

*COSMO* ACROSS CULTURES: A VISUAL TEXTUAL  
ANALYSIS OF *COSMOPOLITAN* WEBSITE IMAGES IN THE  
UNITED STATES AND THE NETHERLANDS

by

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*Cosmopolitan*, recognized globally for its information about sex and sexuality, is now published all over the world. *Cosmopolitan* claims that it adjusts its publications to fit the local culture around sex, so as not to simply export American ideas. The goal of the present study is to determine if *Cosmopolitan* website articles show cultural differences between the United States and The Netherlands. To do so, this study analyzes accompanying images used in articles that exist on both the US and Dutch *Cosmopolitan* Websites. The sample of images was selected by identifying, with help of translators, which articles existed on both websites in April 2013. These images were then analyzed for lighting, location, action, models, framing, clothing, and gender display codes to determine the similarities and differences between them. The results of this study suggest that *Cosmopolitan* does not change how it represents sex and sexuality to fit the different attitudes between the US and The Netherlands.

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## Project Description

As an American, I am interested in if American ideals are exported to different cultures through American media, particularly media concerning sex. Americans have a history of sexual repression (Foucault 26), where even the discussion of and use of sexual anatomical terms is considered vulgar. Exporting these ideas of sex as taboo to such a large global audience could have a negative impact on other countries' culture around sex and sexuality. For example, the Dutch talk openly about sexual intercourse, sexuality (e.g. sexual orientation, erotic interests), and the consequences of unsafe sex as part of their sex education, both private (in the home) and public (public health and sex education) (Schalet 16). This open, respectful dialogue has had a positive impact, helping lower pregnancy and STD rates in the country (1). As the export of American media content grows, thanks in large part to ease of access through the Internet, it could threaten this open system. In 1993, France famously tried to limit the export of American movies into the country, fearing that the globalization of American media meant "American values are being exported within the media like soldiers in a Trojan Horse" (Olsen 3). This theory of media globalization, then, would apply to all forms of media all around the world.

Brown (2004) researched how the media impacted young girls, and that research showed that young people are influenced by the media they consume, and that they purposefully seek out sexual information from mass media. The media they consume becomes, as Brown refers to it, a kind of "sexual super peer" which girls turn to when uncomfortable or embarrassed to talk to another person (426). Much sexual media that shows sexual scenarios does not discuss safe sex and/or does not discuss the possible

negative consequences of sex. The messages young people receive from such images are that it is acceptable for them to have sex, often without much thought to the possible outcomes (423). The media these young girls consume helps shape their beliefs about sex and sexuality, what is and isn't acceptable, and what is and isn't expected of them. The messages they receive are often not in their best interest (427). Because of the amount of sexual content today's adolescents are exposed to in all media forms, and because of the critical developmental time in which they are viewing it, media has the potential to shape the beliefs of adolescents about gender, sex, and sexuality (Bleakley 2008). My research asks: Do the images used in articles on the US and Dutch *Cosmopolitan* Websites represent differing sexual beliefs and cultural attitudes about sexuality in the United States and the Netherlands, or do the images simply export American attitudes about sex?

This research is important because adolescent sexuality is influenced by many different sources, including public health, private discussion, and media (Durham 194). Dutch society has found a way to talk about sex with their young people, and have effectively lowered the rates of teen pregnancy and STDs (Schalet 1). However, as young people are exposed to new and different media, they may be receiving mixed ideas as to what is appropriate, or how to deal with different sexual situations. Knowing how the media represents sexuality, especially media such as *Cosmopolitan* that people turn to specifically for sex and relationship information, could help inform another aspect of public education about sex and sexuality.

I chose to look at *Cosmopolitan* specifically because it has a worldwide readership and has become a globally recognizable brand. It has a huge readership in



the United States (in June 2014 it had a circulation of over 3 million) (auditedmedia.com), and has been widely welcomed and read in countries across the world (Zimmerman). In The Netherlands, it has a circulation of 93,158 (hearst.nl). The US *Cosmopolitan* Website has 20 million unique visitors a month (hearst.com), whereas The Netherlands site has 850,000. *Cosmopolitan* Netherlands has a wider circulation than other Hearst exports in the country, including Elle, Harper's BAZAAR, and Women's Health. Besides Elle, with which it ties, its Website has more unique visitors than Hearst's other Dutch sites as well.

*Cosmopolitan* magazine is the largest-selling young women's magazine in the world, with distribution in more than 64 countries (Zimmerman). *Cosmo*, which is owned by the Hearst Corporation, changes the magazine's content and format from country to country in order to fit local tradition and culture. Most of the magazine's covers, though, look the same (or are even recycled), and the subjects of sex and relationships are still prevalent, if not in big bold letters, on the front cover (Zimmerman). The magazine's first international edition was published in Britain in 1972 to phenomenal success (Machin 457), and the magazine and brand have expanded over the last 40 years to be published in 35 languages in more than 64 countries, the most recent of which were several Middle Eastern countries including Saudi Arabia and Qatar (Zimmerman). If, as *Cosmopolitan* claims, the content within the publication is changed to fit different cultures, many articles either won't be featured or will be changed in certain international publications to fit the cultural attitude towards sex and sexuality. The purpose of my project is to compare images on the US *Cosmopolitan* Website with an international version, the Dutch *Cosmopolitan* Website, to see if they

have adjusted to fit cultural beliefs, or if they are exporting American ideas to other cultures. I chose these versions because, on the one hand, the US is still fairly sexually repressed, meaning that sex is something that is not typically openly discussed. There are many different sexual acts and activities that are perceived as wrong and offensive, - especially among teenagers - but are still seen in the media (Schalet 2). Though we have freedom of speech, there are still many sexual words and images that are censored, especially from children because the sexual topics are deemed “inappropriate” for them (Cohen 251). For example, in 2012 Representative Lisa Brown was banned from speaking on the Michigan House of Representatives floor after saying the word “vagina,” an everyday, anatomical term deemed “offensive” by other lawmakers (Brown CNN). While the media consistently feature sex and sexuality, it is still considered taboo in everyday life.

The Netherlands, on the other hand, is considered one of the most sexually progressive countries in the world in terms of sexuality and sexual health (Schalet 2). The purpose of this study will be to see if *Cosmopolitan* exports American ideas and standards, or if it, in fact, alters its international publications to fit ideas and beliefs about sexuality in a given culture. The Dutch have their own version of *Cosmopolitan* to read, so they would have little reason to read an American *Cosmo* with Americanized sexual content. However, if their version is not adjusted to their culture and is simply exported American content, meaning our repression of sex and sexuality remains intact, it could be harmful to the Dutch attitudes about sex, sexual health, and sexuality. Specifically, I will look at the pictures associated with Web articles that appear on both the US and Dutch Websites and examine what differences in sexual culture those

pictures present. I will base my analysis on categories drawn from Jason Bainbridge's *Textual Analysis and Media Research*, and gender coding based on Goffman's *Gender Advertisements*. Goffman's gender codes fit in to four categories: Function Ranking, Feminine Touch, The Ritualization of Subordination, and Licensed Withdrawals. These codes help to reveal gender and power dynamics in images.

The Internet has not been around for very long, and the legitimacy of using the Internet to conduct research is still being debated (Madge 92). However, many agree that, as the use of the Internet rises, we must be able to adapt and take advantage of it. The Internet allows us to share information around the world and lets us glimpse into the lives of others. We are, then, bombarded with different media from all over the world, and must learn (and teach) how to make sense of the words, images, and noises that come with the Internet (Crovitiz 49). Crovitiz argues that nothing on a (professional) Internet site is accidental, and that every element, including images, must be looked at to discover the connotations behind them (50): "... the explosion in Web-based content and communication the last few years combined with youth culture's embrace of these developments make it vital that we consider the academic potential of these new texts" (49). This research asks whether the images used in articles on US and Dutch *Cosmopolitan* Websites reflect each culture's differing beliefs about sex and sexuality, or if the images represent exported American attitudes. I predict, based on the above mentioned analysis models and the male gaze theory (discussed below), that the images in the Netherlands version of *Cosmopolitan* will be similar to those in the US and will not reveal any significant cultural differences. I will then look at what this means in terms of sexuality and culture.

## Literature Review

### US and the Netherlands

Schalet has studied differences between the United States and the Netherlands, asking the question “how is it that two countries similar in terms of wealth, education, and reproductive technologies have the highest and lowest rates of teen pregnancy respectively, in the Western world” (1). Over the first ten years after modern contraceptives (e.g. hormonal birth control pills) became widely available in the 1960s, the Dutch public moved from a more “traditional” society (in terms of sexuality), towards the much more progressive society it is today (3). Dutch healthcare played a huge role in the transition, as did religious messages. Instead of calling for abstinence and parental control, the Dutch public health system “has given adolescents the right *and* the responsibility to make decisions about their sexual behavior and reproductive health” (4). With the introduction of this new policy in the mid-1960s, the teenage pregnancy rate decreased rapidly, and the country now has the lowest teen fertility and abortion rates in the world (4).

