celebrity weekly magazines splice images in order to provide readers with compelling, if misleading, visual proof of their claims.

Although editors intentionally alter these images in order to produce a specific visual and narrative effect, they do not attempt to hide these strategies from their readership. On the contrary, at times, the magazines explicitly draw readers' attention to these manipulative techniques. For example, an April 2009 issue of *Us Weekly* features an article by Lauren Schutte entitled, "Fake News," which claims to reveal the instances in which its competitors have spun "tall tales." In it, Lauren alleges that *Ok! Magazine* used "Photoshop" to cut Suri Cruise and Shiloh Jolie-Pitt out of original photos and paste them together on a new background in order to make it seem as though the celebrity kids were "best friends" on a "tea party" playdate. By revealing this technique, *Us* is not only staking a claim for its own validity, but it is also explicitly alerting its readers to this strategy. In doing so, Lauren not only makes her readers more attuned to instances of editorialization when they occur in other magazines, but also when they occur in *Us*, since the magazine also uses these same techniques (see figure 4.7).



Figure 4.6: *Us Weekly*, 4/13/09: p 48

The genre's ambiguity allows readers to engage in a pleasurable negotiation, to question the accuracy of the magazine's claims. And once one element of the genre's authority is called into question, others begin to topple in turn. If the latest story about Jen's alleged pregnancy, for example, is not true, then perhaps, readers can infer, all famous women are *not* really size two supermodels who have perfect boyfriends and children who never poop or cry. The ambiguity of the genre, therefore, allows readers to push back against and, at times, firmly reject the rigid moral guidelines and feminine stereotypes it proscribes. As they question the magazines' authority, readers negotiate their own relationship to the "impossible standards," picking and choosing which elements they relate to and which they reject.

The Fun of it All: Playing with Ambiguity

Thus, although celebrity gossip magazines claim to be invested in accurately reporting celebrity news, they are, in actuality, more invested in creating content that will spark interest and conversation amongst their readers. To achieve this, writers and editors rely not only on information, but on speculation and interpretation. Despite their overt claims to the contrary, the genre revels in ambiguity, presenting speculative and opinion-based stories freely and explicitly to their readers, encouraging those readers to not only understand the editorialization process, but to develop their own personal interpretations. In admitting, even pointing to, their own fallibility, the magazines

encourage their readers to draw their own conclusions and stake their own claims. Ambiguity is therefore crucial to the celebrity gossip magazine because this ambiguity draws readers into a constant tug-of-war between truth and opinion, fact and fiction. In this way, audiences are transformed into active participants, informed respondents who have the skills and savvy required to challenge the authority of the magazine. The ambiguous nature of the celebrity gossip text, therefore, invites the reader to enjoy what Roland Barthes call the pleasure of play.

In his 1987 book, *Television Culture*, media scholar John Fiske outlines one of Barthes' key arguments about the characteristics, functions, and affordances of any text:

Barthes (1977) suggests that the pleasure of creating a text out of a work involves playing with the text, and he exploits the full polysemy of 'play' in his ideas. Firstly, he says, the text has 'play' in it, like a door whose hinges are loose. This 'play' is exploited by the reader who 'plays' the text as a musician plays a score: s/he interprets it, activates it, giving it a living presence. In doing this, the reader plays a text as one plays a game: s/he voluntarily accepts the rules of the text in order to participate in the practice that those rules make possible and pleasurable; the practice is, of course, the production of meanings and identities (1987: 230-231).

Because they are ambiguously truthful, celebrity gossip magazines afford their readers the opportunity to play, to interpret their contents in ways that are flexible and variable.

Scholarship suggests that gossip can act as an important mechanism of social control, a way of establishing and policing social norms; this particular use of gossip is evidenced by the aforementioned pregnancy narratives (Gluckman, 1963; Levin & Arluke, 1987; Rysman, 1977). Gossip, however, can also be used as a way of negotiating those norms and it is in this type of gossip that the Cube readers find the greatest pleasure. Readers report that gossip about the magazines takes place whenever a group of women are reading together; as they disagree with the magazines' claims, readers voice their dissent, sparking conversation and debate. Readers are aware of the rules of the text-- they know that celebrity gossip is full of half-truths and exaggeration-- and they accept those rules because it is that very ambiguity that affords them the pleasure of play. "I think there's always the awareness that there's some airbrushing happening there," explains Mary. "She's clearly retouched and styled. She's got false lashes on. Somebody put that on her. It's not realistic. I think that conversation would happen

when you're reading in a group setting." Through this communal detective work, the Cube women question the authority and reliability of the celebrity gossip genre. Gossip, in this context, can therefore be understood as a way of articulating and contesting, rather than simply maintaining, social norms.

Is Britney Spears really getting married this time? Is Angelina Jolie having *another* baby? Readers don't necessarily believe that celebrity tabloids report the truth but, they don't really mind if what they're reading is fake. Gamson notes that fans associate a sense of doubt with celebrity gossip, but that this doubt is unproblematic, a non-issue. "The fact that 'most of it is not true,' that 'it can be interpreted in a million different ways,' writes Gamson, "is acknowledged but irrelevant" (1994: 173-4). Indeed, this is also the case for the Cube readers, many of whom question the accuracy of the magazines but do not find this lack of truthfulness to be bothersome. Mary and Nikki explain:

Mary: My enjoyment isn't based on whether or not it's true. I probably wouldn't enjoy the magazines more if I knew they were true. While I say that I tend to believe the stories, I think they're all trash. Who knows?

