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# Maximizing Masculinity: A Textual Analysis of Maxim Magazine

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MAXIMIZING MASCULINITY: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF *MAXIM* MAGAZINE

A Thesis Presented

by

KIRSTEN WISNESKI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

September 2007

Communication

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, a huge thank you to my advisor, Emily West. Without her patience, support, and guidance this project would not be what it is. I am truly grateful for her persistence in helping me “remove the blinders.” Also, a thank you to committee member Leda Cooks, whose second set of eyes added another perspective to my work, ultimately making it stronger. To me other “advisors,” Lori and Andrea, I truly appreciate your unwavering encouragement and friendship. Lori, thank you for coming up with such a clever thesis title, and Andrea, thank you for being the best “buddy” anyone could hope for. I also would like to thank Erin, Sreela, Eve, Ilana, and other graduate colleagues for indispensable conversations that helped me work out my ideas and always added fresh ones. A final thank you to my family, especially my parents, for their constant love for and confidence in me. And Ata, monyet kecil ku, I am so fortunate to have your presence in my life.

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## INTRODUCTION: THESIS OUTLINE

In light of its role within the mediascape, *Maxim* magazine, as it articulates masculinity, is of great significance and consequence. This thesis seeks to explore how masculinity is represented within the pages of *Maxim* magazine. The central research question is this: Exactly what story does *Maxim* tell about masculinity? More specifically, in the magazine's construction of masculinity, what is asserted and what is overlooked? Considering gender and sexuality are relational constructs, an articulation of masculinity is really about difference. Thus, in addressing the central research question, I also ask: According to *Maxim*, from whom and in what way is this difference articulated?

*Maxim* has not only been a commercial success, but it has also had a profound social and cultural influence as well. The first chapter of this thesis paints a detailed picture of American *Maxim*'s place and role in the men's magazine market, from its inception through its incredible growth to its current brand expansions. It also discusses *Maxim*'s influence on the men's magazine market as well as on broader industry concerns related to the young male market, particularly advertising. Essentially, this chapter offers a rationale for why *Maxim* is an important site for investigation.

The second and third chapters review the relevant academic literature on the topic of masculinity and men's lifestyle magazines. Both theoretical and empirical scholarship are discussed. In Chapter 2, I review foundational theoretical work on masculinity, highlighting key contributions for this particular study, such as 'the paradox of masculinity,' gender as a relational construct, 'hegemonic masculinity,' and masculinity as both homosocial and homophobic. Chapter 3 reviews relevant research on 'lad mags.' Most of the empirical studies discussed are conducted in the British context, thus

suggesting an important opening for research on *Maxim* in the American context. In addition, a review of this literature indicates competing explanations for the contemporary manifestations of masculinity that exist within men's lifestyle magazines – 'the crisis of masculinity,' backlash to feminism, post-feminism irony, risk society and 'constructed certitude,' and the rise of consumer culture. New satellite or sub-questions arise from this debate. For example: Is there evidence pointing to or away from the five explanations for the particular manifestation of masculinity within American *Maxim* magazine? In what way does *Maxim* illustrate or disconfirm various theories of how masculinity is currently articulating itself? Other key concepts – the 'new man,' the 'new lad,' and metrosexuality – are introduced in this discussion as well.

Chapter 4 details the methods and research design used for this project. Textual analysis of the monthly men's lifestyle publication *Maxim* magazine (often referred to as a 'lad mag') is used to respond to the research questions identified. I examine a year's worth of issues (January through December of 2004) and contextualize this analysis with industry information from the trade press as well as relevant academic literature. This textual analysis formally and systematically engages with images and text as well as editorial and advertisement content. It is thematically driven by the following broad categories: gender relations, sex and sexuality, and humor.

The remaining three chapters discuss my findings and analysis regarding the categories described above. Chapter 5 outlines the different types of humor present in the magazine, focusing its discussion on *Maxim*'s irreverent and ironic tone. I argue that humor plays a central role in *Maxim*'s construction of masculinity because of its strategic role in negotiating potential threats to masculinity. *Maxim*'s irreverent and ironic tone

establishes a lack of seriousness and thus distance within the magazine that ultimately works to insulate it from critique. Chapter 6 extends this discussion of humor into the specific domain of male bonding, where I argue that the magazine-reader relationship acts as a mediated version of embodied male-male interactions. Lastly, Chapter 7 addresses women in the *Maxim* world, by highlighting the way in which ‘real’ women are pitted against *Maxim*’s fantasy women.

An intersectional approach to research acknowledges the ways in which various axes of identity interact with one another within a ‘matrix of domination’ (Hill Collins, 2000). Using the ‘matrix of domination’ and its emphasis on irreducibility as a guide throughout the research project illuminates “the multiple ways that women and men experience themselves as gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized within their culture and historical moment” (Hesse-Biber and Yaiser, 2004, p.115). However, while we must recognize the impossibility of separating systems of domination from one another, it is also important to note, as feminist researchers Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Michelle Yaiser (2004) point out, that an “attempt to look at all of the possible combinations of domination based upon difference within one project or discussion can be daunting and overwhelming if not frustrating and impractical” (p.109-110).

Thus, while an integrative perspective also acknowledges the importance of race and class to any analysis, my thesis focuses primarily on gender and sexuality. In this specific instance, *Maxim* magazine firmly and explicitly grounds itself in gender and sexuality discourse, thus making it a fruitful domain for investigation. There is much to unpack regarding these two issues. Of course, the apparent ‘invisibility’ of class and race render them both powerful as a ‘structuring absence’ and thus, important sites for



exploration as well. However, without some form of comparison (whether other magazines or information from readers), a race and class analysis remains more speculative than the gender analysis. Consequently, it stands outside the scope of this project.

## CHAPTER 1

### AMERICAN *MAXIM* AND THE MEN'S MAGAZINE MARKET

The most striking thing about the US men's publishing business in 2000 is how much it resembles the UK men's publishing business back in 1995. Remember how British *GQ* and British *Esquire* – the established, snooty, advertiser-worshipping titles – were usurped so quickly by the funny, reader-driven men's upstarts led by *Loaded* and *FHM*? Well, it's happening all over again in the US. Only this time *Maxim* leads the brash upstarts. And this time, the established, snooty, advertiser-worshipping titles are – American *GQ* and American *Esquire*! Shouldn't they be sacking people over at [publishers] Conde Nast and Hearst for screwing up so badly? Twice in a row?

– Mike Soutar, Former Editor of British *FHM* and American *Maxim* (*The Guardian*, May 1, 2000)

The men's magazine market is a relatively new phenomenon. Of course, men have purchased and read magazines in the past, particularly those organized around such 'masculine' themes as cars, technology, sports, and pornography. However, as sociologist Tim Edwards (1997) notes, "It is, to put it simply, that they weren't *called* men's magazines and this is what constitutes the key difference: the self-conscious targeting of men as consumers of magazines designed to *interest* men if not necessarily to be *about* men" (p.72, emphasis in the original). Since contemporary men's magazines are embedded in the rise of a new lifestyle genre, they are considered men's lifestyle titles as opposed to simply men's interest magazines (Edwards, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Here, Edwards is discussing the growth of the men's magazine market in the UK, which saw an influx of lifestyle titles in the 1980s, beginning with the launch of *Arena* in

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards (1997) categorizes men's magazines as follows: (1) fully style-conscious and self-conscious general interest magazines aimed directly and overtly at a male readership; (2) more specific periodicals with a more open readership, carrying regular features concerning men's style and fashion; and (3) men's interest magazines which covertly target men as their primary readership (p.72-73). Edwards places such titles as *GQ*, *Esquire*, *FHM*, *Loaded*, and *Maxim* in the first category. However, the distinctions between the magazines are not always so clear; the genres are not so fixed.