The United States, on the other hand, has remained conservative in attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Unlike the Dutch, who openly accepted modern contraceptives such as hormonal birth control, there are still debates in the US about the availability – and morality – of using birth control, as evidenced by the many laws being written in places including Arizona and Texas, among others. Sex and sexuality are still more taboo subjects, things to be discussed quietly behind closed doors, and

many are embarrassed to discuss sexual subjects (Houston). Teenage abortion rates in the US are among the highest in the Western world (Schalet 2).

The focus of Schalet's research is on adolescent sexuality, but her findings reflect broader cultural attitudes towards sex. Schalet conducted in-depth interviews with 130 subjects: 58 parents of teenagers and 72 teenagers 15-17 years old. All subjects were either Dutch or American. The interviews covered a wide range of topics involving relationships and sex. The article "Why Must We Fear Adolescent Sexuality" focuses on one specific question: "Would you permit X to spend the night with a girlfriend or boyfriend in his or her room at home?" followed by reasoning questions such as "why?" "why not?" and "if not now, when then?" (6). Schalet then dissected the answers of the American and Dutch parents and analyzed the social and cultural reasoning behind their answers. Nine out of 10 American parents said no to the question, while nine out of 10 Dutch parents said yes (or said that they already had). These differences were attributed to the American "dramatization" and the Dutch "normalization" of adolescent sexuality (15).

The study's answers were divided into three categories that corresponded with the most prevalent answers for each country. The American categories are: (1) Raging hormones out of control, (2) The battle between the sexes, and (3) Not under my roof. The Dutch categories are: (1) Self-regulation, (2) Sexuality within relationships, and (3) Normal sexuality.

The first category for American respondents is "raging hormones out of control" (7). As the category's title suggests, American parents believe that their kids, both boys and girls, are driven by hormones and are unable to make decisions because of them.

They believe that their children will forget safe sex in a flood of hormones, and that it is therefore the parents' job to contain and direct them. Some parents even believe that letting their children and their significant others be home alone is "awfully tempting" (7), and set strict rules on when children can see their boyfriends/girlfriends, where they can meet, or if the door needs to be open. These rules keep children from making a "huge mistake" (7), the consequences of which would be all but forgotten in the moment due to teenage hormones.

The second category for American parents is "the battle between the sexes," which is the widely held belief that boys want sex and girls want love (though many parents are skeptical teenagers are capable of "real love") (8). This belief suggests that teen males only want to have sex, and that females will have sex with them to keep them around, not because they actually want sex too. The image of a concerned father who carries a shotgun around his daughter's boyfriend comes to mind, and several respondents mention that protective duty. Again, parents feel it is their job to protect their kids in romantic relationships, and to reel things in when they go "too far."

The third category for Americans is "not under my roof." This is the idea that, if their child is going to have sex, it's not going to happen at home. This same idea was even mentioned by more liberal parents, who have educated their teens about sex, or even supplied them with contraceptives. As one respondent said, "there is a time and a place. And it's not at home" (9). Many respondents openly admit that this rule often has to do with their own discomfort, some stating that even after their child has moved out, they shouldn't expect to bring somebody home and have them sleep in the same bed. Many said that their children would have to prove themselves as independent from

their parents (either financially and/or otherwise) before they would allow them to have sex in their home.

The Dutch categories Shalet's research found are quite the opposite from the American categories, though the represented issues seem to coincide. Whereas the American parents worried about raging hormones, Dutch parents believe that their children, when educated properly, are able to self-regulate their sexualities. Thoroughly educating their children about sex and sexuality will give them the knowledge they need to make their own decisions about sex. Dutch parents rely on their children's ability to recognize when they are ready for sex on their own, and they let their children's sexualities develop at a slower rate. While American parents may expect their children in brand new relationships to start thinking about and wanting sex, Dutch parents say that they let their children's significant others sleep over long before they ever started having sex. Most did say, however, that part of what made them so comfortable with it was having known the significant other for a while and that, if their child brought home somebody they had never met for a sleepover, they would be more hesitant and more likely to say no. When asked whether he worried about his daughter getting pregnant or contracting an STD, one Dutch father said: "no... I think she knows very well what matters and what can happen and that if she is ready, I would let her be ready" (11).

The next category is sexuality within relationships, which has several components. Unlike American parents, the Dutch do not mention gender differences or conflicts between boys and girls regarding sex (12). They believe that teenagers are fully capable of "real love" and that love, more than hormones, makes them ready for sex. In fact, only one Dutch respondent mentioned hormones at all. Many parents

explained that, while interested in others from a young age, their children did not start to become ready for sex until they started dating and bringing home the same girls or boys regularly. In fact, these parents expressed negative attitudes towards casual sex, and said they would not permit sleepovers for what they believed would be a one-night stand. Allowing sleepovers is not a right among Dutch teens, but a privilege built on trust and responsibility.

The final category for Dutch parents is “normal sexuality,” which is the belief that sexuality is natural and “can be discussed openly between family members without embarrassment or shame” (13). Dutch families aim to create an open dialogue about sex, and invite questions from their kids. They believe sex is normal and should therefore be discussed normally, as they would any other subject. This dialogue helps parents too, who, as with American parents, sometimes become uncomfortable at the thought of their child being sexually active. The dialogue allows them to normalize sex, instead of dramatize it and try to control it, as American parents tend to do.

Widmer (1998) conducted a study concerning attitudes toward sex in 24 different countries, including the US and the Netherlands, which covered premarital sex, teenage sex, extramarital sex, and homosexual sex. It found that, while non-Western societies value chastity in a potential partner, Western European countries, including the Netherlands, do not. There is a strong acceptance of premarital sex in the Netherlands, while the United States was polarized, where the population had either a strong disapproval or a strong acceptance. This does not include adolescent sex, however. The United States showed a very low acceptance of adolescent sex, and the Netherlands were somewhere in the middle. Most countries (18 of 24) view homosexual



sex as *always wrong*, but two thirds of the Netherlands population believed there was nothing wrong with it (352). Widmer attributed the Netherlands' acceptance of homosexual sex to the "Dutch open-mindedness on sexual matters," the Dutch Christian communities redefinition of homosexuality as a "personal issue warranting Christian compassion" rather than a sin, the long history of the Dutch homosexual movement, and the "candor and coverage of sexual topics in the mass media" (356).

The ideas and attitudes towards sex discussed in this analysis are determined by the above-mentioned studies, a documentary, and an interview with someone who has experienced firsthand the differences between US and Dutch attitudes towards sex. These attitudes include the openness the Dutch people have towards sexuality and discussing sex (Schalet), the acceptance of different sexualities (Widmer), and the Dutch preparedness and acceptance of birth control (Houston). Planned Parenthood employee Joanne Alba spent time in The Netherlands studying their public sexual health campaigns and interviewing Dutch citizens about sexual topics. Alba's research found that the Dutch tend to see sex as one of many parts of a relationship, and teach about sex in that context.

The present study combines elements of the above, including differences in approaches to sex education and health and examined differing cultural beliefs about sex, to determine if *Cosmopolitan* alters articles to fit the local culture as it has claimed. For example, if the Dutch do not believe, as Schalet says Americans do, that there is a gender power differences in sexuality, does the Dutch version of the magazine include or eliminate the idea that female sexual power comes from her ability to please her partner (as the Machin article suggests)? And what implications does this have in terms

of the Dutch attitude towards sex and sexuality, especially among adolescents, as discussed in the Schalet and Widmer articles? I will be looking at previous research from a new angle by including the influences of exported American attitudes and by not only analyzing the *Cosmopolitan* Webpage images, but by analyzing the *differences between* the Webpage images.

### **Cosmopolitan**

There has been a lot of research on *Cosmopolitan* magazine and, though much of the research is based on the US version, there are also a few studies that examine international publications (Machin). Research topics on the magazine include its effect on feminism in the 1970s (Machin & Thornborrow 467), its rapid success under Brown's leadership (McMahon 381), and its effects on women readers in terms of body image and attitudes towards sex (Machin).

Machin and Thornborrow analyzed 44 unidentified international issues of *Cosmopolitan* from November 2001. They looked at the language and visuals in women's magazines in general, and at *Cosmopolitan* in particular to discuss the magazine's brand and core values. They argue "what *Cosmopolitan* sells to its readers are not magazines, but independence, power, and fun" (Machin and Thornborrow 454). They are highly critical of *Cosmopolitan* and women's magazines in general for several reasons: (1) women are portrayed as sex objects—even when they are portrayed as being daring and dangerous, the acts represented in women's magazines are based on traditional sex roles, (2) women are portrayed as doing trivial things— this can be seen in all parts of magazines, from high fashion photo shoots to advertisements, where women are seen, "posing in a field ... looking thoughtful, cupping rainwater," (3) they

are damaging to women's self-image— they present distorted views of themselves and what and who is around them (455).