Nikki: You know it's not real and you just enjoy that it's so fake and it's so outrageous that you're like, 'Come on now.' It's really not true.

For these readers, the ambiguous truthfulness of the magazines does not detract from, but in fact adds to, the pleasure of the reading experience. Therefore, truthfulness is a moot point for celebrity gossip readers. By presenting readers with a world of ambiguity in which the line between information and fabrication is thin and ever changing, celebrity gossip magazines allow their readers to pick and choose which narrative elements they wish to subscribe to and which they wish to reject. "Players ... enjo[y] the collective process of making their own meanings, choosing their own beliefs" and, as Gamson makes clear, "the celebrity text, *because* it makes visible and available its own encoding processes, is particularly suited to games of audience meaning creation" (1994:183). It is not whether a story is truthful, but how easily and pleasurably it can be activated, that matters to readers.

Hermes argues that this textual play can be likened to puzzle solving. Readers who engage in this type of play derive pleasure from attempting to discern what is

‘really’ happening in the lives of celebrities (1995: 125). Helena, a twenty-one year old student and educator at the Cube, describes her own puzzle-solving strategies:

I look more at the pictures and I try to find more of the stars’ own quotes because a lot of times they have ‘a friend says this about this person.’ Well, I want their own quotes. I don’t necessarily want ‘a friend says this about them’ because there’s an interpretation in there. So I’ll look for a quote of her saying ‘I want to have a baby.’ ... It’s her own quote that is interesting. Not another person’s interpretation of what’s going on.

Here, we see that Helena has derived a set of specific, complex strategies that she employs in an effort to puzzle out the truth of celebrity gossip. She uses direct quotations as a way of filtering away the editorial point of view contained in the magazines, thereby choosing for herself which narrative details she will and will not accept. For Helena, and other readers, her enjoyment of the reading experience is directly linked to her ability to puzzle solve. This negotiation is, ultimately, what allows the Cube women to take pleasure in celebrity gossip magazines, despite the fact that they often disagree with or reject the claims made by these texts. For readers, the “fun” of celebrity gossip is that it allows, and even encourages, contestation and debate.

There are, however, different levels of resistance through which the Cube readers express their disbelief in the claims of the magazines. The first type of resistance occurs in relationship to matters of personal opinion. The Cube readers report that they often disagree with the magazines’ opinions, especially in regards to matters of appearance and behavior. Helena, Danielle, and Amber explain:

Helena: Sometimes it’s fun to figure out if they *are* right ... The [columnists] have their opinions intertwined. Sometimes one of them says her hair doesn’t work with the dress or her shoes are completely off and you have to take your own opinion and say, ‘Well, I actually really like those shoes’ or ‘Her hair looks really nice with that.’

Danielle: I like debating. ‘No, I think that outfit looks *good*’ or ‘No, he *is* a lying, cheating dog.’ It’s just all in fun.

Amber: It’s fun to disagree with them all the time. It’s pure entertainment. It’s not anything serious. That’s another reason why it’s fun for me.

These readers find “fun” in the simple act of disagreeing with the magazines’ opinions on a hairstyle or dress. This pleasure is rooted in the reclamation of authority, however personal or insignificant that authority may initially appear. As they talk back to the text, the Cube women exert authority over their reading experience in a way that is both empowering and enjoyable. By claiming their right to disagree with the magazines, the Cube women begin to scratch chinks into the magazines’ authorial armor.

These chinks become deeper as debates over personal opinion evolve into discussions about femininity and female life. Because the Cube readers do not only call the magazines’ authority into questions over matters of style; they also use the process of editorialization to “play” with the feminine norms that the magazines make so clearly available. The Cube readers are especially eager to contest two ideals that are continuously rehashed within the genre: the thin ideal and the ideal of the heroic pregnancy. Here, Sasha, Helena, and Mary explain how they deal with instances in which they disagree with the magazines’ treatment of weight and pregnancy:

Sasha: There’s times when I want to fling the thing across the room because I’m not in agreement! I’ve been known to say some unpleasant words about how I feel about what’s written. Sure. It’s your opinion so you have a right to voice and express it. It’s about choice and variety and spice of life. ‘Oh, that girl looks like a scarecrow!’ or ‘Oh no, that’s a very unique, chic, edgy look!’ You’ll go back and forth so yeah it is fun [pitting] your opinion against what they feel because none of it is factual. Very little, if any [is true]. It is fun ... Sometimes you get into a friendly, respectful debate over stuff. ‘No it isn’t!’ ‘Yes it is!’ ‘I’ll be damned! No it’s not!’ It *is* fun. I think it’s designed to be fun. It’s meant to be fun. Anybody that doesn’t find it fun or at least humorous, they’re taking it out of context.