1986 and expanding with US imports *GQ* (1988) and *Esquire* (1991). In the US, lifestyle titles have a longer history, with the establishment of *Esquire* in 1933 and *GQ* in 1957. *Playboy*, arguably a lifestyle magazine as well, has enjoyed a long history in American publishing since its founding in 1953. However, both *Esquire* and *GQ* are generally considered upmarket (targeted to a style-conscious, older, well-educated, higher income bracket) with their emphasis on literary aspirations and fashion respectively, while the latter is first-and-foremost a ‘soft-core’ pornographic magazine, although it includes articles on fashion, sports, consumer goods, and public figures as well.

In terms of general men’s interest or lifestyle magazines, none really existed to parallel the numerous ‘women’s’ titles. Even though *GQ* and *Esquire* are profitable mainstays, neither title succeeded at reaching a wide audience of men. The popular *Men’s Health*, introduced in the US in 1987 and exported to the UK in 1995, was a successful first attempt, with its “clever ‘masculine’ packaging of everything that women’s magazines are expected to be about – looks, sex, relationships, diets, psychology, lifestyle” (Gauntlett, 2002, p.163). However, the title and the semi-naked men, as opposed to women, on the cover perpetuate its misidentification as solely a health and fitness magazine for men. The men’s market as we know it today – a significant market for young men’s lifestyle magazines – really took off with the 1994 launch of *Loaded*, widely recognized as the cornerstone of the modern British ‘lad’ culture, in the UK and then with *Maxim* in the US in 1997 (Gauntlett, 2002).

Without *FHM*<sup>2</sup> and *Loaded* in the American publishing landscape, *Maxim*’s April 1997 launch offered a distinctive new title for the 18-to-34 year old male sector. “We’ll strive to be a general-interest magazine for the general guy, which nobody else is doing.

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<sup>2</sup> *FHM* stands for *For Him Magazine*.

All the other men's books have some particular spin. *Esquire* is literary; *GQ* is a fashion magazine for fashionable guys; *Details* focuses on pop culture," asserted Mark Golin, the second Editor-in-Chief of the Dennis Publishing startup (quoted in Gremillion, 1998). This agenda proved to be a success, with industry observers describing the magazine as "a circulation powerhouse" after less than three years in the market (Brody, 1999); "the biggest and fastest-growing men's magazine in the US" (Gray, 2000); "the highest circulated men's title in America" (Roth, 2000); "a money-making monster" (Gray, 2000); and "one of the decade's great media success stories" (Fine, 2004). Eventually, *Maxim* would be named Advertising Age's "Magazine of the Year" in 2000 and also, Adweek's "Hottest Magazine of the Year" in 2002.

By 1999, with a 91.9% average circulation increase from the prior year, *Maxim* topped *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Details*, and *Men's Journal*, four of the main competitors in the men's magazine category; *Playboy* (3.3 million circulation) and *Men's Health* (1.6 million circulation) were still out of reach, although the latter not for long. In 2000, according to the annual Audit Bureau of Circulation report, *Maxim's* circulation base reached 2.3 million (a 63.9% increase from 1999), surpassing *Men's Health* (ranked 44 with 1.6 million circulation) and moving the title to the number 27 spot on the Average Circulation for Top 100 ABC Magazines list. *Maxim* has hovered around the 25 rank ever since, maintaining a steady 2.5 million monthly circulation base in the US.<sup>3</sup> While subscription rates continue to increase (although only slightly), single copy sales have been steadily decreasing since 2001. However, this is probably just as likely due to the hostile environment of newsstand sales in general, as other magazines have been

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<sup>3</sup> *Maxim's* rank in the Average Circulation for Top 100 ABC Magazines: 2001-26 (2,533,521); 2002-26 (2,540,631); 2003-25 (2,510,144); 2004-25 (2,524,447); and 2005-22 (2,517,450).

struggling there as well. This is evident by the fact that *Maxim* still sits at the number 15 spot of the Top 100 ABC Magazines in average single copy sales. In addition, the magazine sells over 4 million copies globally every month.

The phenomenal success of *Maxim*, particularly at the newsstand with single-copy sales,<sup>4</sup> sparked other magazine publishers' interest in the 'regular-guy market.'<sup>5</sup> *Maxim*'s laddish 'boys-will-be-boys' approach inspired the expansion of other similar types of magazines, as one industry writer described it, "aimed at satisfying young men's demands for tasteless jokes and scantily clad women" (Brody, 1999). The biggest contender in the category came from Emap Consumer Media's British import *FHM*, which launched in the US in February of 2000. As *FHM* Publisher Dana Fields said, "I think it is clear that there's a new wave of men out there. Some of the men's magazines that have been around for decades are a little stale, so there's room for something a little newer and fresher in the market" (quoted in Brody, 1999). Anticipating the increased competition, *Maxim* introduced its own spin-off magazine, *Stuff*, in 2000 as well. Dennis Publishing also began publishing a laddish music magazine, *Blender*, in 1999. Other titles that arrived in the 'lad mag' category include *Gear* (which closed in 2003); *King*, geared toward African-American and urban male audiences; and *Bonita Magazine*, targeted to Latino-Americans. Despite its founding role of the genre, *Loaded* has never

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<sup>4</sup> Only an elite crop of magazines thrive at the newsstand, while most magazines are lucky to sell between 25 and 35 percent of all their copies there (Gray, 2000). In 1998, 1999, and 2000, *Maxim*'s single copy sales made up about 45% of all magazines sold.

<sup>5</sup> However, this was not without some criticism, especially from the old vanguard who saw *Maxim* as appealing to the lowest common denominator. As one GQ editor said, "I don't know the secret formula [for *Maxim*'s singly copy success]. But essentially, when you put women without too much clothing on the cover of the magazine day in and day out, and run similar, very provocative pictures of women inside a magazine, you're going to appeal to a certain mass audience, for the same reason that porn Web sites have more people on them than history sites. I'm not being judgmental. It's a cold reality." (quoted in Gray, 2000)

been imported to the US. Additionally, *Maxim*'s success caused a number of other titles in this category – *Icon: Thoughtstyle*, *P.O.V.*, *Bikini*, and eventually *Details*<sup>6</sup> – to fold.

According to industry observers, Dennis Publishing's *Maxim* and *Stuff* as well as Emap's *FHM* – with their trademark 'beer and babes' formula – dominated the late 1990s and early 2000s, hardly challenged by other titles targeting young guys (Smith & Granatstein, 2006). In academia, James Davis (2005) claimed that the British had successfully created a young male readership of magazines where American publishers had failed, evidenced by the most commercially successful of the British imports, *Maxim*. Clearly, it is not that American magazine publishers had not been trying to court young male readers beyond 'men's interest' titles, as is evident with the early establishment of *Playboy*, *Esquire*, and *GQ* as discussed previously. Davis argues that their efforts to create a market for men's lifestyle magazines failed because "the image of the pipe-smoking, satin-robed connoisseur and the gently womanizing literati failed to recruit the Gen-X fans of *Animal House*, the eventual viewers of *The Man Show* and *Jackass*" (p.1012). These early attempts did not resonate with the elusive young male audience. However, the new irreverent lad approach of the British publishing industry – a scantily clad woman, usually a celebrity (actress, singer, or model), on the cover and then detailed advice inside on how to bed her – apparently scored with the Gen-X market, thus trumping the higher-minded fare of *GQ* and *Esquire* (Roth, 2000). As *FHM* Publisher Dana Fields proclaimed, "My hat's off to *Maxim*. They absolutely proved that the existing men's magazines in the States were asleep and were basically boring and elitist" (quoted in Granatstein, 2000).

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<sup>6</sup> A newly redesigned *Details* was re-launched in October 2000 from Fairchild Publications.