The researchers analyzed the language in the 44 different versions of the magazine, and how what was said contributes to and supports the company's moniker "Fun Fearless Female" (462). This is the most critical part of the analysis, and the language used is often the reason people outside of academia are also critical of the magazine. The goals of the "fun, fearless female" (also called the *Cosmo Girl*) according to *Cosmopolitan's* language, is to feel sexy and confident in bed, give amazing orgasms, and get what she wants (462). The main criticism of *Cosmopolitan* and its language is that, though it promotes sexual freedom and taking control, the main goal of a *Cosmo Girl* is to please men. Some examples of this from the 44 magazines analyzed include the following quotes: "the following tips will enable you to be the sexy goddess that your man dreams of," "his reaction made me feel so powerful," and "I'm sure most men I've been with since feel very lucky to be with a partner who really enjoys doing one of their favourite moves (oral sex)" (464). In the world of *Cosmopolitan*, sexual power for women comes only from pleasing her partner. They say about the textual evidence from the 44 magazines:

The textual features that contribute to the branding of the fun, fearless female are, on the one hand, constructing her as having agency, power, and the confidence to get what she wants, but on the other hand, constructing her as naïve, in need of basic instruction and driven by the need to please a man. (465)

Their analysis yielded several conclusions: women are portrayed as oriented toward social interaction instead of having technical or creative skills or intelligence;

women are fundamentally alone and must manipulate or please others; women's agency comes from their bodies and sexuality (468).

McMahon (1990) also studied the American version of *Cosmopolitan* magazine and analyzed the represented gender roles and how sexuality portrays power relations. She studied 38 issues from 1976-1988. This analysis found that articles in the magazine could be put into six general categories. In order of number of articles, high to low, those categories are: relationships with men; lives of celebrities; explicitly about sex/sex advice; beauty, diet, health; psychological problems/advice; and work and money. Sex often crosses over into all of the categories.

In general, the articles about relationships with men discuss what kind of man to seek and to avoid, what women and men look for in relationships, and domination and subordination in a relationship and what it means to each partner. Articles in *Cosmopolitan* often frame women as in competition with each other, and invoke fear and insecurity in readers' that they don't live up to the fantastical standards presented in the magazine. The sex advice articles then use these fears they created by asking women to either compare themselves to other women or to compare their experiences to what "real men" have to say about their relationships and sex lives (McMahon 390).

McMahon found that *Cosmopolitan* articles present two opposing aspects of the "ideal" woman, or the *Cosmo Girl*. She is both romantic and conservative, and sexy and wild, both the virgin and the vamp. "In this context, femininity, reduced to sex, must be honed to a weapon to be used in what amounts to guerrilla warfare" (395). These representations of women are consistent with the male

gaze theory, introduced by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey in 1975. The male gaze theory predicts women are presented in media as if seen through the eyes of a heterosexual male. This gaze puts men in the more powerful position as the gazer, while women are passively gazed upon (442). Through this gaze, women are often sexually objectified, made into a fantasy woman whose importance is placed more in her appearance than in her personality or actions. The pervasiveness of this in modern American media forces women to take on this gaze as well, seeing other women – and themselves – through the eyes of men, thus placing more worth in looks and sex appeal than other aspects of themselves (Mayne 19). The present study is concerned with whether or not these ideas are exported to other cultures through *Cosmopolitan*.

## Methodology

This research is a visual textual analysis (close reading) of the US and Dutch *Cosmopolitan* Websites, where I specifically analyze images associated with Web articles on both sites. To determine which articles existed on both sites, I got help with translation from a Dutch woman named Roos Kentie, whom I connected with after reaching out on social media, and a Dutch student at the University of Oregon named Martijn Wolthers, whom I was connected with through the University's International Office<sup>1</sup>. They translated article and slide titles and provided summaries of all articles in the Sex and Love subsection of the Dutch Website. Based on their translations, I was able to identify which articles existed on both sites in April 2013, so chosen because it was the most recent set of articles post-Valentine's Day, and because this research is focused on modern media and culture. The analysis of these images will focus on the race of models, framing, lighting, locations, model gender, clothing worn, and actions between subjects in the photographs, categories modeled from Jason Bainbridge's *Textual Analysis and Media Research*. These analyses are also coded according to Erving Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* and are used to determine any differences or similarities that reflect respective cultural beliefs about sex.

Gender displays, as discussed in Goffman's *Gender Advertisements*, refer to the use of stereotypical gender roles portrayed in advertisements and public images (1). These displays typically function to show interactions between genders or to show how one gender is viewed by another. These gender display codes include, for example, a man possessively wrapping his arm around a woman (55), or a woman

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<sup>1</sup> Names changed for anonymity

passively looking away from a man (63). Men are typically larger or are placed higher in these displays (43), and women are often touching themselves in some way (31). These codes represent men as more powerful and aggressive, while women are shown to be weaker and passive, which Goffman refers to as “The Ritualization of Subordination” (40). The gender display codes put forth by Goffman are used in this research to help determine how both the models and situations used in *Cosmopolitan* Web article images treat gender and displays of sexuality.

Visual textual analysis is “the most basic way of finding out something about the media’s meaning,” and images often add to the message being sent (van Leeuwen 13). Images in advertisements help show products and ideas that firms are trying to sell. Sex in advertising – something that has been around for decades and shows no signs of slowing down – gets strong reactions from viewers and thus helps sell products (Reichert 1). Sexual images are often unrelated to the product being sold, but they catch people’s attention and hopefully help viewers remember the brand that goes with the image (though that is not always the case) (Reichert 12). Sexual images in advertising are “attention getting, arousing, affect inducing, and memorable” (Reichert et al. 13). Sexual images have an emotional impact on viewers, and can shape and change attitudes towards brands, though the appeal of these ads are influenced by who is viewing them, the content of the advertisement, and the relevance of sexual appeal to the product (Reichert et al. 14). Similarly, magazines commonly use their companion Websites in order to attract more people to their print publications (FIPP 4). As a magazine largely about sex, the *Cosmopolitan* Website contains a variety of sexual images used not only within articles, but also to draw people into the Website and to

encourage them to read further. The images vary in their sexual content but, as with advertising images, cause an emotional, arousing response in readers. The heteronormative images, when used by *Cosmo*, are aimed at young women and show what is supposed to be ideal to women and sexy to men (McMahon 395). The images, then, tell what is considered ideal and sexy in each culture, and what *Cosmo* believes women should aspire to be (Machin 461). Visual analysis compares and contrasts the articles' images and show and how they differ between the US and Dutch versions. This may help to show varying ideas and attitudes towards sex and sexuality. This study uses visual textual analysis to determine whether cultural beliefs about sex are reflected through the images in the Dutch *Cosmopolitan* Website, or if the images simply export American beliefs.

Wakeford says that the Web can be analyzed in many different ways because it is a mixture of so many different parts, from cultural representations to computer code. One can study who is visiting which Website and when, or one can study what Websites are telling us about people, culture, and material things (31). Wakeford says "several branches of social science are advancing the use of visual material, which holds much promise for the investigation of the graphics-laden new media" (32). Researchers use traditional methods of film and photography analysis as well as newly developed research methods to look at digital visual messages. "All of these media developments can be used as a resource for new studies of new media" but also, according to Wakeford, researchers must acknowledge that Web research is a rapidly changing and progressing field. Questions must be asked, he says, about research design, data selection and collection methods, and other research methods, and these questions



“cannot be sidestepped however ‘virtual’ the data collection” (33). While there are major differences to consider in Web-based research, it is important and valid to research the Web and its images because they are such a huge part of our lives, and people are receiving messages from the Internet just as they are from other forms of mass communication (Wakeford 33).

In research on political figures in online images, Ozel discusses past research and says there are two main methods with which these images have been studied: (1) investigating the use of digital photos and how they improve the quality of messages, (2) researching the relationship between the intention of Website producers and what purpose the specifically chosen images serve (1014). The latter method is most relevant to the present study, and applies social science theories to Web images to determine “the ways in which Website authors use images to induce the involvement of site visitors” (1015). Ozel says that Website image analysis has been used in many different fields, including tourism, and studies have found that Web images have a positive correlative relationship with both how viewers see Websites and how viewers see subjects of online photographs (1015). For example, they found that in tight political races, candidates “tended to present more visual images on their Websites to better convey their central campaign messages” (1015). While Ozel says there are still issues to be discussed with online research, there is a proven relationship between Web images and messages people receive, and is therefore a necessary and important field of study.

Visual textual analysis involves looking at both the denotation and the connotation of a given image (van Leeuwen 93). Denotation is simply what the picture *is*- the subject, his/her/their actions, location, and clothing. The denotation is the literal

message an image is sending, and does not require viewers to think deeply about what is going on in a photograph (van Leeuwen 94). Some parts of an image may be unknown to a viewer, but can still be recognizable (e.g. an unfamiliar tool or uniform), and a broader generalization of an image or elements of an image do not necessarily harm how a viewer sees it. Stereotypes and exaggeration help emphasize the points of an image and are often used to help gain its meaning more quickly (van Leeuwen 96). The number of people in a photograph, their distance from the camera, surrounding text, and other parts of an image “provide visual clues for viewers as to what an image is trying to achieve” (van Leeuwen 96).