Helena: You see all these perfect models, quote unquote perfect models and it’s really unfair because [I had a friend who] was really very upset about herself. She was trying to throw up and she was trying to eat less. She wouldn’t eat anything! Throughout the whole day she wouldn’t eat anything and she was like ninety pounds! She was like fourteen years old and it was ridiculous how skinny she was. And I kept telling her, ‘You’re perfect, you’re fine! There’s nothing to worry about!’ But she would say [pointing to the magazines] ‘but look at this, but look at this, look at her, she’s gorgeous, look at the magazine, look, look, look!’ And I said, ‘That doesn’t matter, they could be computerized. They could go over that, they could airbrush it.’ ‘No, no, they look so pretty.’ ‘Well, that doesn’t

mean she actually looks that way.’ ... You have to take everything in with a grain of salt, basically. Basically weeding it out. You definitely have to take your own perspective and not let these people project on you.

Mary: I think when [the magazines] talk about how women lose the baby weight, what they’re not saying is that their job is to lose the baby weight. And they have trainers and people cooking their meals for them and stylists and airbrushing and knowing how to dress properly. But also some of them have five, six hours a day to work out and they do, every day of the week. They have a nanny and a chef and a whole crew to help them whip their body back in to shape. The magazines don’t show that. They just say, ‘Look how great! Three months post-baby!’ That’s definitely misleading.

A lot of times you would see something like, ‘Party Girl Transformed.’ Bad photos, arrests, drunken flings, and then a comparison showing them talking about how [pregnant celebrities] just want to be home and how they feel they’ve changed and pictures of them knitting or something like that, something very subdued. I feel like they almost want to comfort people if a party girl gets pregnant. The world is going to be worried. No, no, it’s ok. She’s ok now. She’s calm and a good mom. Which, I feel like a lot of times, is a huge scam... I mean, it’s all how PR spins it.

These negotiated readings allow the Cube women to stake their own claim for authority, talking back to the “norms” that the celebrity gossip genre so ardently insists upon. Furthermore, readers note that this type of talking back most frequently occurs in a group setting, where it provides an opportunity for the Cube women to bond with one another through the pleasure of communal resistance.

Within these conversations, readers use their knowledge of the editorialization process and their doubts about the veracity of the genre to rationalize or justify their disagreement with the magazine. Just as Helena and Mary point out the magazines’ penchant for airbrushing and public relations, many of the Cube women reference the behind-the-scenes mechanisms that allow celebrity gossip narratives to appear “real.” In doing so, they debunk the authority of the text:

Helena: You hardly know anything. If you read a couple of articles on Jennifer Aniston, you feel like you know who she is and how she works and all that stuff. But you have to make sure to ground yourself again and say ‘No, I really don’t know this person because I am not getting their view. I am getting a processed

view. This person took a picture but then other journalists take it and say this and take what she said and make a thousand interpretations of it’.

Cynthia: Most of the times I don’t believe what they print. I don’t even believe the photographs. There are ways to alter things today. Where years ago where they would say, ‘Woah we have a picture.’ You’d say, ‘Ok.’ But now with all the ways there are today to alter photographs. If you look at a female’s body in there or something. I don’t believe any of it. Airbrushing and all that stuff.

Amber: You know nothing in there is true. *Star* ... None of them are ever confirmed by whoever they’re talking about. Nothing about their stories ever come out to be true or admitted. I don’t believe anything in most of these magazines. And that’s another reason that I don’t feel bad critiquing with the magazine because I know it’s probably not true anyway.

By pointing out the ways in which the magazines “fake it,” the Cube women hold the genre’s feminine standards up for inspection and find that there is, in fact, a man (or woman) behind the curtain of feminine perfection. The “ordinary” women who appear in these magazines are far from ordinary; they are airbrushed, digitally manipulated and coated in a thick public relations gloss. The version of femininity that is presented as obtainable is, in actuality, a façade, a myth, a fairy tale.

The readers take pleasure in the process of demystifying these powerful messages because in doing so, they not only assert their authority to debunk the claims of the celebrity gossip magazine, they also resist the normative ideals of femininity that pervade their media environment and, indeed, much of the contemporary landscape of American popular culture. Of course, the Cube women do not always find themselves in the position of critic and report that they do, at times, feel vulnerable to the magazines’ incessant messages about thinness, beauty, and motherhood. It is paradoxical then, that the genre’s hyper-emphasis on feminine norms, its ability to consistently and explicitly lay bare the tropes of ideal femininity, works to legitimize these messages while simultaneously making them available for public critique. This opportunity for critique, the Cube women report, is a foundational pleasure of celebrity gossip magazines. This is the reason why readers, even those who reject the genre’s normative messages, find themselves plucking the latest issue of *In Touch* off the staff room table or the supermarket shelf.

But let us not forget how it is that readers come to be aware of the inner workings of the celebrity gossip genre in the first place; the magazines themselves provide the insider knowledge, the viewing tools that allow audiences to engage in these negotiated readings. The magazines guide the reader, step by step, through the editorialization process, encouraging her to draw her own inferences and make her own conclusions. The magazines call attention to their own inner workings, showing the reader how and when images are manipulated in service of a particular narrative. Furthermore, celebrity gossip magazines call upon their reader, inviting her to become an active adjudicator in its moral universe. Polls directly address audience members, asking, “Who wore it better?” and “What do you think of the latest controversies?” Readers are encouraged to judge, rank, and comment on, to weigh in, to voice their concerns, to let their opinions be heard. “And with each question, betrayal, triumph, or crisis,” Douglas notes, “judgment *is* required; it is a given that you are an authority on such matters and will bring your own social knowledge and moral compass to bear on the topic at hand” (2010: 249). Furthermore, because the contents of the magazine are based largely on speculation, the reader’s opinion is no more or less valid than the opinion set forth by the magazine, or by any other reader. The ambiguous truthfulness of the celebrity gossip text, therefore, produces the magazine as a site of contestation and deliberation and its readers as active participants in this debate.