Rob Gregory, Group Publisher of *Maxim*, opined: “We don’t think of competition with *Playboy* as head to head. We don’t run nudes, no dirty words...I think of *Esquire* as a grownup version of *Maxim*” (quoted in Brady, 2004). These successful upstarts gave more established titles a run for their money, by gaining young male readership with what has been described within the industry as “a sometimes lowbrow but often genius mix of hot women, cold brew, sports, fashion, health and fitness, advice columns, film and music reviews, and celebrity interviews” (Case, 2002). The tried-and-true broad-based magazines struggled to compete with “brash, narrowly focused upstarts with fresh editorial formats, highly targeted (and seriously devoted) reader bases and fawning advertisers” (Case, 2002). Magazines like *Maxim*, *FHM*, and *Stuff* successfully targeted their laddish brand of lifestyle magazines to a clear audience where there existed ad categories that correlated to the target market (Case, 2002). These magazines relied on obtaining a readership base before chasing advertisers, rather than the other way around. As *Maxim* Publisher Felix Dennis contended in 2000, “[Rival magazines like *GQ*, *Esquire*, *Details*, and *Gear*] worship at the altar of the advertiser. They are contemptuous of their readers. They just want to make you feel guilty because you don’t spend two-and-a-half thousand dollars on a suit” (quoted in Donaton, 2000). Commenting on the fashion focus of competitors, an editor accused, “There’s an awful lot of gratuitous fashion brownnosing from magazines that know damn well their reader is not wearing the stuff, or has any interest in that stuff” (quoted in Granatstein, 2000). Nevertheless, once the circulation numbers developed, advertisers flocked to the young men’s magazine market.

Industry insiders saw the rise of lad mags as an indicator that “the days when sophisticated men’s titles – such as *GQ* and *Esquire* – were arbiters of what makes a man [appeared] to be on the wane” (Brody, 1999). Within the trade press, there was talk that other men’s titles were beginning to emulate *Maxim*’s style and tone. As one industry observer wrote, “The more-established titles seem to be following *Maxim*’s lead – putting scantily clad females on their covers, targeting their editorial product to the basest of male desires” (Case, 1999). The industry logic followed as such: *Maxim* had forced its rivals to contemporize their editorial content and marketing strategies (Case, 2002), driving the likes of *GQ* and *Esquire* to become younger, hipper, and sexier (CBS, 2004) and pushing “even the most staid men’s magazines to drop pinstriped trou and start chasing half-naked babes around the frat house” (Donaton, 2000).

As scholar David Gauntlett (2002) explains, “To avoid the failure in the circulation wars, *GQ* nowadays combines old-fashioned upper-class masculinity (expensive fashion, posh restaurants, smart grooming) with a substantial dash of laddish populism (women in bikinis, supermodels, nudity)” (p.164). He contends that what people think *GQ* is – posh clothes and upmarket articles for ‘gentlemen’ – only scratches the surface of what *GQ* really includes: “expensive fashion and style features, some decent articles, plus embarrassing middle-aged lust and lots of scantily-clad women” (p.165). In a similar imitative move, Conde Nast’s *Details* – a competitor of *GQ* and *Esquire* – brought in former *Maxim* editor Mark Golin to revamp its magazine in 1999. Even *Playboy*, although not a direct competitor, felt the threat of this emerging market on its own cultural relevance and has been actively trying to re-assert its hold on the 18-to-34 male demographic through various efforts, such as re-opening the Playboy Club in Las



Vegas and airing a reality television show, *The Girls Next Door*, which stars Hugh Hefner's three live-in girlfriends (MediaWeek, 2006).

The success and popularity of *Maxim* with this notoriously hard-to-reach target group seems to have contributed to “a resurgence in macho-themed marketing” (Gold, 2006). One industry observer contends that following *Maxim* logic – a mix of attitude, irony, and sex, “it’s correct to be politically incorrect again, at least for marketers trying to sell products to young men” (Howard, 2005). Examples include Carl’s Jr./Hardee’s television advertisement for a Spicy BBQ sandwich featuring a bikini-clad Paris Hilton sexily washing a fancy car ([www.spicyparis.com](http://www.spicyparis.com)); the unapologetically politically incorrect sexual innuendos of Axe deodorant and body spray print advertisements and television commercials; and Burger King’s “Eat Like a Man” and Miller Lite’s “Man Laws” advertising campaigns (Howard, 2005; Gold, 2006). Both the “Let Your Man Out” advertising campaign for the energy drink Full Throttle and the “Real Men of Genius” Bud Light advertising campaign would fall into this category as well. Similarly, the re-launching of Spike TV – “the first network for men” – has actively attempted to cultivate a more manly image with “an unapologetic, action-oriented, home base for guys” in order to lure males aged 18-to-34 away from game systems, tech gadgets, and online entertainment and back to the television set (Gold, 2006).

Trend-spotter and author Marian Salzman says that these messages embrace “a new kind of maleness... a new form of masculinity that says... ‘I’m not going to be made to feel guilty about being a guy’” (quoted in Howard, 2005). The sex-obsessed and irreverent spin of *Maxim* clearly influenced, or ‘Maximified,’ the markets targeted to young males. Young males are considered jaded about advertising, thus the characteristic

irreverent and unapologetic tone of *Maxim* appears more authentic. As Dennis Publishing owner Felix Dennis said, “*Maxim* and its British sense of humor and irony were in the right place at the right time, hitting US shores just as men were collapsing under the weight of the political correctness movement” (quoted in Donaton, 2000).

With 21 editions in 32 countries, *Maxim* is the self-proclaimed “world’s best selling men’s lifestyle magazine.”<sup>7</sup> Dennis Publishing does not see itself as a creator of a ‘lad mag’ but rather views *Maxim* as a magazine that “addresses the real life needs of intelligent, professional men in an entertaining as well as informative way” and that “set[s] out to reach men in their late 20’s rather than out and out lads, producing a magazine that readers can grow into rather than out of” (Dennis Publishing website, [www.dennis.co.uk](http://www.dennis.co.uk)). The average *Maxim* reader is 28 years old, and 1-in-4 readers is a woman. While the independent publisher mainly serves the UK magazine market, it has four titles in the US, of which *Maxim* is one.<sup>8</sup> In 2004, Dennis Publishing tested the working title *K-Maxx!* targeted to the 10-to-14 year old boy market. The magazine was described within the trade press as, “A dumbed-down *Maxim*. *Maxim* without the sex and violence, but with the same sort of humor” (Fine, 2004). Since 1999, *Maxim* has also been available in online form at MaximOnline.com ([www.maximonline.com](http://www.maximonline.com)), with similar content as the magazine (tagline: Hot Girls, Sex, Photos, Hot Videos, Sports, Movies, and Music). A wireless version for cellular carriers also exists ([www.maximtogo.com](http://www.maximtogo.com)), where readers can download wallpaper, ring tones, and games.

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<sup>7</sup> A partial list of countries in which *Maxim* is published: Argentina, Canada, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Belgium, Romania, the Czech Republic, France (as *Maximal*), Germany, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Korea, Mexico, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Montenegro, the Philippines, Singapore, Spain, Thailand, Ukraine, and Portugal.

<sup>8</sup> *Maxim*’s spin-offs – *Stuff* and *Blender* – are two of the others. The fourth American circulated Dennis Publishing title is *The Week*. In February 2007, Dennis Publishing announced that it would be selling its four American titles.

The magazine is available at most newsstands and retailers, with the exception of Wal-Mart, which will not sell the sexually suggestive title or its competitors *FHM* and *Stuff*.

The monthly publication has (horizontally) expanded from a magazine into a brand and lifestyle, marked by an ‘essential *Maxim*-ness.’ *Maxim* sponsors/hosts parties and events. It has a number of licensing deals, including hair color products, furniture and barware, and bedding (*Maxim Living*). It also has television, film, and music partnerships. In February 2005, *Maxim* introduced a radio channel on Sirius Satellite Radio that focuses on “girls, sports, and humor.” In addition, the magazine has announced plans to open a bar and steakhouse chain under the name *Maxim Prime* as well as to build a hotel and casino on the Las Vegas strip. Of course, *Maxim* is well aware of its advertising support; thus, as to avoid any competition or conflict, it has said it will not expand in certain directions, such as alcohol or video games.