Connotation is the second, more conceptual layer of visual analysis. It means taking the image apart and analyzing it for symbols and deeper meanings. Connotation can come through cultural ideas a subject or action represents, specific image techniques, and other connotators (van Leeuwen 97). The frame used, distance from the camera, lighting, and focus are all parts of an image that give it connotative meaning, and a textual analysis of images looks at these and other aspects when “reading” an image. While a denotative reading looks at an image and says “this subject is thin,” a connotative reading will look at *why* the subject is thin. What is the deeper meaning? What does this say, for example, about beauty standards? Is this promoting health or thinness? Is it critical of or is it praising thinness? What, if anything, does it say about being overweight? Connotative meaning can be represented by what a subject is wearing, their posture or pose, or the type of shot and what is and isn’t showing in the image. Analyzing an image, then, looks at what these connotators stand for and determines what the image is saying (van Leeuwen 98).

Visual textual analysis is beneficial because visual clues are the oldest form of communication (Howells 1), and even today can be just as useful as words (such as gender images on restroom signs in foreign countries) (2). Humans communicate through more than just words, and it is important to understand all aspects of what is being communicated to viewers, including both words and images. There is much to be learned from an image beyond what it *shows*, and what it *says* is often just as important. Howells and Matson state: “although images may be seen as primary sources for the study of what has been shown, all visual texts are primary sources for the study of their makers” (3). However, because it is qualitative and not quantitative research, visual textual analysis is not exact, and different people may interpret an image in different ways (van Leeuwen 99). While there are generally accepted connotative meanings to certain poses, lightings, or angles, connotation is symbolic, and therefore not as certain as denotation (van Leeuwen 97).

## Analysis

Both the US and the Dutch *Cosmopolitan* Websites divide their articles into several different categories which include “Sex and Love,” “Health and Beauty” and “Quizzes.” Both publications’ Websites have a “Sex and Love” section which, on the US Website, is divided further into subsections such as “Relationship Advice,” “Sex Advice,” and “Sex Q&A,” and the number of articles for each topic is much larger than the number of Dutch articles. In April 2013, there were seven identical or nearly identical articles on both Websites with little to no differences, and those articles are (as listed by their US English titles): “Will Tofu Steaks and Leafy Greens Really Turn You On?,” “10 Things You Don’t Know About Kissing,” “Why Sex is Good for You,” “7 Things Guys Never Notice During Sex,” and “6 Weird Things That Affect Your Relationship.”

The first article that appeared on both the US and Dutch *Cosmopolitan* Website is called, in English, “Will Tofu Steaks and Leafy Greens Really Turn You On?,” and discusses which foods effect a person’s sex drive. On both Websites, the images for each slide all have pictures of food against a white background. However, the pictures that accompany the title in the article lists differ.

On the United States *Cosmopolitan* Website, the title picture is of tofu cubes against a white background (Figure 1). The article is about how certain foods affect one’s sex life, yet focuses on the food instead of the sex. The Dutch title picture, on the other hand, features a white couple in a kitchen, where the woman is sitting on a counter and the man is standing next to her smiling and spraying whipped cream into her mouth. The lighting is soft and romantic, and the atmosphere is relaxed and comfortable

(Figure 2). In coding according to Goffman's *Gender Advertisements*, this is an example of Function Ranking, where the woman is receiving help from the man, in this case him feeding her, making him more powerful than her. They are of nearly equal size and take up roughly the same amount of space in the frame, sizing being a code within The Ritualization of Subordination.



**Will Tofu Steaks  
and Leafy  
Greens Really  
Turn You On? ▶**

Figure 1



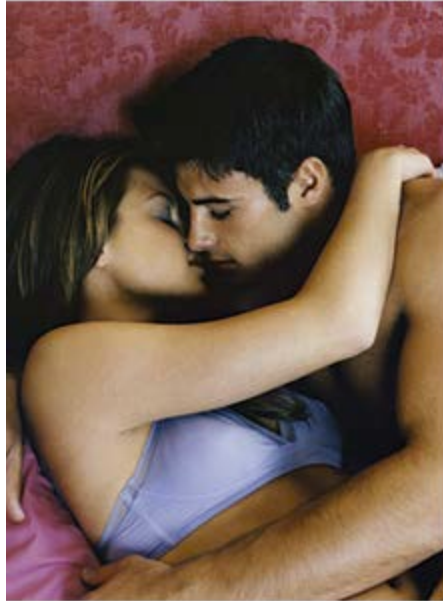
### Love Food

A visit to the supermarket and your Valentine can not go wrong. These foods ...

Figure 2

Another article that appears on both Websites is “10 Things You Don’t Know About Kissing,” and discusses little-known facts about kissing. Of the 10 pictures used in the US version, six of them feature couples embracing, their lips mere inches apart, and all at least partially undressed (Figures 3a-3j). The shots are from different angles and widths, but all are still intimate and romantic. The four photos that are not of a couple nearly kissing feature: a woman looking at the camera while a man kisses her neck; a couple standing in an indistinguishable location (perhaps a bedroom or hallway) with their arms wrapped loosely around each other; a couple sitting together in bed, the woman with her hands over the man’s mouth, both laughing; and three women lying on the floor looking seductively at the camera. All of the images in this article are sexy in one way or another, but they do not show much of a variety of sexual encounters. The emotions presented are intimate, fun, or purely seductive. There is little range of activity, framing, or lighting between the photographs, giving a mostly uniform idea of what kissing should look like. Gender codes in this series fall into the categories of The

Ritualization of Subordination, as seen in most images by the men being higher, larger, and in front of the woman in the frame. Only three of the images feature the woman as larger, higher, further forward than, or equal to the man.



*Tamara Schlesinger*

Figure 3a



Tamara Schlesinger

Figure 3b



Figure 3c





Figure 3d



*Ruy Sanchez Blanco*

Figure 3e



*Tamara Schlesinger*

Figure 3f



Figure 3g



*Tamara Schlesinger*

Figure 3h



*Beith Stufenberg*

Figure 3i



*Beth Studenberg*

Figure 3j

The Dutch images, while still featuring many nearly-kissing couples, show more variety of situation, including several pictures of people out in public (Figures 4a-4j). This article features four images of people kissing and/or embracing in bed, one couple in a shower, one in a car, and one in what appears to be a restaurant. The final three images feature: a couple kissing in front of a window, fully dressed in nice clothing; a red envelope, inside of which is a piece of paper with a red lip print on it; and a young blonde woman sitting in front of a window. Most of the pictures featuring couples can also be coded within The Ritualization of Subordination, with men higher or larger as well as through smiling models, some on both men and women, some just on the women. Figure 4i can also be coded for Feminine Touch, in which a woman touches herself or an object in a light caress.

REAL GUILTY. FINE DIVORCE.



Figure 4a

2. FORTY PERCENT OF MEN SAY ...



Gerelateerde artikelen

Figure 4b

*Tekstbewerking: Anne Broekman.*



Figure 4c



Figure 4d





Figure 4e



Figure 4f

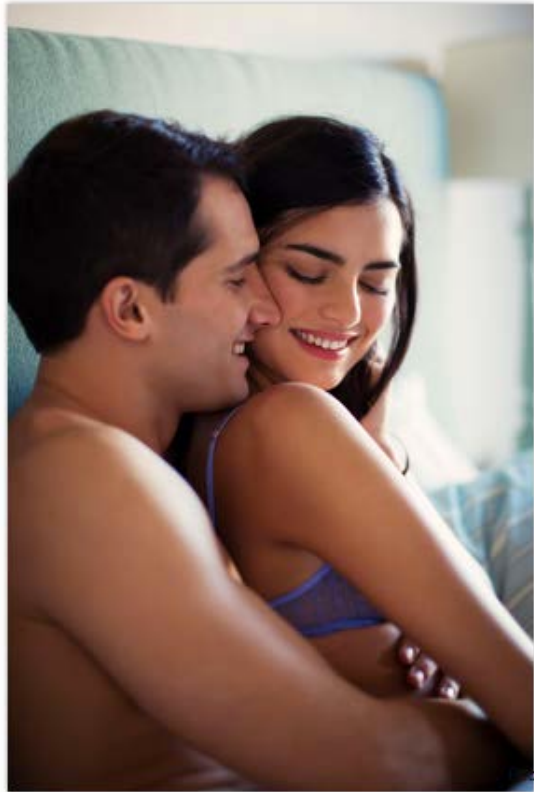


Figure 4g



Figure 4h





Figure 4i



Figure 4j

The next article that appeared on both the US and Dutch Websites is called (in English) “Why Sex is Good For You.” Three of the seven pictures used in the American article are similar: they feature couples (including the only non-white couple in the article) embracing on a bed and nearly kissing (Figures 5a-5g). The images are in various shot-widths, but all take place in white or generic bedrooms with soft, romantic lighting (as do all images in the article). The other images show couples in some other sort of intimate embrace, including cuddling and kissing foreheads or cheeks. One image shows the woman sitting atop the man, her head thrown back and his hands around her waist, which is arguably the sexiest picture of the article. The lighting is the

same throughout, the coloring is similar, and the models all have the same body types and conform to typical western beauty standards. The Ritual of Subordination is present throughout most the images, seen through women being lower or smaller, have their faces obscured while the mans is visible, or showing more emotion on their faces than their partners, all of which are signs of subordination. Four pictures show woman lying on top of or higher than their partners, and in two pictures their partners are hardly visible, a reversal of normal gender advertisements.



