

A Content Analysis of Sexual Themes in *Playboy* Cartoons¹

Mala L. Matacin and Jerry M. Burger²

Santa Clara University

Critics of pornography have argued that the way men and women are portrayed in these media create images that can result in harmful gender socialization. The cartoons from all 1985 issues of Playboy were coded for the presence or absence of four themes that have been identified by these critics. It was found that, when these themes appeared, women were more often the victim of sexual coercion, were more often depicted as sexually naive and childlike, and were more often shown with a more attractive body than were the men in the cartoons.

It is now widely accepted that gender stereotypes can be generated from exposure to male and female models via many different mass media vehicles. Research to date has identified unequal portrayal of men and women in terms of typical social roles and stereotypic sex-linked characteristics in television commercials (O'Donnell & O'Donnell, 1978), television programs (Ross, Anderson, & Wisocki, 1982), magazine advertisements (Venkatesan & Losco, 1975), and children's toy advertisements (Schwartz & Markham, 1985), among other mass media outlets.

Recently, a large amount of research has been concerned with the way men and women are typically portrayed in another media—pornography. Most of this research has been directed at the question of how certain pornographic materials are related to violence against women (cf. Donnerstein, 1983). Although much of this research is concerned with the impact of blatant-

¹The authors wish to thank Mike Chambers, Bruce Healy, Cathy Thompson and Micheala Wilczynski for their help with the project.

²To whom reprint requests should be addressed at, Department of Psychology, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California 95053.

ly violent acts perpetrated against women, there are also critics of pornography who maintain that less obvious images of women in certain roles are responsible for creating and maintaining negative stereotypes of females as sexual objects available for male domination and exploitation (Brownmiller, 1975; Killoran, 1983; Lederer, 1980a). Brownmiller (1975) has described pornography as "male invention, designed to dehumanize women, to reduce the female to an object of sexual access" (p. 443). She has argued that, along with other forces, pornography is responsible for creating an image of women that is at least partly responsible for maintaining the high incidence of rape in this country.

Some content analyses of pornographic materials (Malamuth & Spinner, 1980; Smith, 1976; Winick, 1985) have found evidence for the presentation of some of these negative images of women. Malamuth and Spinner (1980), for example, found a significant increase in the number of pictures of women as the victim of violence in *Penthouse* magazine during the 1970s, although these represented only a small percentage of the pictures in the magazine.

The focus of the present investigation, however, is directed at more subtle presentations of men and women in these types of outlets. Specifically, we were interested in determining the extent to which certain images of men and women are portrayed in the cartoons found in popular men's magazines. Past researchers have argued that humor is a particularly subtle but effective means of communicating gender stereotypes (Chavez, 1985; Zimbardo & Meadow, 1974). Stereotypes about men and women, such as the nagging and gossiping housewife, woman driver, and helpless-in-the-kitchen husband, are exaggerated to enhance humor. Because these jokes are pleasant and widely accepted, it is difficult to see the harm or to take offense at them. However, for these reasons and because of the high circulation of some outlets of humor, they may be particularly powerful in communicating stereotypes. Zimbardo and Meadows (1974), for example, examined the cartoons and jokes in *Reader's Digest*. They found that, relative to jokes that portrayed men in a negative, stereotypic manner, there were a large number of jokes that portrayed women in these stereotyped ways. Chavez (1985) found that women were depicted in stereotypic roles in daily newspaper comic strips more often than would be justified by the actual number of women found in these roles.

Given the potential to communicate gender stereotypes through the hyperbole in humor, it is reasonable to speculate that the many cartoons and jokes in popular men's magazines might also be a source of the type of negative imagery of women that Brownmiller and others have criticized. A few past investigations have examined themes in pornographic humor. Palmer (1979) looked at themes in pornographic comic books, largely from

the 1930s and 1940s, and Chapman and Gadfield (1976) examined pornographic postcards in Great Britain. Although both investigations found evidence for the existence of derogatory images of women, the findings seem removed from today's debate about the impact of widely distributed pornography in the 1980s. Malamuth and Spinner (1980) examined cartoons in *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, but these were coded only for the presence or absence of overt violence against women.