Other men’s titles have not fared as well under *Maxim*’s domination. While *FHM* is the number one British lad mag, in December of 2006 it announced that it would be shutting down its operation in the US market, with the March issue to be its last. According to Market Wire, the magazine is transitioning from print to digital with the launch of the daily online site FHMonline.com ([www.fhmonline.com](http://www.fhmonline.com)), which replaces its print magazine and companion website FHMUS.com. Scott Kritz, the editor for FHMOnline, is quoted as saying, “With the vast majority of young men turning to the Web as their primary source of entertainment, it only makes sense that *FHM* evolve into an all-digital brand” (Market Wire, 2007). Regarding its anticipated competitive launch against *Maxim*, Ed Needham, the first Editor of American *FHM*, had said:

We’re a window on the world. They’re a window on the locker room.  
*FHM* covers everything that men, like, worry about and spend money on.

*Maxim*'s approach – and it's been very successful – has been to say, "It's OK to be a guy. As long as you're our kind of guy." (quoted in McCarthy, 1999)<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately for *FHM*, by market standards, it appears that *Maxim* really is "the best thing to happen to men since women," as its tagline proclaims.<sup>10</sup>

However, *Maxim* is not without its critics. In an interview with Publishers Weekly, Dave Itzkoff, a former *Maxim* editor, states:

Both Felix Dennis [*Maxim*'s publisher] and Mark Golin [its former editor] had an idea about how to make the magazine accessible and funny at the beginning. But through imitation and imitation of itself, that got lost somewhere. Now it is just parroting the same dirty jokes. But it has gotten even more aggressive, at times sexist and even racist, and is championing a kind of philistinism that [Dennis and the current editor] seem to be proud of. (Polly, 2004)<sup>11</sup>

Other critics of the magazine would agree with these accusations of racism and sexism.

In the February 2003 issue of *Maxim*, an article entitled "*Maxim*'s Kick-Ass Workout" depicted 21 different scenes of a muscular white man beating up – hitting, kicking, choking, and throwing to the point of bleeding – the famous non-violent peace activist, Mahatma Gandhi. The article provoked outrage, with activist groups such as IndiaCause and the National Federation of Indian American Associations organizing email protest campaigns, which sent more than 5,000 complaints to *Maxim* within the course of the first two days. *Maxim* issued an apology in its April 2003 issue.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Ed Needham later served as American *Maxim*'s Editor-in-Chief from October 2004 to June 2006.

<sup>10</sup> The tagline was changed to "Your life made better" in 2006.

<sup>11</sup> The interview was about Itzkoff's new book, *Lads: A Memior of Manhood* (2004).

<sup>12</sup> The apology that appeared in the April 2003 issue was different than the apology sent to IndiaCause, which can be seen on its website ([www.indiacause.com](http://www.indiacause.com)). The disparity between the two incited further outrage at the magazine. The magazine apology was read by critics as sarcastic, lacking sincerity, "classic, poor-taste *Maxim*," and "smack[ing] of the same kind of irreverent, sophomoric tone found throughout the magazine" (Tolerance.org). Michelle Naef, an administrator of the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence, said that *Maxim* was avoiding responsibility for its actions by claiming confusion or misinterpretation. She asserted, "There was no confusion, to use their word, on my part. The article was clearly inappropriate and

Another point of outrage is *Maxim*'s annual 'Hot 100' list, which ranks celebrity women based on their sex appeal. In June of 2003, the 'Hot 100' was also a televised program special on NBC, without much success however. Angered by the continued judging of women's worth by their appearance, a group of feminist activists began 'the REAL hot 100' ([www.therealhot100.org](http://www.therealhot100.org)) to counter *Maxim*'s focus on physical attributes. Now in its second year, the REAL hot 100 aims to show that young women are 'hot' for reasons beyond their ability to look cute in a magazine – 'see how hot smart can be' reads their tagline. As the website says, "REALLY hot women are smart. REALLY hot women work for change. REALLY hot women aren't afraid to speak their minds. And while some REALLY hot women might look awesome in a bikini, they know that's not all they have to offer" (emphasis in website text).

However, despite – and perhaps also because of – these critiques, evidence of *Maxim*'s popularity, success, and influence in the US is clear at this point. In light of this role within the mediascape, *Maxim* magazine, as it articulates masculinity, is of great significance and consequence, particularly regarding the conversation about shifting masculinities. Here, I want to explore the story that *Maxim* tells about a kind of masculinity. As stated in the introduction, the central research question is this: Exactly what story does *Maxim* tell about masculinity? In addition, as relational constructs, gender and sexuality are really about difference. Thus, more specific auxiliary questions include: In the magazine's construction of masculinity, what is asserted and what is overlooked? In relation to whom does *Maxim* articulate masculinity? The following

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ill conceived. It was not funny and it was not an example of irony. It sent a clear message to the reader, 'Anyone who believes in peace is weak and should be attacked' (Tolerance.org). *Maxim* launched its Indian edition in November 2005.

chapter reviews foundational theoretical work on masculinity, which grounds these main research questions.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORIZING MASCULINITIES

The previous chapter offered a rationale for the study of masculinity in *Maxim* magazine. In this chapter, I review the necessary scholarship to theoretically ground this analysis in a men's studies perspective. Since this perspective foregrounds men's experiences with masculinity, it is most useful for my project, as *Maxim* is a cultural product representing a specific type of masculinity and male experience to a largely male audience. Although feminist theory and practice have addressed the concern of men and male domination throughout their development, feminist theory has not developed a focused theorization of men and masculinity due to its emphasis on the consequences of men's domination on women's experiences (Hearn and Collinson, 1994). As Michael Kimmel explains in the Foreword of *Theorizing Masculinities* (1994), "For decades, it was feminist women who had been theorizing about the meanings of masculinity – and with good reason: Men's efforts to live up to some vaguely defined notions of masculinity had some disastrous consequences for women" (p.vii). However, many of these feminist analyses failed to resonate with men because they theorized masculinity from the perspective of women's experiences with masculinity (Kimmel, 2006). Similarly, theory from the gay men's movement offered a gendered analysis, but it did not necessarily address wider issues of men and masculinity, nor was it always feminist (Hearn and Collinson, 1994). 'Men's studies,' on the other hand, attempts to study masculinities and male experiences in their own right as specific and varying social, cultural, and historical formations (Brod, 1987b).

Of course, the argument can be made that men have historically been at the center of much of social science scholarship. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman address this very concern in the Introduction of their edited volume, *Theorizing Masculinities* (1994). They ask: “How does one *really* go about placing men and their institutions at the center of an analysis without replicating the patriarchal biases of previous studies of men?” (p.4, emphasis in original). They argue that the difference is in how one theorizes men and masculinities, i.e. studying “men *as men*, rather than as generic human beings whose gender [goes] unnoticed and untheorized or at least undertheorized” (p.4, emphasis in original). This approach acknowledges men as gendered beings, socially constructed and reproduced, rather than as agendered, asexual, ‘neutral’ adults, citizens, or people (Hearn, 2004).

Thus, men’s studies is much like women’s studies in its efforts to critique and undermine “patriarchal ideology’s masquerade as knowledge” (Brod, 1987b, p.40). Androcentric scholarship is only seemingly about men; it is only negatively about men in that it is about men only by virtue of not being about women (Brod, 1987b). Brod (1987a) argues:

In inverse fashion to the struggle in women’s studies to establish the *objectivity* of women’s experiences and thereby validate the legitimacy of women’s experiences *as women*, much of men’s studies struggles to establish the *subjectivity* of men’s experiences and thereby validate the legitimacy of men’s experience *as men*. (p.6, emphasis in original)

In this sense, the two are complementary, and indeed, Brod views men’s studies as an extension of feminist scholarship.