Figure 5a



Figure 5b



Figure 5c



Figure 5d



Figure 5e



Figure 5f



Figure 5g

The Dutch version of the article contains similar images, yet with some subtle but important differences (Figures 6a-6g). As with the American version, all images feature a couple (again all but one are white) in intimate poses, some nearly kissing, some simply embracing. The lighting is again romantic in all but one image, where the

couple is outside. The major difference in these pictures, however, is the settings in which they take place. Only four of the seven take place in white and otherwise generic bedrooms. One image features a couple kissing outside, and they are partially hidden behind a tree. Gender codes are varied within the images, and those within *The Ritual of Subordination* and *Licensed Withdrawal* sometimes switch genders, with normal male codes found in the woman and vice versa. One image shows the woman taking up more space in the frame, but her actions are all subordinate in nature: she is being nuzzled by her partner while curled on his lap, her eyes drawn to his chest where she absently rests her finger. Looking away from him withdraws her from the situation while her partner is focused completely on her. Snuggling and nuzzling, codes within *Licensed Withdrawal*, are featured in several photos in this article. However, one shows a woman higher than her partner who is smiling into her neck while she smiles at the camera – the power is hers in this situation due to his smiling and lower position in the frame, and her openness to the viewers, opposing normal gender codes.



Figure 6a





Figure 6b



Figure 6c





Figure 6d



Figure 6e



Figure 6f



Figure 6g

Figure 6c features a couple standing back to chest, the woman in front and standing in her bra. They are standing on what appears to be the outdoor walkway at a hotel, since viewers can see other doors and rail behind the couple, as well as what appears to be another person in the hallway in the background. Gender codes include

The Ritual of Subordination and Licensed Withdrawal. Her standing in front would suggest the power is hers; however, her boyfriend is touching her possessively. He is watching her while she closes her eyes, a sign she is withdrawing from the situation. 6d shows a couple kissing in a bathtub, hair wet and bubbles on their skin. The man is larger and on top, an arm wrapped around her neck, all codes belonging within The Ritualization of Subordination.

The differences in images become more pronounced in the final two articles this research analyzes, and the images will therefore be analyzed one by one. The first article is called “7 Things Guys Never Notice During Sex,” and the American version opens with the image of a pretty, thin, blonde, white woman sitting naked on a white bed in a light grey room, and the slide is titled “Your Extra Lbs” (Figure 7a). She has one leg to the floor, her toes pointed, and the other leg bent and resting on the bed frame. She covers herself with a white blanket, looks shyly at the camera with light makeup and styled hair. This image is used as both the introductory and the first slide image. Gender coding falls within The Ritualization of Subordination, and include her sitting on a bed with her knees bent. She is also lightly touching her hands together, a form of Licensed Withdrawal.



Figure 7a

“Your Extra Lbs” US Website

The Dutch article has a different introductory image than the first slide, and I will therefore discuss both here. The introductory image features a white couple, the man kissing the woman’s neck while her head is thrown back and she is smiling, perhaps even laughing (Figure 8a). Gender codes include Licensed Withdrawal, her head tipped back and withdrawing from the situation. It also includes The Ritualization of Subordination, seen in her huge smile opposite the serious, intent face of her partner. The first slide image features a white couple cuddling in a white bed, morning light coming in through the window behind them (Figure 8b). The couple is talking and she is smiling at him, lying on his chest while his arms are wrapped around her. She, too, shows subordination through her big smile and that she is looking away from his eyes.

His arms are wrapped possessively around her, part of The Ritualization of Subordination, and he looks her directly in the eye.



Figure 8a

Article Introduction Image - Dutch Website



Figure 8b

“Your Extra Lbs” Dutch Website

The next image in the US version, a slide title “Your Breast Shape,” shows a straight-on view of a topless blonde woman, hair styled and makeup done (Figure 7b). She is wearing nothing but blue shorts, and is pressing her breasts together between her arms, one of which is crossed over her chest, while the other is holding her thigh. She looks down at her breasts and appears to be examining them, sizing them up, and judging them. She is looking away from the camera, which views her directly, part of Licensed Withdrawal that takes her out of the situation, in this case being gazed upon and judged. She is also caressing her arm, the Feminine Touch presenting her as delicate.

The Dutch image, in contrast, shows a couple lying on a bed, both smiling as their lips almost touch (Figure 8c). Her hair is done and she is wearing a small, lacy bra.

The man is hovering over her, shirtless. They are in the left half of the frame and on a white bed. She lays underneath him, a code of The Ritual of Subordination, and her face is hidden behind his, a code within Licensed Withdrawal.





Figure 7b

“Your Breast Shape” US Website



Figure 8c



“Your Breast Shape” Dutch Website

The next slide, “Your Bacne,” features, in the US version, a woman of indeterminable race wearing white cotton underwear with black lace with what appears to be a French phrase written across the back (Figure 7c). She is topless and standing with her back to the camera, her arms wrapped around herself hiding her breasts as she looks over her shoulder directly into the camera. Her makeup is minimal, if there is any at all, and her hair appears brushed but not styled. Though she looks straight into the camera instead of away from the situation, she is caressing her arm, self-touch being a gender advertisement under Feminine Touch. The corresponding Dutch image is perhaps the most different image of all looked at in this study. In it, a woman in the left half of the frame sits up on her hands and knees on a bed, reaching one arm out and grabbing the boxers of a man who is walking out of the right side of the frame (Figure 8d). She is in a black bra and panty, and he is in tight black boxers. His head and shoulders are outside the frame. The background is a deep purple curtain with a matching chair, and the lighting is harsher than in other images. She has a big smile on her face – Ritual of Subordination – and her face is scrunched as though she is yelling or laughing loudly, part of Licensed Withdrawal.



Figure 7c

“Your Bacne” US Website



Figure 8d

“Your Bacne” Dutch Website

The next slide is “Your Hair and Makeup,” and, in the US version, the image is a close-up of a couple, the woman in front and the man out of focus behind and below her as she straddles his lap (Figure 7d). Her hair and makeup are both done, and he is pulling a strap off of her shoulder. The Ritualization of Subordination is partially reversed in this image, with her above him and bigger than him. However, he is also touching her possessively, a normal gender advertisement within this category. He is also undressing her, part of Function Ranking in which he helps her do a simple task. Codes within Licensed Withdrawal are also seen in her looking away. The Dutch image features a black couple, the woman facing the man, who’s back is facing the camera (Figure 8e). They appear to be nearly kissing, but the angle makes it hard to determine. The shot is a bit wider, showing them from their waists up, and the background is white with soft lighting. She is wearing makeup and her hair is curled. She is above him, a reverse within The Ritual of Subordination, and is facing the camera while we only see the back of his head, though she is looking away from his face, a part of Licensed Withdrawal.



Figure 7d

“Your Hair and Makeup” US Website



Figure 8e

“Your Hair and Makeup” Dutch Website

The final slide, entitled “Your Stubble,” features a smiling woman straddling her partner’s hips (Figure 7e). She is sitting up so we can see her whole body, while he is lying down and we see very little of him at the bottom of the frame. He is white and she is of indeterminable race and is wearing a lacy white bra and grey panties. She is touching his abdomen and looking at his body, and her hair appears to be in mid motion, swung in front of her. The lighting is soft. She is smiling widely above him, a code within The Ritual of Subordination. She is looking away from his face and down at her finger, which is brushing his stomach, a gender code within Licensed Withdrawal.



Figure 7e

“Your Stubble” US Website

The Dutch counterpart is an intimate image of a couple in bed, with white sheets and a grey headboard (Figure 8f). The light is from the far left, so the man, who is on his elbow next to the woman, blocks the light from her, giving himself an angelic glow over his blonde head. She is lying at the bottom of the image, her shoulder blocking some of the half of her face we see. The angle is from near the bottom of the bed at the side, looking up at them from an odd angle. His position above her and bigger than her in the frame code this photo as part of The Ritualization of Subordination.



Figure 8f

“Your Stubble” Dutch Website

The US version includes two more slides than the Dutch version, so those images were not analyzed because there is nothing to compare them to.

The final article is “6 Weird Things That Affect Your Relationship,” and has perhaps the most meaningful differences in the images presented. The first slide in the US article is “Your Weight,” and the image is of a woman, shown from the waist down, standing on a scale with her hands on her hips (Figure 9a). She is wearing a white shirt

and pink underwear and is standing in an all white room. Because only a small portion of her lower body is shown, the image is unable to be coded according to Goffman's *Gender Advertisements*.



Figure 9a

“Your Weight” US Website

The Dutch photo, in comparison, draws little attention to weight and more attention to health. The image shows a black woman kneeling behind a table and smiling at the camera (Figure 10a). In front of her is a balance scale, where one plate is holding fruits and vegetables and the other chocolate and other sweets. The plate with the healthy food weighs more than the sweets plate, reminding viewers of which is more important for health. Coding for this image falls into the categories The Ritualization of Subordination, through her smile, and Licensed Withdrawal. Within

withdrawal we see her looking straight into the camera and engaging with her viewers, a reversal of roles. However, her face is partially obscured due to her being behind the balance scale, another sign of her withdrawal.