Thus, the present investigation was designed to assess the presence of more subtle themes in the cartoons of a popular men's magazine, *Playboy*. *Playboy* was selected for two reasons. First, it is a very widely circulated magazine, thus having a much greater potential audience than more "hard-core" publications. Second, it was the subtlety of the images of women in the more respected *Playboy*, in contrast to other sources, that was of interest. As with humor, the respectability of *Playboy* (e.g., an interview with presidential candidate Jimmy Carter) may give it the appearance of being above the criticism aimed at pornography generally. Indeed, a case can be made that *Playboy* should not be labeled "pornography" at all, that the images of women it presents are not at all similar to those in more obviously "pornographic" publications. However, there are those who disagree with this (Lederer, 1980b).

Four themes were identified from past research and from critics of pornography and men's magazines: seduction, exploitation, naivety, and body image. First, it has been argued that women are often presented in these materials as the nymphomaniac (Brownmiller, 1975), who is exceptionally eager to have sex with men. It is argued that this presentation can lead a man to believe a woman he encounters is more interested in pursuing sexual relations with him than she actually might be. Abbey (1982) found evidence that this image of women does exist among college males. The men in this study were more likely than the women to misinterpret another woman's friendliness in terms of seductiveness and flirtation. Tieger (1981) found that a significant predictor of men's reported likelihood of committing a rape was their belief that rape victims acted seductively and enjoyed the rape. If this theme is communicated through the cartoons in *Playboy*, then it was expected that the female would be shown as the person doing the seducing more often than the male when seduction was portrayed in the cartoon.

Closely related to seduction is the theme of exploitation. As used here, this refers not only to forcing sexual attention upon another physically, as in rape, but also in taking advantage of an inequitable power relationship, such as when a boss pressures a secretary to have intercourse with him through implications that her job might be in jeopardy if she does not consent. Kanin (1984, 1985), has found evidence for exploitation-oriented sexual attitudes among date rapists, whom he describes as "sexually predatory." He found

that these men frequently use "sexual exploitation techniques," including attempts to intoxicate the woman and threats to leave her stranded, in an effort to obtain intercourse on a typical date. If this type of thinking is depicted in *Playboy* cartoons, then it was predicted that women would be portrayed as the victim of exploitation more often than men in the cartoons examined.

Brownmiller (1975) has identified sex with an innocent, virginal female as a common theme in pornography. Other critics have pointed out the frequency with which subtle images of young, childlike females as sex objects are portrayed in popular men's magazines (Lederer, 1980b). One consequence of the female's innocence and naivete about sexual matters is that she is seen as more vulnerable to the advances of a more sophisticated male. It was predicted that, if this theme is being portrayed in the magazine, that females would be more often shown as sexually naive than would the males in the cartoons.

Finally, the female models used in men's magazines have been criticized for having excessively attractive bodies (Lederer, 1980b). It is argued that these models are presented as standards for physical appearance that nearly all women will fall short of—standards not required for the male models or male readers. Although cartooning styles often depict both male and female characters in less than desirable physical shape, it also is the case that cartoonists often utilize caricature, which might exaggerate subtle differences in the perceived attractiveness of the character's bodies. Thus, if these different standards are being expressed in the cartoons, it was expected that when there is a male and a female character in a cartoon and one has a significantly less attractive body than the other, it will more often be the male who has the less attractive body.

METHODS

Stimulus Materials

The stimulus materials for the study were all of the cartoons found in the 12 issues of the 1985 *Playboy* magazine. This included all one-frame cartoons and short multiple-frame cartoons, with the exception of the long multiple-frame cartoon *Annie Fannie*, which appears regularly in the magazine. The latter cartoon feature was not included in the study because its series of changing scenes and characters did not allow for easy coding within the scheme described below.