Nevertheless, a distinct difference between the approaches remains men’s studies’ foregrounding of male experiences. Theorizing masculinity from men’s experiences with



masculinity results in the illumination of the ‘paradox of masculinity.’ Best explored by Kaufman (1994), the paradox refers to the strange combination of power and powerlessness in men’s lives – men as a group have power over women as a group, yet men as individuals do not feel powerful. The difference is between social power and subjective experience. As Kimmel (1994) notes:

Institutionally, women lived in a world in which men held virtually all the positions of power. Interpersonally, individual women felt powerless to effect the kinds of changes in their lives they wanted. Feminism thus proposed a syllogism: Women were not in power and did not feel powerful; men were in power and therefore must feel powerful. But this symmetry between women’s powerlessness at the aggregate social level and at the individual, interpersonal level, however, was not matched by an equally symmetrical relationship for men to the idea of power. (p.vii)

It is this place – this disjuncture – between the aggregate social power of men and men’s individual experiences of powerlessness that acts as a jumping off point for theorizing about men and masculinities (Kimmel, 1994). In this process, it is important to not overemphasize men’s standpoints, with its felt powerlessness, at the expense of the empirical reality that men still exercise significant power in their lives, over both women and other men (Coltrane, 1994).

Early, or ‘first wave,’ theorizations of masculinity, which relied primarily on the uncritical and ahistorical sex-role framework for understanding gender, stressed the former without addressing the latter, thus turning males into a new oppressed class. The writing on masculinity during the 1970s and early 1980s emphasized the powerlessness of men and the detriment of masculinity to men (see Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 1985, for a discussion and categorization of this body of literature). The ‘second wave’ of work theorizing masculinities, which will be discussed in more depth here, reexamines its understanding of gender and addresses the fundamental issue of power. Brod (1994)

claims that this body of work moves beyond the problematic sex-role paradigm to “incorporate the fundamental feminist insight that gender is a system of power and not just a set of stereotypes of observable differences between women and men” (p.4). As a result, theorizations of masculinity begin to recognize gender as more relational and also, to recognize the diversity and plurality of men’s experiences. Much like feminist theory, masculinity theory has developed through various phases, however, all the while keeping in focus its joint goal of being both critical of masculinity and sympathetic to men.

### Beyond Sex Roles: Gender as Relational

I will begin the in-depth discussion of masculinity theory by focusing on sex-role theory. While this may appear somewhat tangential to this specific project, it establishes important groundwork for understanding later theoretical conceptions of masculinity that are relevant. In addition, understanding sex-role theory is useful for an examination of *Maxim* magazine, as the magazine often relies on this out-dated and simplistic model for making sense of gender relations.

The sex-role framework emphasizes innate sexual differences between men and women. It is based on the idea that being a man or a woman means enacting a general set of expectations that are attached to one’s sex – the ‘sex role’ – of which there are considered to be two, a male role and a female role. In this context, masculinity and femininity, the products of social learning, become internalized sex roles. From this perspective, “sex roles are seen as the cultural elaboration of biological sex differences” (Connell, 2005, p.22). Early sex role theorists assumed that “the roles were well defined, that socialization went ahead harmoniously, and that sex role learning was a thoroughly good thing” (Connell, 2005, p.23). However, in the 1970s, feminism disrupted this

functionalist perspective by claiming that the female sex role was actually oppressive and that its internalization served to subordinate girls and women. Following on the heels of this feminist insight, the so-called Men's Liberation movement adopted a similar perspective in regards to the male sex role. While there were efforts to criticize normative sex-role theory (see Pleck, 1981), they generally failed to overcome the limits of the role perspective in general (Connell, 2005).

Sex-role theory is inherently ambivalent about women because the basic framework posits that the two sex roles are reciprocal and complementary. As a result, sex role theory cannot account for power or material inequality (Connell, 2005). In addition, its normative standard of reference perpetuates a static, historically invariant sex-role model that makes it unable to take into account a wide range of masculinities, including those that are subversive or resistant (Kimmel, 1987; Conway-Long, 1994). Connell points out the usefulness of the dramaturgical metaphor in particular social situations – where there are well-defined scripts to perform, there are clear audiences to perform to, and the stakes are not too high. However, Connell (2005) argues:

In sex role theory, action (the role enactment) is linked to a structure defined by biological difference, the dichotomy of male and female – not to a structure defined by social relations. This leads to categoricalism, the reduction of gender to two homogenous categories, betrayed by the persistent blurring of sex differences with sex roles. Sex roles are defined as reciprocal; polarization is a necessary part of the concept. This leads to a misperception of social reality, exaggerating differences between men and women, while obscuring the structures of race, class, and sexuality. (p.26)

Thus, he concludes that the above-mentioned conditions do not generally apply to gender relations, so 'sex role' seems to be an inappropriate metaphor for gender interactions.

Sex-role theory ignores the extent to which our conceptions of gender are relational, thus ignoring that masculinity and femininity (the content of the male or female sex role) are actually a product of gender relations that are historically and socially conditioned. Relational means that the definition of either masculinity or femininity depends upon the definition of the other (Kimmel, 1987). Masculinity is “a constantly changing collection of meanings that we construct through our relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with our world” (Kimmel, 2006, p.3). In this sense, masculinity is not static, timeless, or ahistoric, but rather masculinity means different things at different times to different people (Kimmel, 2006). “Masculinities are neither programmed in our genes, nor fixed by social structure, prior to social interaction. They come into existence as people act. They are actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given social setting” (Connell, 2000, p.12).

This shift away from a conceptualization of gender as a set of static sex roles allows for a more relational understanding of gender, where masculinity is both a site and result of interactive negotiations amid structures of domination (Brod, 1994). From this perspective, masculinity is no longer understood as a normative referent against which standards are assessed but rather is seen as a problematic gender construct (Kimmel, 1987). Understanding masculinity as a problematic construct that is relationally (re)produced acknowledges gender as a structure of social relations, particularly a structure of power relations (Connell, 2000). Thus, the social construction of masculinity becomes connected with male domination. As Hearn and Collinson (1994) note, “In talking of ‘men,’ ‘masculinity,’ and ‘masculinities,’ it is particularly important to continually contextualize the discussion in power and power relations” (p.97).

## Masculinities and 'Hegemonic Masculinity'

Understanding gender as a relational construct, it is important to note, as Kaufman (1994) reminds us, that “Patriarchy exists as a system not simply of men’s power over women but also of hierarchies of power among different groups of men and between different masculinities” (p.145). Similar to charges against some strands of feminist theory, early masculinity theory has also been accused of essentialism. By privileging white heterosexual middle-class men’s concerns, terms like ‘men’s experience’ and ‘masculinity’ often reflected an overgeneralized, homogenous male population. Acknowledging differences within the category of men, a turn has been made toward a more intersectional analysis, hence the pluralizing of masculinity to masculinities (see Kimmel and Messner (2004) for an intersectional approach to men’s lives). However, Connell (2005) asserts:

To recognize diversity in masculinities is not enough. We must also recognize the *relations* between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance, and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on. There is a gender politics within masculinity. (p.37, emphasis in original)

Thus, recognizing more than one kind of masculinity is only the first step; it is also necessary to examine the relations between them. In this way, “various men and masculinities may be defined in relation to other men, other masculinities, women, femininities, or some further difference(s)” (Hearn and Collinson, 1994, p.108), and therefore, “masculinities are perhaps more accurately understood in terms of complex associations of more than one other social division” (Hearn and Collinson, 1994, p.111).

Acknowledging that there is no one masculinity, but multiple masculinities, must be combined with the recognition that, as Connell (2000) says, “Different masculinities

do not sit side-by-side like dishes on a smorgasbord” (p.10). Instead, there are different social relations between them, particularly relations of hierarchy. In this sense, some masculinities are dominant, while others are subordinated, marginalized, or just not available to all men. Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985) developed the concept ‘hegemonic masculinity’ to refer to the hierarchy of power among men and thus, the ability to impose a particular definition on other kinds of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity refers to “a particular variety of masculinity to which others...are subordinated” (Carrigan et. al., 1985, p.587) and also, “how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate dominance” (Carrigan et. al., 1985, p.592).