Figure 10a

“Your Weight” Dutch Website

The next slide is entitled “Your Guy’s Parents.” The US image features three models smiling for the camera in a close up—the man is on the left, his mother (presumably) in the middle, and the woman on the right (Figure 9b). All three look happy—it is a posed picture that could be on anybody’s cell phone, or could be put in a scrapbook. In this photo, the man is slightly higher in the frame than the two women and all three are smiling, all signs within The Ritualization of Subordination. The Dutch picture features three laughing women, two men (presumably father and son), of which only the father is laughing. All of them are dressed well and holding champagne (Figure 10b). The son, in the center of the photograph, looks annoyed, like he’d rather be anywhere but there. In this image, the young male is low in the photograph, no smile on



his face as he looks away from those around him, a partial reversal within The Ritual of Subordination in his position in the frame.



Figure 9b

“Your Guy’s Parents” US Website



Figure 10b

“Your Guy’s Parents” Dutch Website

The next slide is entitled “Your Commute” in English, and features two very different pictures. The US picture features a blonde woman in business casual clothes standing in the center of a bus, holding on to a pole for balance, and looking out the window (Figure 9c). There are several other commuters behind her, all standing closely together on the bus and all wearing business clothing. It feels cramped with so many people standing so close together, none looking at each other but instead looking in various directions. It is unfriendly and realistic, as none of them are very done up in terms of hair and makeup. It looks like an image you would see on social media from an annoyed commuter. Gender coding in the image includes Licensed Withdrawal in the girl averting her eyes from her situation and looking out the window instead. The Dutch image is quite the opposite, featuring a beautiful model in high-end clothing and accessories, her hair done perfectly as she talks on her phone with a laptop and snake-skin purse in front of her on a table (Figure 10c). She is the only person in a large room

of long tables with chairs. Codes include Licensed Withdrawal, as seen through her being on the phone and looking away from the computer. It also includes Feminine Touch, one hand resting lightly on the laptop.



Figure 9c

“Your Commute” US Website



Figure 10c

“Your Commute” Dutch Website

The next slide is “Your Contraception.” The US features an extreme close-up of a circular pack of birth control pills (Figure 9d). It is simple and matter-of-fact, showing a full pack of the pills and nothing else. Because no people are featured, it cannot be coded by for gender advertisements. The Dutch version, however, shows a woman with styled hair and heavy makeup putting a pill in her mouth (Figure 10d). She holds a compact, her lips in the mirror on top, and a large pile of different pills on the bottom. The model looks out of frame, her expression wary, as if she is sneaking the pill and looking out for anybody who might see. Her gender codes include Feminine Touch, her fingers almost caressing the pill in her hand, as well as Licensed Withdrawal, represented in her hiding from whomever she is wary of behind her compact full of pills.



The fifth slide is titled “Your Cell,” and is the most accusatory of the American photos. It shows a couple lying in bed, but not together (Figure 9e). The woman is in the foreground of the photo, her feet on her pillow and her head at the foot of the bed. She is propped up on her elbows with a cell phone in her hand, smiling down at whatever is on the screen. The man is in the background, out of focus, and at the head of the bed. He is sitting up with his arms resting on his knees and looking at the woman with an annoyed expression. Gender coding in this image fall into the categories The Ritualization of Subordination and Licensed Withdrawal. She is lying on a bed, her knees bent behind her and smiling into the phone, all signs of subordination. Her attention to the phone rather than her surroundings shows her withdrawal from the situation.



Figure 9e

“Your Cell” US Version

The Dutch version shows a man in the center of the photograph, though farthest away from the camera, sitting shirtless in a chair and on his phone (Figure 10e). However, out of focus in the foreground is a shirtless woman who is taking off her bra,

and his attention is fully on her. His interested expression implies he is about to hang up the phone and give up the conversation in order to be with the woman. The gender codes in this image are a reversal of what is normal, giving the power to the woman. Several of the gender codes in this image are reversed, including the Licensed Withdrawal in his being on the phone and The Ritual of Subordination in his sitting on a chair, lower than her in the frame.



Figure 10e

“Your Cell” Dutch Version

The final slide in the article is “Your Dog,” and in the US version shows a woman lying on her back in bed, fully clothed, cuddling with her dog (Figure 9f). She is smiling at the camera and appears to be having fun bonding with her dog, which is content in her arms. It is a fun picture, from the dog to the woman’s smile to the bright green walls. However, gender coding reveals several forms of subordination, including her lying on a bed, upside down in a silly posture, and smiling at the camera. The Dutch image is similar, with a couple outside with their small dog, the man holding it and the

woman bending over to kiss it on the head (Figure 10f). They are both smiling and happy, much like the woman in the US picture. The codes in this image give power to the man who is standing erect and higher in the frame while she lowers herself down to the dog's level, a sign of subordination. Licensed Withdrawal is also present in her position behind the dog, and Feminine Touch is seen in her light touch around the dog.



Figure 9f

“Your Dog” US Version



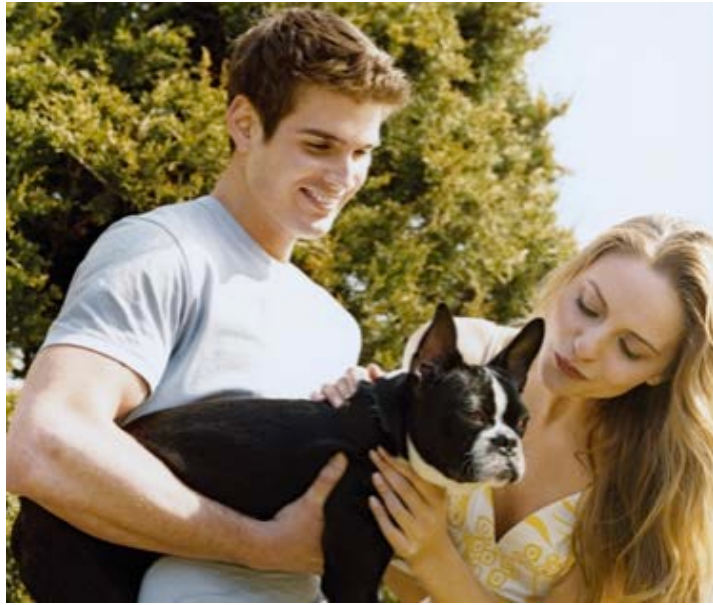


Figure 10f

“Your Dog” Dutch Version

## Discussion

There were only five articles at the time of this study that existed on both Websites *and* are nearly or exactly the same. The images that accompany those articles are also nearly or exactly the same. With a few exceptions, the images are overwhelmingly similar in many aspects, including lighting, situation, models, and sexist devices used, including the male gaze and the virgin and vamp dichotomy. There are many repeated gender codes as well, including The Ritualization of Subordination, mostly seen in subject positions within the frame, and Licensed Withdrawal, seen in models looking away from their significant others and the situation they are in together.

The images used in the article “Will Tofu Steaks and Leafy Greens Really Turn You On?” (Figures 1 and 2) clearly reflect the differing attitudes towards sex in the US and The Netherlands. By focusing solely on the food, the US image shows American society’s beliefs about sex as something hormonal, as Schalet’s article suggests, and as something separate from relationships. The Dutch picture combines sexuality and relationships, as Schalet’s article also says is common in Dutch beliefs about sex. The fact that the whipped cream he is feeding her is phallic in shape adds a deeper sexual element, so he is not only helping her eat, but also showing his power through his implied sexuality. The Dutch society sees sex as one aspect of a bigger relationship, with hormones having little to do with it. The picture of a couple having fun together with food reflects that belief, and puts the content of the article in context for readers to apply to themselves and their lives. The Dutch image changes the article from arbitrary facts to something relatable to one’s relationship, keeping the two parts—sex and relationships—together, whereas the US picture separates the two. This goes along with

the conservative American beliefs about sex, keeping it separate from and unrelated to relationships rather than a part of a relationship, as the Dutch believe.

In the article “10 Things You Don’t Know About Kissing,” the latter image of three women laying sensually on a floor (Figure 3i) corresponds with the information in its slide (how many women have kissed another woman), but the revealing clothes and the seductive looks the women are giving the camera seem to be making a mockery of the information by injecting the male gaze on a subject that does not involve males. Their clothes and bodies make them look sexy and seductive, but they are not seducing each other, as the slide title might suggest, but instead they are being looked down upon and seducing the viewer, presumably a straight male. In the Dutch version of this slide (Figure 4i), the model is also seen through the male gaze, although the slide is about female/female intimacy. The male gaze in these particular images leaves viewers with a distinct message: girl-on-girl activity is strictly for the enjoyment of men. Instead of framing the act as one of sexual exploration and experimentation, or even strictly homosexual, it instead becomes about what type of same-sex acts men find sexy. The article is, of course, about kissing, which explains the repetitive situations. However, between the two articles, the images are largely similar and thus give a narrow definition of what is “right” or “acceptable” kissing behavior.

In the article “Why Sex is Good For You,” the images are all repetitive, featuring similar looking models in similar situations (Figures 5a-g). None of them stand out from the rest, giving the impression that these situations can happen to anybody, including the viewer. The Dutch images (Figures 6a-g) feature three scenarios that do not take place in the bedroom, one in the bathroom and two outdoors in public.

