More Than Meets the Eye
By Katie Carrico

In the American culture, we are surrounded by images that demand our attention be focused on our bodies. In mainstream media our physique is constantly under attack. The effects from idealistic images seen on television, in magazines, and larger than life billboards can be devastating to perceptions of body type and attitudes toward the opposite sex. Cultural influence and misrepresentation within mass media persuades women to believe that they must be young, thin, and always submissive in order to negotiate their paths in life. These images also persuade men to believe that women are helpless, vulnerable and should be submissive. This is derived in part by the representation of women in media such as magazines that present fallacies regarding “normal” body types and protect binary gender roles. The message that is embedded within the media encourages sexual objectification of women and over-masculinizes men. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on Maxim, a popular magazine that specifically targets men as their audience.

What defines our ideas of sexual attractiveness? Our cultural influences play a role in defining expectations, attitudes, and ideologies about our sexuality and gender roles. Maxim magazine is published with the intent to reach younger to adult aged men. Upon examining the December 2011 issue, I found that sexual objectification of women and unrealistic portrayal of women’s body types is heavily accentuated. I admit that it is hard to remain objective when viewing these types of images as I have struggled with body dissatisfaction. Regardless, I was appalled and disgusted by what I found. Among the tasteless quotes from this magazine, some of the best include “Ready for a sexy smackdown? Kelly Kelly, the smoking hot WWE diva, is ready to put your heart in a leg lock. (We don’t know what that means the oxygen left our brains when we saw these pictures)” and “Hannah Simone—the breakout hottie from our favorite new sitcom, New Girl—makes smart sexy again” (48, 67). When did being smart stop being sexy? Interestingly, the author and photographer for the first article are both women.

While this magazine is filled with appalling images regarding idealistic beauty, one of the most insulting regarding body type is an ad for an electronic cigarette called blu. The tag line is “No Regrets.” The image contains a young, thin, handsome man who is slightly sitting up with his back against a wall in a bed puffing...
on his e-cig. Lying next to him is a large blonde woman with dark roots on her back wearing a black pleather outfit and smiling just a little. Her hair is blonde but she has very dark roots which suggest that she does not “keep up” on her appearance. The slogan offers a clean, healthier way to smoke: “With no odor and no ash, blu allows you to enjoy your habit anywhere with no regrets” (47). In their article “Master Your Johnson” Sexual Rhetoric in Maxim and Stuff Magazines, Krassas, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink open with a claim that “The media prescribe how we should look, with whom we should have sex, and how important sex should be in our lives” (98). The media culturally defines who we should be attracted to by advertising certain shapes of bodies and idolizing them to manipulate what is seen as normal. The media also shows us who we should not be attracted to by negatively depicting larger, closer to average looking people. This manipulation may lead men and women to seek out ideals which would clearly cause social anxiety and unrealistic expectations. Krassas, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink share that “[Scholars] argue that these depictions contribute to a construction of the beauty ideal which is unattainable for most women because they are not blonde or do not have pencil-thin figures” (102). So, if a woman is unable to live up to the standard that she is placing on herself due to this exposure, what happens to her? How does she feel? Is she supposed to be so preoccupied with her image that she does not pay attention to the world around her? Is she supposed to feel negatively about herself? Might she be easier to control if her mind is contently focused on her image? Hmmmm... Who is the architect constructing this beauty ideal and why?

Magazine covers are especially influential. People may not choose to purchase the magazine, but the image is still thrust into their vision by appearing on accessible shelves in gas stations, supermarkets, and numerous other public places. Little research has been done on magazines, however, authors Sammye Johnson and Susan Currie Clark explain that “The choice of whom or what to feature on a magazine cover is not only an editorial one, but can also be studied as a measure of the value and importance placed on any individual or group in society” (Framing Sex, Romance, and Relationships in Cosmopolitan and Maxim 3). This is understandable because the magazine wants to assure that it is sold, therefore, the most desirable objects are placed front and center on the cover. Regarding Maxim magazine, the primary audience is heterosexual men and the most desirable object is an unrealistic ideal of a woman who is culturally defined as the sexiest, skinniest, unattainable toy. This is a key aspect into understanding the type of value that is placed on women in our society.
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Simply flipping through the pages of this issue of Maxim magazine, threatening images of unrealistic social norms appear on almost every page. Every image of a woman within this magazine shows her almost completely nude and looking excited, happy, or aroused. It is comparable to soft pornography due to the explicit nature of the photographs. As an example, an article appears within the magazine presenting one of Maxim’s own employees. An office assistant, Johanna Sambucini, is shown with another woman, name unknown, clad only in bras and panties staged in extremely erotic poses. There are three images throughout the article. In one, Johanna is on bending knee in front of the other woman, both wearing high heels, applying some sort of oil to her leg. In another, both women’s buttocks are facing the camera as they playfully look back while Johanna is pretending to undo her “friend’s” bra. Finally, the third image shows us that Johanna loves to apply a shiny lip gloss to her “friend’s” lips. Is this what professional office assistants do in their spare time? Another example of objectification within this issue of Maxim is the image of Hannah Simone- the woman that “makes smart sexy again.” She is posted sitting on a carpeted floor, leaning up against a wall with her arms stretched above her head. Doesn’t sound too provocative, right? Maybe it wouldn’t be if she were wearing a shirt long enough to cover her entire breasts in this position. Maybe it wouldn’t be if she were wearing more clothing besides her underwear covering her bottom half. Instead, the attire she is wearing shows the entire bottom half of her breasts, midsection, and black panties. Simone is smiling and in a submissive position. Krass, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink describe a similar photograph seen in the October 2001 issue. The authors were referring to the close relation of images of women seen in Maxim as compared those seen in pornographic magazines. They state that “…Jolene Blalock [is depicted] sitting on a feather boa almost entirely nude. Her nipples are shielded from view by her long hair and she is in the process of pulling down bikini underpants. The lack of total nudity provides a veneer of acceptability that prevents Maxim and Stuff from being regarded as pornographic despite these commonalities” (105). The fact that the content in magazines such as Maxim and pornographic materials can be so closely related reassures us that sexual objectification of women is being presented to the audience of these magazines.

Objectification of both the male and female bodies is present in magazines such as Maxim and similar mass media vehicles. There are other social issues that can also be addressed such as sexuality as the means to promote consumerism, how this type of objectification brainwashes men into believing women are objects
to use strictly for their sexual pleasures, the impact this may have on self-esteem; the list of negative implications could go on and on. Unfortunately, exploring these issues is outside the realm of this paper; however, I urge you to ponder the ways in which our society would shift if we were to remove fake and submissive representations of women and overly masculinized representations of men. The media has declared a no-holds-barred attack on our bodies and their performances. They are winning with every rape, domestic violence case, and diagnosis of eating disorder. Where does the greed to sell stop and social responsibility begin? Social anxiety falls on the shoulders of both genders. Both men and women may be negatively affected by the representations of their genders in the media context due to the standards imposed on them. Regarding this particular examination, mass media uses our first amendment right to free speech to attack and manipulate our opinions about ideal body types. Instead of loving our bodies for what they are, we are persuaded to attempt the achievement of unrealistic bodies. Women are taught to see themselves as powerless possessions of men, not partners. Men are taught to see women as providers of pleasure, not people.