In later works, Connell (2005) continues to advocate the use of the concept of hegemonic masculinity as essential, since it provides “a way of theorizing gendered power relations among men and understanding the effectiveness of masculinities in the legitimation of the gender order” (p.xviii). Critics argue that hegemonic masculinity is too stable of a concept and that it suggests a static, fixed masculine identity.<sup>13</sup> However, Connell is careful to note that ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is always contestable and susceptible to change and also, that it does not play itself out the same every time, everywhere. In this regard, hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily the most common pattern of masculinity, since other masculinities are produced at the same time (Connell, 2005). Connell’s notion of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is helpful for my project in that it emphasizes the power relations between masculinities; some are dominant and others are complicit, subordinate, or marginalized. In looking at *Maxim*, this theoretical framework

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<sup>13</sup> See Whitehead (2002), Pascoe (2003), and Hearn (2004) for thorough critiques of ‘hegemonic masculinity.’

offers a lens to examine the hierarchical relationship between heterosexual and homosexual masculinities.

While differences among men demand a recognition of masculinities, “all American men must also contend with a singular vision of masculinity, a particular definition that is held up as the model against which we all measure ourselves” (Kimmel, 2006, p.4). In *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (2006), Kimmel traces the development of ‘manhood’ and concludes that there is always a prescriptive ideal that men are held up to, although it changes over time and in different contexts. Thus, for Kimmel, manhood is defined by “this tension between the multiplicity of masculinities that collectively define American men’s actual experiences and this singular ‘hegemonic’ masculinity that is prescribed as the norm” (Kimmel, 2006, p.4).

Kimmel foregrounds male-male relationships when he posits that testing and proving one’s manhood is actually a performance for other men. He argues that masculinity is a *homosocial* enactment, as American men define their masculinity more in relation to each other rather than in relation to women (Kimmel, 2006). Homosociality acknowledges the role that men play in evaluating, ranking, accepting, granting, and denying the manhood of other men, thus making homophobia fundamental to the conceptualization of masculinity as a homosocial interaction (Kimmel, 2005a). As Kimmel notes:

Homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood...Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of gay men, more than the fear that we might be perceived as gay...Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. (p.35)

Thus, according to Kimmel, the foundation of masculinity is a fear of scrutiny by other men that will reveal a man's masculine inadequacy and subsequently, expose him as a fraud, i.e. 'not manly enough.' As a consequence of this fear, men go to great lengths to demonstrate their 'manliness' so that other men will not get the 'wrong' impression. This fear of humiliation and the ensuing shame of feeling afraid lead to silence. As Kimmel observes, these are "the silences that keep other people believing that we actually approve of the things that are done to women, to minorities, to gays and lesbians in our culture...Our fears are the sources of our silences, and men's silence is what keeps the system running" (p.35). Therefore, according to Kimmel, homophobia can be considered a cause of sexism, heterosexism, and racism. In addition, it is male complacency and participation in this type of regulation that controls and stifles masculinity, both their own and that of other men.

Kimmel's theoretical framework of masculinity as both homosocial enactment and as homophobia is the most appropriate for my project of analyzing *Maxim* magazine. Rather than simply identifying the magazine as perpetuating hegemonic masculinity, through the lens Kimmel provides, questions can be asked about how hypermasculine posturing can serve as a defense mechanism used to prevent emasculation/to prove one's masculinity. In looking at how various elements of the magazine, particularly the use of women, work to verify and assert masculinity (i.e., to deny homosexuality), Kimmel's approach is useful. It enables an examination of how the relations of gender define and constitute masculinity and how women and femininity are used by men to prove their manhood in this homosocial interaction – whether as the audience for their risk-taking machismo behavior, as currency in the male exchange, as a negative pole (femininity) to



be measured against, or as sexual objects to demonstrate absolute heterosexuality.

Following this review of masculinity theory, I discuss a second body of relevant literature to this study. Existing research on 'lad mags' is taken up in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE CIRCUIT OF CULTURE: 'LAD MAG' STUDIES

In the previous chapter, I overviewed foundational contributions to masculinity theory. Here, I review the available literature on 'lad mags' in order to gain further insight into what the research has to say about the 'lad mag' version of contemporary masculinity. While there is much research on women's magazines (e.g., McRobbie, 1978; Tuchman et. al., 1978; Winship, 1987; Frazer, 1987; Ballaster et. al., 1991; Hermes, 1995; Currie, 1999), there is still a dearth in the literature regarding men's magazines, particularly in the US. This is most likely due to the fact that the men's magazine market only recently emerged as a force in the 1990s. Thus, the existing research on men's magazines has primarily taken the form of cultural histories, contextualizing the emergence of men's lifestyle magazines in the 1980s consumer boom in the UK (e.g., Mort, 1988, 1996; Nixon, 1996; Edwards, 1997). The emphasis of this research on the development of the 'new man' and its relationship to masculinity, style/fashion, and consumerism does not detail the more 'laddish' forms of masculinity which emerge in the 1990s. Only recently has this phenomenon been addressed.

Much of the research on this subject utilizes the concept of the "circuit of culture" (Johnson, 1986; Hall, 1980), which emphasizes the connection between the sites of production, text, and reception. Applied to this context, the "circuit of culture" refers to "linking the production issues and editorial decisions with the actual content of the magazines, following this through to issues of readership and interpretation" (Jackson et. al., 2001, p.3). The "circuit of culture" approach to this subject matter is useful as it highlights the interconnectedness and inseparability of these stages. The ways in which

production, content, and consumption overlap is evident throughout the research on ‘lad mags,’ particularly where the same themes consistently resurface. Many of these themes also constitute the central debates within this research area. For example, the competing explanations for the contemporary manifestations of masculinity that exist within men’s lifestyle magazines – ‘the crisis of masculinity,’ backlash to feminism, post-feminism irony, risk society and ‘constructed certitude,’ and the rise of consumer culture – demonstrate this as contested ground. In reality, as the discussion of available research on this topic suggests, many of these accounts are actually complementary and overlapping. Additionally, the competing understandings of the role of irony within these magazines are a significant source of departure between the scholars. I discuss the referenced empirical research in the following sections.

#### ‘Lad Mag’ Research in the British Context

Within the literature on men’s magazines, there are competing, and often overlapping, explanations for the emergence and then embrace of this ‘new lad’ brand of masculinity, which was successfully exported to the US beginning with *Maxim* in 1997. It is commonly argued that the ‘new lad’ was a reaction to the ‘new man.’ The latter, while a self-absorbed consumer, also willingly supported the women’s movement, internalizing and endorsing the principles of feminism. This concept stems from John Beynon’s (2004) distinction between two main strands of the ‘new man’ – “new man-as-narcissist” and “new man-as-nurturer.” Britain’s ‘new man’ is the equivalent of the ‘sensitive New Age guy’ (SNAG) of the US’s 1980s. The ‘new lad,’ understood as embodied within such *Loaded*-inspired magazine titles as *Maxim*, *FHM*, and *Stuff*, is commonly considered to mark “a return to traditional masculine values of sexism,

exclusive male friendship and homophobia” (Benwell, 2003a, p.13). Or, as Beynon (2004) describes him: “objectionable, selfish, loutish, inconsiderate, building his life around drinking, football and sex” (p.211). Sociologist Tim Edwards (2006) describes the distinction as follows: “While the New Man was apparently a fairly *pro*-feminist, if still narcissistic, invention, the New Lad represented a return to reactionary *pre*-feminist values of sex, sport and drinking and the relatively male-only worlds of pubs, pornography, and football” (p.39, emphasis in original).