This is no happy accident. According to Rob DeMarco, the magazines are intentionally designed to encourage these types of participatory, negotiated engagements. Rob argues that celebrity journalists are not only aware that readers develop these types of interpretations, but that they actually compose stories in ways that promote these contested readings. “Our attitude is, let’s give them the facts, let’s show them the pictures, let’s present it in a positive way or in a way that we’re not looking judgmental and we’ll let the readers decide what they think,” says Rob, who is quick to point out that he and fellow staffers anticipate a reader response that is less than rosy. For example, stories about celebrity children often depict toddlers in high-fashion clothing, surrounded by mountains of luxury goods. These stories are framed in a positive light; their message is ostensibly, “Look at these cute, lucky kids!” But staffers like Rob are aware of, and indeed promote, a second-level reading. “We’re sitting there going, ‘What a spoiled little

brat this kid is!’ but we don’t want to say that. We don’t want to say, ‘She’s a spoiled little brat,’ so we’re saying, ‘Here she is with all her stuff.’ But we want the readers to think, ‘Oh, what a spoiled little brat she is.’ And so we let the readers draw their own conclusions, which gets them involved in it to a certain extent. So it’s intentionally done.” Celebrity journalists like Rob anticipate a reader response that directly contests the moral frame that they provide and intentionally craft their narratives in a way that allows readers to become “involved,” to enjoy the pleasure of playing with those narratives.

“The pleasurable freedom of celebrity gossip” is, therefore, as Gamson argues, “built precisely on its freedom from but resemblance to truth” (1994: 177). In order to work as ambiguous texts, the magazines must appear authentic, credible, and ingenuous (Eco, 1978: 162). They must loudly maintain their commitment to truth for they cannot let the reader know that *they* know, *the reader* knows, it’s all a game. The pleasure of play is possible if and only if the magazines present themselves as artless and unaffected; the magazines must, therefore, conceal the fact that they are, in reality, complex and sophisticated texts designed to create a compelling and pleasurable experience for their readership.

“The power of play,” writes Fiske, “involves the power to play with the boundary between the representation and the real, to insert oneself into the process of representation so that one is not subjected by it, but, conversely, is empowered by it” (1987: 236). For the Cube women, the pleasure of celebrity gossip magazine reading is that it affords them the power to challenge mass-mediated representations of femininity and female life. It would, however, be naive to suggest that all readers engage in these types of negotiated readings at all times or that the impossible standards produced and promoted by the magazines are negated by these types of negotiated readings. They are not. Even those readers who challenge the text in certain contexts accept it at face value in others. Indeed, some of the Cube women report that their own tendency to agree or disagree with the magazines depends on their emotional state and motivation for reading; women who are experiencing personal hardship or who read as a way of “getting away from it all,” for example, report that they are less likely to dispute the magazines’ claims. But it would be equally false to suggest that celebrity gossip magazines are simply

ideological booby traps designed to ensnare unsuspecting women. To argue thus is to ignore the pleasure that these texts afford their readers. Celebrity gossip magazines are complex texts, intentionally designed to allow readers to develop their own, polysemic interpretations. Whether or not their contents are true, whether that bulge really *is* a baby bump or simply an ill-positioned t-shirt, does not matter because it is precisely this ambiguity that affords readers the opportunity to consider and critique, to revel in and revolt against, both the magazine and the feminine “norms” it reproduces.

It is the power of play that produces the celebrity gossip magazine as a guilty pleasure. The magazines are pleasurable for female readers because they allow and, indeed, encourage women to confront and challenge contemporary culture’s narrow, obsessive, and often troubling images of femininity and female life. The magazine put these “norms” on display, splashed in bold-print neon, made impossible to ignore by the ubiquitous stars who smile and sob on their covers. In doing so, the genre makes these rigid standards of femininity, nebulously floating about in so much of the mass media, tangible, accessible, and refutable. But celebrity gossip magazines are also designed to allow women, even those who abhor the “worst beach bodies” articles and the bump patrol, to revel in a fantasy world, a world in which those impossibly high standards of femininity are brought down to the level of ordinary life and thereby made accessible.

This is the double-edged sword, the two-headed monster, the alluring cocktail of fun (with a splash of guilt) with which celebrity gossip magazines, and indeed all popular feminine texts, tempt their readers. The appeal of these texts lies in their ability to acknowledge and make plain the contradictory experience of being female. The love-hate relationship that women have with celebrity gossip magazines (and soap operas, and dating shows, and romance novels) is indicative not only of women’s conflicted relationship with the media, but also of our complicated and contested relationship to contemporary discourses of femininity and to our contradictory place within patriarchy. Popular feminine texts allow female audiences to, in a lighthearted and enjoyable way, confront their contradictory relationship to normative femininity and to thereby exert authority over it. And while there is no guarantee that these moments of contention protect women from the powerful and often problematic messages that these texts present, the ability to negotiate and play remains an important affordance of the popular

feminine, for it is through the power of play that woman can, both individually and collectively, stake their claims against a web of competing discourses.