Procedure

Two undergraduates, one male and one female, were trained as judges. Both were kept naive about the hypotheses of the study. Each judge rated

Table I. Coding System for Four Themes^a

| | |
|--------------|---|
| Seduction | Scene in which sexual activities are initiated. One person should be identifiable as the persuading party. The scene should be coded only if the sexual encounter is at the initiation stage. Implicit suggestions or sexual innuendos toward the potential partner are also considered as seduction. |
| Coerciveness | Scene in which the man or woman exerts pressure or force against his or her partner to engage in any type of sexual activity against the partner's will. A person taking advantage of a power/status difference in a relationship (such as boss and secretary) to pressure the other into sexual activity is to be coded as coercion. |
| Naivete | Scene in which an adult male or female is shown as being sexually naive or inexperienced. The naive person may come across as childlike and very young compared to the experienced partner. Because of this naivete, the person may be seen as vulnerable to sexual advances or being taken advantage of. |
| Body shape | Scene in which a man or woman's body is drawn as being less than sexually desirable (overweight, old, dirty) as compared to the person of the opposite sex in the scene. |

^aA more complete description of the coding system is available from the authors.

each cartoon independently. First, the cartoon was judged as either sexual or nonsexual in content. Next, the presence or absence of each of the four themes was coded for the primary male and female character in each cartoon, according to the coding scheme shown in Table I.

RESULTS

Cartoons were first divided into those with and those without sexual content. The two judges agreed on this classification in 260 of 262 cases (99.2%), and the two authors were used to make the judgment in the case of disagreement. It was found that 101 cartoons (38.5%) did not contain a sexual theme, and these were then dropped from the study.

Each remaining cartoon was then classified into one of three categories (present for male, present for female, not present) for each of the four themes. If both judges agreed on the classification, that category was assigned to the cartoon. Judges' agreement rates for the four categories were: seduction, 92%; coerciveness, 94%; naivete, 95%; and body shape, 87%. Where disagreements occurred, the two authors decided the classification.

The frequencies with which each classification occurred were then examined. As shown in Table II, these frequencies ranged from 16.8 to 3.7%

Table II. Number of Cartoons Depicting Themes for Males and Females^a

| Theme | Present for male | Present for female | Percent of all sexual cartoons with theme |
|--------------|------------------|--------------------|---|
| Seduction | 11 (40.7%) | 16 (59.3%) | 16.8 |
| Coerciveness | 6 (100%) | 0 (0%) | 3.7 |
| Naivete | 1 (10%) | 9 (90%) | 6.2 |
| Body shape | 13 (76.5%) | 4 (23.5%) | 10.6 |

^aFigures in parentheses indicate the percentage of the cartoons within that theme coded for the male or female character.

of the sexual cartoons. The major purpose of the study, however, was to examine the extent to which the depiction of men and women along the lines of the four themes was equivalent. If males and females are shown, for example, to be the victim of coerciveness an equal number of times, then we would expect the frequencies of the present-for-male and present-for-female classification to not differ significantly from 50%. Binomial tests thus were conducted to test this for each of the four themes.

As shown in Table II, females were depicted as the initiators of seduction more often than were males when this theme occurred. This frequency did not differ significantly from 50%, however. One hundred percent of the time, when a coerciveness theme was shown in a cartoon, it was the male who was the initiator of the coerciveness. This amount did differ significantly from what would be expected by chance, $p < .016$. Ninety percent of the time when naivete was shown in the cartoons the female character was the one depicted as sexually naive and vulnerable, $p < .011$. Finally, when there was an inequity in the general attractiveness of the man's and woman's bodies, it more often was the case that the male would have the less desirable body, $p < .025$.

DISCUSSION

The findings provide support for the notion that popular men's magazines contain subtle images of women that critics have identified as harmful to women. In interpreting these findings it should be kept in mind that the vast majority of the cartoons in *Playboy* did not contain any of the four themes examined here. Although about one in five sexual cartoons (19.3%) depicted the woman as either acting seductively, the victim of coercion, or sexually naive, how "significant" this percentage is remains a subjective assessment. Another caution in interpreting the findings concerns how representative *Playboy* is of other popular men's magazines. It generally is

acknowledged that *Playboy* is less hard-core than other popular magazines, such as *Penthouse* or *Hustler* (Lederer, 1980b). As such, although no data were collected from other magazines, it might be argued that the images examined here would be found less frequently in *Playboy* than in some of the other publications. It is not, of course, possible to argue from these data that the subtle images of women found in men's magazines cause men or women to behave in any way differently from those who do not read the magazine. Given the tremendous number of sources of socialization about gender roles and sexual attitudes, it is unlikely that the cartoons by themselves play a very large role. The data presented here should instead be seen as an illustration of the presence of one source of this socialization.