The ‘crisis in masculinity’ is a popular explanation for the shifting conceptions of masculinity in the context of understanding men’s magazines. As Bethan Benwell notes in the Introduction of her edited volume *Masculinity and Men’s Lifestyle Magazines* (2003a):

Commentators both within and outside the academy have argued that recent shifts in patterns of production and employment, as well as the progress made by second-wave feminism, have unsettled traditional gender formations and led to changing gender roles which have tended to be seen as bolstering the social position and psychic security of women at the expense of the confidence and self-justification of men. (p.14)

The argument here is that dramatic economic changes (such as industrialization and deindustrialization, cutbacks, layoffs, outsourcing, downsizing, immigration) as well as social changes (e.g., the impact of the women’s and gay movements and changing sexual politics) have left masculinity ‘in crisis,’ i.e. no longer stable, natural, or fixed. However, Michael Kimmel (2006) has challenged the idea that this ‘crisis’ is a uniquely modern development and instead, demonstrates that “moments of crisis have occurred historically for men ever since masculinity became an acknowledged category” (quoted in Benwell, 2003a, p.15). Indeed, Kimmel contends that testing and proving one’s manhood is a defining experience for American men and that this ‘quest for manhood,’ i.e. the effort to

achieve, to demonstrate, to prove one's masculinity, is a reoccurring and decisive experience for American men. He argues that it is particularly in the moments of crisis – when masculinity is threatened – that there are attempts to salvage, revitalize, and resurrect the meaning of manhood.

Robert Connell (2005) offers a related but somewhat different critique of thinking about masculinity as in crisis. He argues that the “term ‘crisis’ presupposes a coherent system of some kind, which is destroyed or restored by the outcome of crisis.

Masculinity...is not a system in that sense. It is, rather, a configuration of practice *within* a system of gender relations” (p.84, emphasis in original). Thus, masculinity itself cannot be in crisis, but the gender order can possess tendencies toward crisis. In addition,

Edwards (2006) notes an important distinction between men and masculinities, thus

postulating a difference between “the crisis from without” and “the crisis from within.”

The former refers to the perception that men as a group are somehow in crisis, while the latter addresses the feeling that men are experiencing a more personal crisis. As he

states, “Although some *men* in some situations are perhaps in some kind of crisis, often through structural changes such as unemployment, this does not equate with a crisis in

*masculinity* as a set of characteristics, values, or dispositions” (p.4, emphasis in original).

Like both Kimmel and Connell, Edwards acknowledges how, from a historical

perspective, “masculinity is often in crisis or, perhaps more accurately, it *is* crisis or at

least contains crisis tendencies” (p.4, emphasis in original).

According to the backlash explanation, it is the economic, political, and social crisis points discussed above which have left men feeling “angry and restless because of what they experience as the erosion of their ‘rightful’ privilege” (Kimmel, 2006, p.220).

Most famously discussed in Susan Faludi's (1991) book by the same name, the backlash refers to "a reaction to the encroachment of feminism upon the power and privilege of patriarchy" (Benwell, 2003a, p.15), essentially a reversion to traditional masculinity and/or regressive adolescent tendencies. It is obvious how this explanation is easily applied to the discussion about the lad genre of men's magazines, which on its face appears quite sexist and misogynistic. Imelda Whelehan (2000) offers a broad cultural critique of contemporary British popular culture. Central to her argument is the assertion that men's magazines, now dominated by a 'laddish' worldview, are laden with "retro-sexist" sentiments. Challenging political correctness and female empowerment, the 'new lad' is merely "a nostalgic revival of old patriarchy; a direct challenge to feminism's call for social transformation, by reaffirming – albeit ironically – the unchanging nature of gender relations and sexual roles" (Whelehan, 2000, p.5). Therefore, from this perspective, the 'lad mags' are primarily a backlash against feminism, where women remain sex objects and ironic jokes dismiss changes in gender roles.

Whelehan's argument is by far the most polemic, a result of its clear political agenda strongly rooted in feminist criticism. Interestingly, Whelehan's work is also the most criticized, particularly for being overly simplistic, reductionist, and one-dimensional. David Gauntlett (2002) calls her analysis "superficial," claims it is "based on a caricature of what modern men's magazines are about," and renders her assumptions about men's identities "too casually damning and pessimistic" (p.152-3). Ben Crewe (2003), in his research on cultural production in the men's magazine market, contends Whelehan's oversimplification of representations of gender dismisses "the value of a greater understanding of the objectives and intentions" of the magazine producers

(p.201). In addition, the backlash-to-feminism thesis has been rejected by some because it fails to take into account that:

a rejection of feminism [has] less to do with men's response to women, but is bound up with the 'new lad's' rejection of the feminist-friendly 'new man,' in part a commercial response and also a rejection of the taint of femininity (and by extension homosexuality), rather than feminism. (Benwell, 2003a, p.16)

Also, it ignores the ways in which 'new lad' discourse skillfully incorporates feminist discourse.

A slight modification of the backlash-to-feminism thesis is a post-feminist line of reasoning. Here, the key distinction between the 'new lad' and traditional masculinity is the former's "unrelenting gloss of knowingness and irony, a reflexivity on its own condition" (Benwell, 2003a, p.13). Thus, the irony explanation could be seen as a less hostile, more tongue-in-cheek understanding compared to the backlash-to-feminism argument. Angela McRobbie (2004) discusses a "complexification of backlash," arguing:

post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force. (p.255)

Essentially, feminism is "taken into account," merely to be understood as having already passed away. She describes this as a "double entanglement" – "the co-existence of feminism as at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian sense, while also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated" (p.255-256). Thus, feminist gains imply that feminism can be dismissed as a thing of the past, hence post-feminism. Literally, it comes to mean after feminism. Central to this explanation is the acknowledgement that men and women are 'different but equal.' Thus, rather than a reversion to traditional

masculine values, this explanation utilizes the notion of “new sexism” discourses, which involves “the legitimation of male power in new and creative ways, often by the strategic accommodation or negotiation of liberal, progressive, or feminist discourses” (Benwell, 2003a, p.20).

Another explanation for the manifestations of masculinity in men’s lifestyle magazines utilizes Ulrich Beck’s (1991) concept of the risk society, which relates to the ‘crisis in masculinity’ discussed earlier. The instability and sense of the unknown surrounding contemporary sexual politics are hypothesized as creating anxiety and fear for men. ‘Constructed certitude’ offers “a clear and unified sense of identity or ideology partly by casting out or ignoring ambiguity or complexity” (Benwell, 2003a, p.17). From this perspective, the magazines, relying on a form of biological essentialism or sex-role theory, are assumed to serve a compensatory function of presenting the readers with a form of gender certitude. In essence, they offer an understanding of masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality as natural and fixed. In her qualitative study of the “masculinization of intimacy” in *Loaded* and *FHM*, Anna Rogers (2005) concludes that men’s magazines serve as a source of ‘constructed certitude,’ where these magazines act as a resource for confidence building and provide men a shared sense of direction, essentially “collectivizing disoriented men within a virtual masculine community” (2005, p.76).

However, according to sociologist Tim Edwards (1997), the preoccupation with understanding the shift in masculinity from the ‘new man’ to the ‘new lad’ as a potential response to second-wave feminism ignores that “men’s style magazines have very little to do with sexual politics and a lot more to do with new markets for the constant



reconstruction of masculinity through consumption” (p.82). Rather than a radical shift in masculinity, both the new man and the new lad “are often connected more to patterns of consumption and marketing, or the commodification of masculinities, than to second-wave feminism and sexual politics” (Edwards, 2006, p.4). Thus, from this perspective, there is actually as much continuity as there is change, since both foster “an aspirational and narcissistic masculinity that makes money for the fashion and media industries alike” (Edwards, 1997, p.82). Indeed, the foremost function of the magazines is to encourage and perpetuate consumption; after all, magazine profits are advertiser-driven. These masculinity constructions simply reach different niches, constructed around different commodity signifiers and consumerist practices.