¹ http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr59/nvsr59_01.pdf

² Since most celebrities are extremely wealthy, the financial underpinnings of heroic motherhood are typically unmarked, but taken-for granted. Heroic mothers are often presented alongside beautiful nurseries or at baby showers heaped with luxurious gifts. Finances are only explicitly discussed when they become problematic. The most obvious example of this is in the case of Nadia Suleman, i.e. “Octomom,” a single mother who was condemned in the tabloid press for her decision to have octuplets. Suleman was portrayed as the ultimate failed mother, in part because she was unable to financially care for the newborns.

³ Ives, N. (2007, May 7). Shocker! Us Claims rivals Lied to Readers. *Advertising Age*, 78(19), 3-42 (2p).

⁴ LXTV Interview [Video File]. Retrieved from <http://lx-tv.com/lxoriginals/video/8412>

Conclusion: On Popularity and Pleasure

Over the past decade, celebrity gossip magazines have taken their glossy, garish place at the forefront of American popular culture. Their success has come at a time when the publishing industry at large has suffered enormous blows: newspaper sales have dropped along with magazine subscriptions and advertiser spending on print (Farhi, 2006; Ives, 2009). Industry critics cite the economic recession and the increased availability of instant online content for the decline; however, throughout all this celebrity gossip magazine sales have remained largely stable. All the while, some have cried that the celebrity weekly market is oversaturated and doomed to fail. In 2007, *Advertising Age* predicted that the genre was “maxing out,” its explosive growth in the early-2000’s replaced by slowing figures (Ives, 2007). But despite these premonitions, the genre’s slow growth has been a relative success in a dismal market, especially compared to fashion magazines, whose ad revenues have been steadily declining (Magazine Monitor, 2008). Looking back over its short but influential lifespan, the celebrity gossip genre’s emergence has been a lucrative one; looking forward, it seems that the industry is poised for future success.

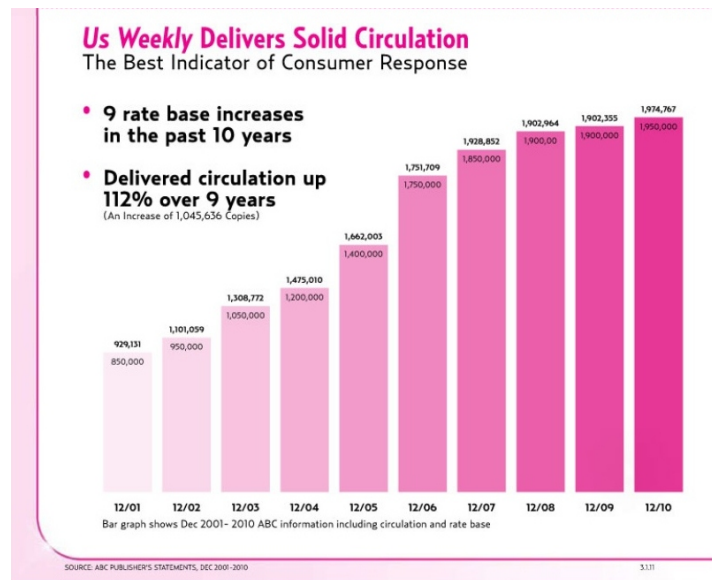


Figure 5.1: *Us Weekly* Circulation, 2001-2010

As demonstrated in figure 5.1, *Us Weekly*'s circulation has consistently grown over the past decade and continues to trend upwards, despite precarious market conditions. Across other publications within the genre, sales have remained generally consistent, with only slight gains or losses in readership. *In Touch*, for example, has retained a readership of approximately 7.6 million since 2009; meanwhile sister publication *Life & Style* added around 250,000 readers to its ratebase of 450,000 between 2009 and 2011.¹ And while *Star*'s readership has dropped nearly 50,000 since 2008, it continues to reach over 10 million readers each week, with sales up 38% since its conversion from a paper tabloid.² Still, as the popularity of the celebrity gossip genre has persisted, it has brought with it increased competition.

Countless blogs, websites, Twitter accounts, and Facebook pages have emerged in the wake of the celebrity weekly genre. PerezHilton.com, TMZ (website and television show), and X17 online all debuted between 2005 and 2007, bringing star gazing, snarky commentary, and instant access to the latest paparazzi photos straight to computer screens across the country and around the globe. How, then, have these weekly magazines, whose production is tortoise-like in comparison to their virtual competitors, managed to remain successful? It is because these magazines

offer their readers something that digital content cannot. Unlike websites, which are enjoyed from the privacy of one's personal computer, magazines are read and shared in public spaces. Readers can flip through their pages in the checkout line, glance at a story over a coworker's shoulder, or grab an issue from a friend's coffee table. Unlike digital content, the magazines offer their readers a type of engagement that is primarily based in conversation and interaction; their physicality allows for their portability, share-ability, and durability (as one reader pointed out, the magazine is not likely to be, as a computer may, destroyed by a spilled beverage or sticky toddler and, even if the magazine were ruined, it could be replaced at a marginal cost). "The world moves so fast," explains *Ok!*'s Valerie Nome. "It's crazy. It's constant. Online is up-to-the-minute but when you open the magazine [it] offers an experience."