The data do lend support to those who argue that men often are exposed through men's magazines to images of women that lead to unhealthy interactions between men and women. In the most extreme case, it is argued that certain negative images of women in pornography can facilitate the act of rape. Men consistently exposed to media that present women as, for example, highly interested in sexual activity and as the target of coercive actions might begin to approach heterosexual relations in the type of sexually predatory ways described by Kanin (1984, 1985). However, this type of casual link is a very difficult one to establish empirically. For example, it might be easily argued that the negative images of women identified by critics of pornography are the *result* of societal attitudes and values rather than their shapers. At any rate, the findings from the present study provide additional evidence for the existence of these images in subtle form in at least one widely distributed men's magazine.

REFERENCES

- Abbey, A. Sex differences in attributions for friendly behavior: Do males misperceive females' friendliness? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1982, 42, 830-838.
- Brownmiller, S. *Against our will: Men, women, and rape*. New York: Bantam, 1975.
- Chapman, A. J., & Gadfield, N.J. Is sexual humor sexist? *Journal of Communication*, 1976, 26, 141-153.
- Chavez, D. Perpetuation of gender inequality: A content analysis of comic strips. *Sex Roles*, 1985, 13, 93-102.
- Donnerstein, E. Erotica and human aggression. In R. Green & E. Donnerstein (Eds.), *Aggression: Theoretical and empirical reviews*, Vol. 2, New York: Academic Press, 1983.
- Kanin, E. J. Date rape: Unofficial criminals and victims. *Victimology*, 1984, 9, 95-108.
- Kanin, E. J. Date rapists: Differential sexual socialization and relative deprivation. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 1985, 14, 219-231.
- Killoran, M. M. Sticks and stones can break my bones and images can hurt me: Feminists and the pornography debate. *International Journal of Women's Studies*, 1983, 6, 443-456.
- Lederer, L. *Take back the night: Women on pornography*. New York: Morrow, 1980. (a)
- Lederer, L. "Playboy isn't playing" An interview with Judith Bat-Aba. In L. Lederer (Ed.), *Take back the night: Women on pornography*. New York: Morrow, 1980. (b)

- Malamuth, N. M., & Spinner, B. A longitudinal content analysis of sexual violence in the best-selling erotic magazines. *Journal of Sex Research*, 1980, *16*, 226-237.
- O'Donnell, W. J., & O'Donnell, K. J. Update: Sex role messages in TV commercials. *Journal of Communication*, 1978, *28*, 156-158.
- Palmer, C. E. Pornographic comics: A content analysis. *Journal of Sex Research*, 1979, *15*, 285-298.
- Ross, L., Anderson, D. R., & Wisocki, P. A. Television viewing and adult sex-role attitudes. *Sex Roles*, 1982, *8*, 589-592.
- Schwartz, L. A., & Markham, W. T. Sex stereotyping in children's toy advertisements. *Sex Roles*, 1985, *12*, 157-170.
- Smith, D. C. The social content of pornography. *Journal of Communication*, 1976, *26*, 16-24.
- Tieger, T. Self-rated likelihood of raping and the social perception of rape. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 1981, *15*, 147-158.
- Venkatesan, M., & Losco, J. Women in magazine ads: 1959-1971. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 1975, *15*, 49-54.
- Winick, C. A Content analysis of sexually explicit magazines sold in an adult bookstore. *Journal of Sex Research*, 1985, *21*, 206-210.
- Zimbardo, P. G., & Meadow, W. *Sexism springs eternal...* in the *Reader's Digest*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western Psychological Association, San Francisco, 1974.