The scenarios depicted give viewers the distinct feeling that they have intruded on something not only private, but also secret. It is risky behavior to show affection to the extent these couples are in an outdoor, public setting where anybody could catch them. These photos, different from most of the *Cosmo* images, add excitement and intrigue to the situation. While these images show sexuality on a slightly broader scale than what is normal for the *Cosmopolitan* images, the couples are acting in much the same way as couples in other images. Through The Ritualization of Subordination and Licensed Withdrawal, these scenarios still show men having the power in the encounter and are not otherwise different from other scenarios *Cosmopolitan* presents.

The US image for the “Your Extra lbs.” slide in article “7 Things Guys Never Notice During Sex” (7 Things) features a single woman who is the picture of sexy innocence, the personification of the virgin or vamp dichotomy (discussed below), which is seen throughout *Cosmopolitan*’s articles and images (Figure 7a). She is not confidently sexy, but rather is looking for the approval of those viewing her, e.g. the straight male, forcing the male gaze on her – the focus of the entire article. The Dutch image (Figures 8b) differs in that it is fun and romantic and displays more carefree sex, which ties to the title of the article and appeals to a self-conscious audience. It says that, with the help of this article, the reader can get over their fears and perceived flaws and have the kind of sex this couple is having, which almost certainly draws readers in. It is the image of an ideal relationship, showing readers what they could have if they got over their insecurities.

The US slide “Your Breast Shape” (Figure 7b) from the 7 Things article shows a woman sitting in front of a window which, combined with the straight-on viewpoint of

the image, gives the impression that she is showing them off for another to look at and judge as well. The Dutch image (Figure 8c) shows a couple having fun together, not stressing about their looks and not being gazed at as the US image model is.

With the slide “Your Bacne,” the US model, like those before her, is seeking approval of those gazing upon her, baring her (clear-skinned) back, looking shy and almost unhappy while she is being looked at (Figure 7c). The Dutch image is the opposite, a fun moment between people obviously very comfortable with each other (Figure 8d). She is not worried about the acne on her back, as the US woman is, but is instead playing around with her partner, in the process nearly pulling his boxers off.

The US version of “Your Hair and Makeup” (Figure 7d) is intensely intimate, romantic and passionate, but the fact that the model is wearing makeup detracts from the “ what could be” aspect of it, like the Dutch images show, by having her be so confident while made up instead of how she naturally looks. The Dutch image (Figure 8e) is the same, putting the female model in makeup instead of leaving her natural, opposing the trend the Dutch images otherwise have of showing what a relationship could be like without the insecurities.

Overall, this article shows two very different kinds of images, looking at the topic from two different angles. The US images tend to feature insecure women who are blatantly being gazed upon by a male audience. They point out their perceived flaws and shyly ask for approval by the gazer, reflecting the way a viewer may feel about her own flaws. The Dutch images, on the other hand, feature couples who are very comfortable together in sexual situations. They show no insecurities, instead giving an

idea of what a relationship can look like when one gets over their insecurities and perceived flaws.

The final article is “6 Weird Things that Affect Your Relationship.” The first slide is Your Weight, and the US image features a female body, face obscured, on a scale (Figure 9a). The woman in the image has no face and therefore no identity—she is reduced to her body and her weight, giving exaggerated importance to those aspects of her, giving the impression that they are of high importance universally. The fact that she is the only color in an otherwise white photo also brings importance to her body and weight because it is the first thing a viewer’s eyes are drawn to and the only thing given any attention. The Dutch image is quite different, and features a woman behind a balance scale with health food on one side and junk food on the other (Figure 10a). The photo is non-judgmental and does not focus any attention on the weight or the body of the model, which is in fact largely obscured. “Your Weight,” then, is not so much about looks, but about health and how one takes care of his or herself. The stark contrast between the themes represented in the photos represent the contrast between not only how the US sees weight and health and how The Netherlands views it, but also what is considered sexy or desirable in the respective cultures.

The next slide is “Your Guy’s Parents,” and the US image features a social media-type photo of three people squeezed close together in the frame (Figure 9b). The article title suggests the relationship is strained in some way, but the image is of a happy relationship between the guy, girl, and (presumably) guy’s mom. It’s close and comfortable, with no problems in the relationship to be seen. The Dutch image features a larger group of people, girl and guy’s entire family perhaps, but the only one who is

unhappy is the guy (Figure 10b). Neither image is revealing as to why his parents would affect their relationship, instead choosing to show happiness and bonding between the girl and his mom.

The US image for the “Your Commute” slide is one of the most relatable of all the images, showing a woman on a crowded bus (Figure 9c). Anybody who has taken public transportation may even feel a bit of stress looking at the image due to their familiarity with the uncomfortable situation. The Dutch image isn’t one of a person on a commute, but instead gives a glamorous feeling, with a beautiful woman doing something different from the masses (Figure 10c). While the American model looks stressed and average while on her commute, the woman who is not caught up in rush hour public transportation looks poised and beautiful, and the differences show how commuting can cause someone stress and end up affecting a relationship.

The images for “Your Contraception” (Figures 9d and 10d) are strange in that they are the opposite of what you would expect them to be—the US, which has a stigma around birth control and does not universally accept it should be the image of a woman sneakily taking the pill, while the Dutch, who are much more open about sex and much more accepting of contraception, as shown in the documentary “*Let’s Talk About Sex*,” should be more matter-of-fact about the pill. These images are an unexpected reversal of what, based on each culture’s attitudes about contraceptives, one would expect to find.

The images for “Your Cell” differ greatly, the US image showing a woman ignoring her partner for her phone (Figure 9e), the Dutch showing a guy on a phone, though his attention is focused fully on his partner (Figure 10e). In the US image, the

fact that they are in bed gives the impression that he is looking for sex and she is not giving him what he wants. It puts the blame on the woman who is completely removed from her physical situation and not taking care of her partner's needs. She is ignoring him in order to be on her phone – which is its own code within Licensed Withdrawal – and not just for a quick text judging by their positions on the bed. She is fully ignoring him for the phone, and that is getting in the way of their relationship. The Dutch image doesn't show how the phone would get in the way of their relationship since he looks so eager to get off of it, but does still show a cell phone in an otherwise purely sexual encounter. The difference between the two is who has the phone and how they are reacting—the man is focusing his attention on his partners needs, the woman is not, which makes the American photo seem judgmental towards women's phone habits and, by extension, the stereotypical habits of ignoring men's needs for their own.

Erving Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* discusses how individuals are presented in images, both by themselves and in their dynamics with others. The gender codes he presents serve to represent the power each person in a given photograph has, and how they present themselves or how the situation presents them, to the viewer. Function Ranking puts power to those serving a function, whether it be an occupational or helpful function. In the *Cosmopolitan* images we see several instances of a man helping a woman with a simple task. In image 2 and 7d we see a man helping feed a woman and helping undress a woman, respectively. Helping her with such a simple task represents her as helpless, giving him power in the situation. Feminine Touch includes women caressing or lightly touching objects or themselves. When a woman touches herself in such a way, she is presenting her body as delicate and precious, giving power



to viewers who then see her as submissive. When touching an object lightly it is a careful touch, opposing the more forceful and grasping touch of a man.

The Ritualization of Subordination is the most common gender coding among the *Cosmopolitan* Web article images. This code includes many different visualizations, from placement in a photograph to smiling to postures. Codes in this category give power generally to men, who are often placed higher in the photograph or hold a woman possessively, both of which signify power over her. Smiling is another sign of subordination where smiling says to another that no harm is intended. A smile is an “offering of an inferior” that is more often (or more exaggeratedly) seen on women.

Licensed Withdrawal is most often seen on women and allows them to remove themselves from a given situation and instead rely on another to protect them or pay attention enough for them. Licensed Withdrawal is seen in concealing feelings by turning away or covering part or all of one’s face. It is also seen in head or eye aversion, where women mentally drift from a scene while close to men. This withdrawal allows a woman to attempt to conceal her emotions or to give only partial attention to the scene at hand. Mentally taking oneself out of the present requires trust and dependency in whomever he or she is with, and thus gives power to those not withdrawn.

Goffman’s gender codes look at a variety of symbols to determine how one’s gender is presented and how those genders function in groups of two or more. Power dynamics are an important part of his gender coding, with men generally pictured to have more power, whether that is shown by his position, posture, emotion, or attention to his given situation. Women are seen as having less power, through their bigger emotions, touching, posture, or withdrawal from situations. The gender coding in

*Cosmopolitan* tends to coincide with Goffman's own analysis. Some images show mixed coding, giving and taking power to both people involved, and very few give power to women over men.

Many of the images have a voyeuristic quality to them. Voyeurism is closely related to scopophilia, literally "love of looking" (Manlove 96), but has the added fetishized qualities of sexual gratification and objectification. Most importantly, the voyeur remains separate from the object, watching in secret without consent (96). Many of the images used on both the US and Dutch *Cosmopolitan* Websites have voyeuristic qualities, where the viewer is watching a sexual moment between others, uninvolved in the moment themselves. Apart from the intimate moments between these couples, we also see women in various states of undress in both voyeuristic and scopophilic ways. Some are looking straight at the camera – the viewer – while others are unaware they are being viewed. This quality in the images lets viewers satisfy their curiosity and see the scenarios the articles discuss. They get to see others playing out these scenarios and, in some images where identities are obscured, can even place themselves in the position of those they are viewing.