The experience that Valerie describes, as this study has shown, is one based on female identification and conversation, which often takes the form of gossip. Gossip, in this context, should be understood as a key mechanism of social engagement and female pleasure, through which emotions, opinions, and life choices can be debated and discussed. In other words, gossip is, as Deborah Jones eloquently defines it, "a way of talking between women in their roles as women" (1980: 194). For the Cube readers, celebrity gossip magazines are enjoyable precisely because they provide for this type of talk. Research has shown that gossip helps participants to establish and maintain relationships (Coates, 1989), manage anxieties around group norms (Jaworski and Coupland, 2005), and provide emotional support (Jones, 1980); the readers who participated in this study report that gossip about celebrities allows them to benefit from *all* of these outcomes. Celebrity gossip magazines, therefore, offer their readers a type of sociable experience that their digital counterparts do not afford.

Further, this experience is uniquely targeted to women at a particular life stage and, as such, allows the Cube readers, and millions of other American women like them, to work through serious life issues in a way that is fun and enjoyable, sociable and safe. The notion of *working through* is a Freudian one which, in the clinical sense, describes the psychoanalytic process whereby patients repeatedly discuss the

same topics as a way of uncovering and managing repressed emotions. This concept, however, can also be applied to the mass media, as John Ellis makes clear in his (2000) study of television. According to Ellis, “television imbues the present moment with meanings. It offers multiple stories and frameworks of explanation which enable understanding and, in the very multiplicity of those frameworks, it enables its viewers to work through the major public and private concerns of their society” (2000: 74). Gossip magazines perform a similar function for their readers, providing a constant stream of repetitive narrative content that allows for a continuous working through of difficult topics. Perhaps one reason why women continue to read celebrity gossip magazines week after week, despite their uniformity and predictability, is because the reading experience provides for an opportunity to work through -- to consider, talk over, and come to terms with -- the anxieties and difficulties facing young women today. This opportunity to work through life challenges alongside other women is one element of celebrity magazine reading that the Cube women find particularly cathartic.

That is not to say, however, that celebrity gossip magazines offer young women a solution to their problems. Nor do they do seek to progressively affect the institutional structures and popular discourses that work to perpetuate unrealistic representations of femininity, even while they allow their readers to express their anger over these representations. The enunciative productivity, the opportunity for resistance, that the texts provide is, therefore, as Fiske points out, limited to the moment in which it occurs and does not typically result in real social change (Fiske, 1992:38). Similarly, Jones finds that when women engage in “bitching,” a form of gossip in which female participants express anger over their limited social roles, this type of conversation, though pleasurable in that it allows women to make “complaints in an environment where their anger will be understood and expected,” usually occurs amongst participants who generally do not expect social change (1979: 197). Indeed, as chapter four demonstrates, the Cube readers do take pleasure in bitching about the magazines, but they also express a sense of disappointment in the brevity of the conversations and the fact that, despite their discussions, images of femininity in popular culture remain, for the most part, largely idealized and stereotyped.

Do the conversations generated by celebrity gossip magazines, then, matter at all? Even if they do address the complex links between personal struggle and social change, what is the impact of this dialogue if it does not seek to address institutional or political structures of power? With these questions in mind, it may be easy to once again dismiss celebrity gossip magazines, and other popular feminine texts, for their inability to affect tangible or lasting social change; however, to do so would be to ignore the ways in which these texts provide their readers with an opportunity to confront and work through -- for as long as they need to, on their own terms, and in a way that does not take itself too seriously -- their own identities, relationships, and desires. Are celebrity gossip magazines empowering? Not necessarily. Still, the experience of fandom is, as Grossberg points out, generative in its own right:

Unlike the consumer, the fan's investment of energy into certain practices always returns some interest on the investment through a variety of empowering relations ... fans are empowered in the sense that they are now capable of going on, of continuing to struggle to make a difference. Fans' investments in certain practices and texts provides them with strategies which enable them to gain a certain amount of control over their affective life, which further enables them to invest in new forms of meaning, pleasure and identity in order to cope with new forms of pain, pessimism, frustration, alienation, terror and boredom. ... Fandom is, at least potentially, the site of optimism, invigoration and passion which are necessary conditions for any struggle to change the conditions of one's life (1992: 64-65).

In short, fandom, and the conversation generated by fans, provides for a way of managing and coping with the conditions of life as they really are. This affordance, though seemingly simple, is an important first step towards eventual change.

Here we must recognize that empowerment (like "private" life) is both personal *and* political. We can see it not only in marches and protests, in legislation and elections, but in the everyday lives of individuals who recognize that something is not quite right, yet continue to feel that they, truly, can continue to persevere in the face of adversity, to manage, to continue on, to share their ideas with others. These are the small steps, the personal triumphs, the coffee-break conversations and staffroom chats that often go unnoticed, but that are crucially valuable in the everyday lives of women. And so while it may, on the surface, seem unfathomable to claim

that celebrity gossip magazines can actually be empowering for women, it is only so unimaginable if we continue to view empowerment as a means to an end, instead of as an end in itself.

Still, celebrity gossip magazines remain deeply contradictory texts; at once highly pleasurable and incredibly frustrating to their audiences. This is not only true of these magazines, but also of many reality television shows, chick-lit, romantic comedies, and fashion magazines. Some might argue that the problematic nature of the popular feminine outweighs any potential for pleasure, that women should turn off *Real Housewives*, burn their copy of *The Notebook*, and fling the latest issue of *Elle* into the trash. But what good does that really do? Does it help us to reach a better future? Or simply eliminate the hope for pleasure in the present? “It is impossible to live solely with a feeling of discomfort,” writes Ang. “We cannot wait until the distant Utopia is finally achieved: here and now we must be able to enjoy life -- if only to survive. In other words, any uneasiness with the present, with the social situation in which we now find ourselves, must be coupled with an (at least partial) positive acceptance and affirmation of the present. Life must be experienced as being worth the effort, not just because a prospect exists for a better future, but also because the present itself is a powerful source of pleasure” (1985: 133-134).

Despite their “trashy” reputation, popular feminine texts are more than just mindless indulgences; they represent for their audiences an important opportunity for expression, dissent, and companionship. They serve as a discursive space in which the deeply contradictory nature of femininity and female life is acknowledged, valued, and made available for public discussion. Popular feminine texts also presume a preexisting, ever-linked female community of participants, providing their audience with a sense of connectivity and camaraderie while also encouraging face-to-face conversations between peers and friends. And so, in a very real sense, the popular feminine provides women not only with an opportunity for pleasure, but also with the opportunity to work through the challenges of the present. As audiences use their engagement with these texts to balance their frustration with the present and their hopes for the future, they may raise an eyebrow, they may speak up, they may

complain. In this way, the popular feminine serve a crucial task in helping female audiences to deal with the challenges of ordinary life.

But many questions remain unanswered. Do women really benefit from their ambiguous relationships with the magazines or with the popular feminine writ large? Or do the pernicious normative messages that are often deeply woven into these texts continue to perpetuate low-self esteem and cynicism, despite negotiated and contested readings? I still cannot say. Nor do I believe that answer will ever be fixed or clear. Still, I hope that this project proves that celebrity gossip magazines, and other popular texts for women, are not simply ideological traps, but complex worlds which both reflect and distort our own aspirations and points of view. And I hope that the fact that questions remain unanswered will encourage others to take up these texts, seriously and on their own terms, so that we might begin to retrieve the popular feminine from the margins of academic discourse.

¹ MRI Fall 2009, Spring 2011

² MRI Fall 2008, Base Adults

Appendix A: Reader Profiles

Amber is a 27 year-old, African-American college student who has been working in the guest services division of the Cube for seven years. Hailing from suburban New York, she enjoys listening to music, travelling, and spending time with her boyfriend and friends. Amber reads celebrity gossip magazines about five times each week.

April is a 26 year old, Caucasian supervisor at the Cube. Having earned her Associate's degree, April also works in the healthcare industry and reads celebrity gossip magazines three times a week.

Cynthia is an Italian American manager at the Cube. She is divorced, proud mother of three who discusses celebrity gossip on a weekly basis.

Danielle is a 33 year-old Cube director of West Indian descent who reads the magazines three to four times per week.

Helena is a 21 year-old, Caucasian Cube employee and student. Having earned her Associate's degree, Helena is currently completing work towards a Bachelor's degree in psychology. She reads celebrity gossip magazines three times a week.

Lisa is a 30 year-old Caucasian woman who has recently become engaged to be married and reads celebrity gossip magazines on her spare time.

Mary is a 33 year-old manager at the Cube. She has earned both her B.A. and Master's degrees and currently lives with her boyfriend in suburban New York. Although Mary only reads the magazines once a week, she discusses celebrity gossip with friends and coworkers on a daily basis.

Nikki is a 28 year-old, Hispanic student of language, literature, and culture. Nikki, who identifies as a gay woman, discusses celebrity gossip with her friends and coworkers daily.

Sasha, an African-American woman who declined to reveal her age, describes herself as an avid reader and animal lover. Having earned her Bachelor's degree, she now works as an educator at the Cube museum and says she reads celebrity gossip magazines "any chance I get!"

Stacey is a 37 year-old, Italian American lead-educator and program coordinator at the Cube. Stacey has earned a B.A. and Master's degree, is recently divorced, and reads gossip magazines about twice a week.

Stephanie is a 33 year-old African American mother of three, who has been happily married for twelve years. In addition to her work as an executive assistant at the Cube, she also owns her own business in the creative arts. Stephanie engages in discussions about celebrity gossip about three or four times each week.

Appendix B: Editor Profiles

Rob DeMarco is the former Senior Photo Editor of *Life & Style* magazine. Rob has worked in the photo industry for the past three decades, holding positions at *U.S. News and World Report*, *National Geographic*, *The New York Post*, and *Star Magazine*. He has also served as the editorial director for TimePix.

Sarah Grossbart earned a degree in journalism from Michigan State University in 2004. She became an editorial assistant at *Us Weekly* after having worked as an intern and staff assistant at the magazine.

Valerie Nome is a self-proclaimed fan. She developed an early interest in celebrity culture and, after a failed audition for the Mickey Mouse Club at age 12, decided to pursue journalism. A native of Ohio, She worked for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and the *Akron Weekly Journal* while earning a degree in journalism from Kent State. After college, Valerie took a job at MTV where, in 1998, she became the first person at the station to publish a full-length interview with Britney Spears. Valerie has since worked for *USA Today*, *Us Weekly*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Cosmo Girl*. She became the celebrity editor for *Ok! Magazine* in 2005.