Another common theme throughout the images is the color white, a common symbol of purity (Sherman 1019). Many of the images feature white backgrounds, bed sheets, and clothing. Surrounding these sexual scenarios with a color of purity coincides with the US attitudes towards sex by sexualizing the images, but then repressing their sexual nature by showing them as pure. Toning down the sexuality within the images helps to put viewers at ease so their repressed sexual attitudes aren't offended by something too sexually overt.

With the exception of outdoor and a few indoor photographs, the images all have soft lighting. The light comes from the sides, left or right, instead of straight on, creating a soft, flattering light on the subjects. The lighting gives the photographs a romantic feeling, often giving the impression of a sleepy and/or romantic morning in bed. The universality of the lighting and the feeling it creates, however, leaves an impression of a universal “right” kind of sex. By largely showing only one kind of sex, viewers do not get a full picture of a spectrum of sexuality. The lack of representation of other sexual scenarios or emotions puts other forms of sex and desires into a “wrong” category, closing the doors to anything other than *Cosmo*’s definition of sexuality. *Cosmopolitan*’s representation of sex is narrowed to intimate, vanilla, male-dominated sex that takes place inside the bedroom, with only a few minor exceptions.

Much of the same can be said for the moments depicted in the images. In an overwhelming majority of the images, a couple is in bed, embracing, and very nearly (though never actually) kissing. The models’ closeness gives the images a sense of intimacy and passion, supposedly an ideal kind of sex, though it again discounts other emotions that may be involved in a sexual relationship. Many of these images also put the man in a position of power, often featured above the woman or otherwise in control of the encounter. This goes along with *Cosmopolitan*’s habit of putting men’s pleasure first, as previously discussed. These images tell viewers (women) to let men take control in sexual scenarios, rather than take control or balance control between partners. Though *Cosmopolitan* claims to be a magazine about women’s sex, between the lighting and power structures demonstrated in their photos, they do not give women much agency.

The models used in these photographs have the same general look on both Websites. Most of the models in the photographs, both men and women, are white. Many have blonde hair, followed by brown hair. Only a few of the models aren't white, and the only other races represented are black and Asian. The female models are all very thin, though not necessarily fit, since they lack any visible muscle definition. The males are all very thin *and* fit, with large, well-defined muscles and broad shoulders, and both sexes following Western beauty ideals. Many of the models, both male and female, have perfectly styled hair and many of the women are wearing makeup, from natural-looking to heavy, evening looks. They are all beautiful (through hair, makeup, and photo composition at least), the kind of people one would stare at on the street. Some of the pictures appear to be set in the early morning, yet the models have perfect hair and makeup. They hold up an unattainable standard of beauty, setting a high bar for viewers. These beauty standards do not change across the two cultures, and neither one is more likely to have less beautiful or less made-up models.

As mentioned above, another issue with the models is that of race. In the Dutch articles, only four out of 39 pictures feature people of color (POC), all of whom are black. The US articles feature three pictures with POC, two of which feature black models while the other features Asian models. There are 32 pictures used in the US articles. These numbers include repeated pictures, where one picture is used three times in the Dutch articles. The lack of representation of race is just as harmful here as it is in other forms of media. *Cosmopolitan* is widely known as a sex magazine, telling women what is and is not sexy, what they should be doing sexually, and what they should know about sex. By showing mostly white people, it shows white-ness as "right" and as sexy,

alienating readers of other races who do not see themselves represented among the sexy and beautiful people shown in the sexy and beautiful magazine.

The sexist devices used in these photos include the virgin or vamp dichotomy complex and the male gaze. The virgin or vamp dichotomy was introduced by Helen Benedict, and represents women as at “opposite ends of the good-bad spectrum,” where a virgin is innocent and pure and needs a man’s protection, while a vamp is a “wanton female” who provokes with her sexuality (Benedict 18). Several of the images used on the two Websites use this complex, presenting models as both the virgin and the vamp. In these images, the models look innocent in some aspects, yet seductive in others, such as the image of a young woman sitting in a windowsill. Her hat and gloves and the shy expression on her face give her a sense of innocence, but her body language and the little clothes she is wearing suggest something more sexual. This is yet another impossible standard for viewers to meet, being at once both sexually pure and experienced, and it also seems to go against *Cosmopolitan*’s idea of giving women sexual knowledge and freedom.

The use of the male gaze also goes against the idea of women’s agency by framing female sexuality in accordance with male desires, instead of what the woman herself wants. This tells women to think of men first and to conform to what they want. Their own sexuality and desires becomes of lesser importance than that of the person gazing. Even female/female activity becomes about men in *Cosmopolitan*.

One shortcoming of this research is the language barrier between the US and Dutch versions. While translators were available to help, it was a difficult obstacle to overcome when looking for articles, and more articles may have been missed in

translation errors or phrases that don't cross between languages. It also could have enabled images to come from physical publications instead of the Web, which may have provided a larger sample size. Limited cultural knowledge is another shortcoming. Having to rely on research and interviews to determine the different attitudes towards sex and sexuality between the US and The Netherlands does not necessarily result in the full picture, and important cultural information could have been missed. Another shortcoming is the small number of articles that existed—and stayed mostly intact—on both Websites. With so few articles, there was a limited amount of images to analyze, and a larger sample may have provided a different conclusion.

## Conclusion

As *Cosmopolitan* magazine continues to grow, adding new publications all over the world, it continues to reach a wider, more diverse audience. The magazine prides itself on its cultural sensitivity, claiming to change articles and topics covered in the many publications to conform to what is appropriate, widely taught, or even legal in different parts of the world (Zimmerman). The Netherlands and the United States have very different ideas about sex and sexuality— The Netherlands is very open about sex, and believe in teaching people from a young age about safe sex and healthy relationships. The US, on the other hand, is still very conservative about sex, often choosing to teach abstinence over safe sex. In The Netherlands, sex is normal. In the US, it's taboo. In The Netherlands, not carrying a condom on you is considered abnormal. In the US, someone with one is a creep or a slut (Houston).

If *Cosmopolitan* truly does change their publications to fit the respective culture, there should be a large difference between what the two Websites present to their audience. While the images were greatly similar between the two countries, there were important differences between them that coincided with each respective culture's beliefs about sex.

A vast majority of the photos featured couples (almost all white couples) embracing in bed, their lips almost touching. They were almost all in generic white and/or grey rooms with little background. This trend carried over for both the US and Dutch Websites. Also on both Websites, images were taken via the lens of the male gaze, even on pictures used for slides talking about girl-on-girl kissing. The male gaze puts female sexuality in the back seat, even though *Cosmopolitan's* target audience is

female. In both publications, male pleasure and the male definition of sexy are at the forefront, driving the images and the actions within them.

Both sets of images use the same kinds of gender coding. All heavily feature codes within *The Ritualization of Subordination and Licensed Withdrawal*, for the most part keeping those codes to their usual gender with only a few exceptions. Neither were more likely to show role reversals than the other, and neither relied more on one category of gender coding than another. In terms of gender displays and power, the images on the two *Cosmopolitan* Websites were largely similar.

A major difference between the magazines came with the articles that were not about sex, but what is considered “sexy” (again, by men). Where the US Website showed women who were ashamed of their bodies or some aspect of themselves in the article “7 Things Guys Never Notice During Sex,” the Dutch version, in contrast, showed women interacting confidently with men, having apparently overcome the insecurities the US images were so focused on. In the “Your Weight” slide in the article “6 Weird Things That Affect Your Relationship,” the US image showed the importance (and sex appeal) of being thin by cutting out the model’s face entirely, featuring only her thin body standing on a scale. The Dutch version showed a woman with a balance scale, healthy food on one side, unhealthy food on the other, showing healthy as sexy instead of skinny as sexy.

Most models in the US images wore very little and posed intimately with each other, almost exclusively in neutral-colored bedrooms, the message being there is one universally “right” kind of sex—intimate, vanilla, and private. There is little room for anything else in *Cosmopolitan* US’s definition of sex. The Dutch version opens up



just a bit more, giving a slightly wider definition of “right” or “appropriate” kinds of sex. This is evidenced by their wider variety of sexual scenarios, leaving the bedroom more often and even showing elements of voyeurism and exhibitionism in some images.

The present research asked: do these images on *Cosmo* Websites represent differing sexual beliefs and cultural attitudes towards sexuality in the United States and the Netherlands? Gender displays in the images were the same across both Websites’ images, and most scenarios were viewed through the male gaze. Women across both cultures were represented as subordinate, needing help and approval from men. There were some important differences – including the Dutch women’s confidence and more public displays of affection – but those few slight differences are not significant enough to represent our two cultures’ different beliefs around sex and culture. Based on analysis comparing images used on articles existing on both Websites, *Cosmopolitan* does not change their content in order fit the local cultural beliefs of its Dutch audience, and simply exports American ideas about sex.

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