Susanne Rieth grew up in Queens and Brooklyn and graduated from New York's Pratt Institute in 2003. She served as photo editor at *Star Magazine* from 2004-2007, before becoming photo editor at *Life & Style*. In 2010, Susanne left the photo industry to pursue a career in education.

Lauren Schutte, who hails from Texas, earned a degree in journalism from the University of Missouri in 2005 and, in 2007, was hired as assistant to *Us Weekly*'s editor in chief, Janice Min. The following year, Lauren was promoted to assistant editor at *Us*, a position she later left to join *The Hollywood Reporter* as a staff reporter. Lauren has also served as an assistant editor at *Bridal Guide Magazine*.

Joy Wood graduated from Vassar College in 2004 with a degree in English Literature and subsequently began work as an editorial intern at *Us Weekly*. A Michigan native, Joy returned to the state to pursue a M.F.A. in fiction at the University of Michigan, which she completed in 2008. She has since served as a writer in residence at the Santa Fe Art Institute and the MacDowell Colony.

Appendix C:
Content Analysis of Female Celebrities in Cover Stories by Age
November-December 2009

Name	Age at Time of Publication	Number of Appearances	Issues
Jaycee Dugard	18	1	IT 12-7,
Kristen Stewart	19	8	LS 12-7; Ok 11-2, 11-9, 11-16, 11-30, 12-7; S 11-9; Us 11-30
Amanda Arlauskas	20	1	IT 12-21
Taylor Swift	20	3	Ok 11-2, 11-16; Us 11-9
Rihanna	21	3	IT 12-7; S 11-2; Us 11-16
Elizabeth Smart	22	2	IT 12-7, 12-14
Mischa Barton	23	1	S 12-21
Lindsay Lohan	23	1	Us 12-14
Lea Michele	23	1	Ok 11-16
Audrina Patridge	24	1	Ok 11-2
Kendra Wilkinson	24	7	IT 11-2, 12-21, 12-28; LS 12-28; Ok 12-14, 12-28; Us 12-7
Khloe Kardashian	25	3	LS 11-30, 12-14; Ok 11-16
Molly Malaney	25	1	Us 11-9
Ashlee Simpson	25	1	Us 11-16
Kate Bosworth	26	1	S 11-16
Melissa Rycroft	26	3	IT 12-28; Us 11-9, 12-28
Carrie Underwood	26	1	Us 12-21
Jessica Biel	27	1	S 11-2
Leann Rhimes	27	1	LS 11-16
Britney Spears	27	6	LS 11-2, 11-16, 12-14; Ok 12-7; S 12-7, 12-14
Jodie Sweetin	27	1	S 11-2
Jessica Alba	28	1	Us 12-14
Beyonce Knowles	28	1	IT 12-7
Nicole Richie	28	1	S 11-2
Ivanka Trump	28	4	IT 11-9; LS 11-9; Ok 11-9; Us 11-9
Kim Kardashian	29	3	LS 11-2, 11-30; S 11-30

Minka Kelly	29	1	S 12-7
Elin Nordegren	29	5	Ok 12-28; S 12-7; Us 12-14, 12-21, 12-28
Jessica Simpson	29	6	IT 12-28; Ok 11-9, 12-14; S 11-9, 12-28; Us 11-16
Kate Hudson	30	1	LS 12-28
Kourtney Kardashian	30	5	IT 12-28; LS 11-16, 11-30, 12-28; Ok 12-28
Katie Holmes	31	9	IT 11-2, 11-9, 11-16, 12-7; Ok 12-7, 12-14; S 11-9, 11-30; Us 11-30
Kim Zolciak	31	1	IT 11-16
Alexis Bellino	32	1	S 11-30
Reese Witherspoon	33	2	Us 12-14, 12-28
Fergie	34	3	IT 11-16; LS 11-16; Us 11-16
Kate Gosselin	34	1	S 11-2
Angelina Jolie	34	15	IT 11-2, 11-16, 12-7, 12-14, 12-28; LS 11-2, 12-7, 12-28; Ok 11-16, 12-28; S 11-16, 12-14, 12-28; Us 11-30, 12-7
Abby Rike	34	1	LS 11-9
Rachel Uchitel	34	3	IT 12-21; Ok 12-21; S 12-21
Heidi Klum	36	1	Us 12-14
Tori Spelling	36	2	LS 12-21; S 12-7
Nicole Eggert	37	1	S 12-7
Gwenyth Paltrow	37	1	S 11-16,
Shuana Sand	38	1	S 12-7
Mariah Carey	39	1	S 12-7
Jennifer Aniston	40	7	IT 11-2, 11-9, 11-30; Ok 11-2; S 11-9, 11-30, 12-21
Jennifer Lopez	40	1	IT 11-30
Celine Dion	41	1	LS 11-30
Lisa Marie Presley	41	1	S 11-9
Nicole Kidman	42	1	Ok 12-14
Cindy Crawford	43	1	LS 11-30
Sandra Bullock	45	1	LS 12-21
Sarah Palin	45	1	IT 11-30
Vicki Gunvalson	47	1	LS 12-7
Oprah Winfrey	55	3	IT 11-30; LS 12-7; Ok 12-7

Thirty Nine Issues From November-December	IT=In Touch LS= Life & Style Ok= Ok! S= Star Us= Us Weekly Appearance= First or Last Name+ Photo on Cover
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