Of course, both depend on making it more socially acceptable for men to be consumers, i.e. narcissistic. Freeing consumption from feminization and homosexualization was feasible as a result of the women’s and gay movements and their challenging of hegemonic notions of heterosexual masculinity. More specifically, it allowed men to be “consumers of their own masculinity or, in short, to look at themselves and other men as objects of desire to be bought and sold or imitated and copied” (Edwards, 1997, p.73). Edwards (1997) argues that the rise of a visible and socially more acceptable gay masculinity, which acted as a pilot consumer group for men in general, served as “a significant, if often unacknowledged, factor in the development of men’s style magazines targeting men and masculinity” (p.73-74).

As a result, consumption is sanctioned as a socially acceptable leisure activity for heterosexual men now. However, how consumer culture is actually sold to men remains vital. The ‘new lad’ approach has been more successful than ‘new mannism.’ Magazines

like *Maxim*, seen as more laddish and down-to-earth, succeeded where other incarnations of consumerist masculinity failed. According to Edwards (2006), this is “precisely because [the new lad] reconciled, at least artificially, the tension between the playboy and the narcissist or, to put it more simply, it reconstructed personal consumption and grooming as acceptable parts of working-class masculinities” (p.42). ‘New man’ magazines like *GQ* and *Esquire*, with their overly upmarket and aspirational emphasis, failed to resonate with a wider audience of men; however, the ‘new lad’ magazines have succeeded in appealing to the more ‘ordinary man’ (Edwards, 2006). This was in part due to age, but it was mostly an association of working-class machismo with authentic masculinity in comparison with the metrosexual (see Simpson 2002, 2004) nature of the ‘new man.’ However, this explanation may not translate to the US context, as there is not the same strong working-class identification here. In the US, there is a sense that everyone sees themselves as middle-class.

The new man, or in the US context the SNAG, invokes images of an older, well-educated, style-conscious, wealthier, sensitive, and therefore ‘effeminate’ man. The new lad, on the other hand, invokes associations with such ideas as low-brow, ordinary, down-to-earth, and the masses. Connected to this is a suggestion of working class-ness, particularly as it appears more authentic. Specifically, it appears more authentic in terms of masculinity – a working-class bravado, defensively masculine and heterosexual, exuding machismo. But in reality, it is merely an exploitation of such. As Beynon (2004) notes, “the whole ‘lad phenomenon’ was a profit-driven, middle-class version of the archetypal working-class ‘jack-the-lad’” (p.211). In this sense, laddism is a middle-class appropriation of an assumed working-class masculinity, which allows – gives

permission to, sanctions – young men to display “the errant side of masculinity, a return to unreconstructed basics like flesh, fun, and unselfconsciousness” (Beynon, 2004, p.212). This suggests an interesting intersection of class, sexuality, and gender, particularly the demonstration of a class-based masculine (hetero)sexuality. Therefore, it is perhaps not so much a response to feminism per se, but to the perceived effeminacy of the metrosexual New Man. Thus, homophobia seems to be at the forefront, rather than sexism, although the two are, of course, interrelated. In this regard, this process is more homosocial, where men are more self-involved and engaged with other men – looking at other men and competing with other men – than with women (Edwards, 2006).

Publishers were well aware of the perception of glossy magazines, with fashion and advice, as being feminine products. Early men’s style magazines appealed to a broader range of the young male demographic, as their cool, detached manner did not alienate men of any orientation (Itzkoff, 2004). Katherine Sender’s (1999) discussion of ‘gay window advertisements’ is useful here. This concept refers to implicit advertising appeals, where coded representations remain innocuous to heterosexual readers, while allowing for a ‘gay’ interpretation by lesbian, gay, and bisexual readers. Applying this concept to the men’s magazine context, it was assumed that more upscale magazines appealed to gay readers because of the fashion spreads and the bare-chested male models, while remaining innocuous to heterosexual readers by also exploring ‘manly’ issues like sports and cars. However, sometimes featuring ‘male’ interests was not enough to assuage “the high level of anxiety relat[ed] to the exclusion of heterosexual readers if homosexuality [was] too overtly or openly condoned” (Edwards, 1997, p.77), especially

with the rise of new laddism and its reactionism to the perceived effeminacy of the ‘new man.’

In order to “off-[set] the near-pornographic and homoerotic nature of much of the imagery used to advertise products or illustrate features on fashion, style, and accessories,” many of the magazines also asserted a vengeful, defensive heterosexuality to their readers (Edwards, 1997, p.77). As such, these magazines can be heteronormative at best and blatantly homophobic at worst. Interestingly, the earliest issues of American *Maxim* did not have fashion photography, yet still demonstrated the defensive heterosexuality described above. It still does, although now it does have fashion spreads. However, perhaps this logic is irrelevant at this point, considering the heteronormativity of *Maxim* is quite clear by now.

Thus, it appears that *Maxim*’s laddism is responding to metrosexuality, yet remains style-conscious and consumerist as well. Edwards (2006) and Simpson (2004) both argue that the distinction between metrosexuality, new mannism, and new laddism is obsolete, as they are all united by narcissism and commodification. Edwards (1997) asserts, “The styles may have altered, yet the drive to consume remains the same” (p.83). Metrosexuality offers the narcissistic side of the new man, without the nurturer. It seems the new lad, embodied in *Maxim*, retains the narcissism, while also completely distancing itself from the nurturer. However, it manifests its narcissism differently than the new man, perhaps less about fashion and consumption but still as a self-absorbed, pleasure seeking hedonist.

Lastly, throughout the research on ‘lad mags,’ irony is a reoccurring theme. In her early work on gossip and language play in the letters pages of men’s lifestyle

magazines, Bethan Benwell (2001) concludes that “the discourse style of men’s magazines...have been shown, through the use of expletives, and through the aggressive, competitive nature of their presentation, to be allied to traditional models of masculinity” (p.30). The presence of traditional masculine language qualities such as swearing, insults, and macho exhibitionism render ‘lad mags’ a “hegemonic subculture.” In later research however, Benwell (2003b), focusing more on the uses of irony within the magazines’ discourses, demonstrates a site of tension within the language of these magazines: a tension between a celebrated traditional masculinity with its attributes of physicality, violence, autonomy, and silence and a more ironic, humorous, anti-heroic, and self-deprecating masculinity. Benwell (2004) expands on this discussion of irony and concludes that irony has a two-fold function within men’s lifestyle magazines – to give voice to reactionary and antifeminist sentiments and to continually destabilize the notion of a coherent and visible masculinity. In this way, an ironic knowingness shields against the explicit marking of masculinity, thus achieving a kind of invisibility that pre-empted critical (read: feminist) scrutiny.

David Gauntlett (2002) focuses on the centrality of strategic irony, while coming to different conclusions than that of Benwell. Much of Gauntlett’s argument is in response to the likes of Imelda Whelehan and other social critics, who he perceives as giving new men’s magazines “rough treatment.” In contrast to what he considers as their oversimplification and reactionism, his own argument contends that “the magazines really show men to be *insecure* and *confused* in the modern world, and seeking help and *reassurance*, even if this is (slightly) suppressed by a veneer of irony and heterosexual lust” (p.166-7, emphasis in original). He argues against the view that men’s lifestyle

magazines represent a reassertion of old-fashioned masculine values or a backlash against feminism and instead, asserts that their existence and popularity shows less a fixed and stable masculine identity but rather men insecurely trying to find their place in the modern world. Gauntlett insists that men want advice articles, but they do not want others, and even themselves, to think they need them. This is where the strategic use of irony is significant, as “irony provides a ‘protective layer’ between lifestyle information and the readers, so that men don’t feel patronized or inadequate” (p.168). He concludes that the predominance of humor and irony does not “hide a strong macho agenda, but conceals the nervousness of boys who might prefer life to be simpler, but are doing their best to face up to modern realities” (p.180).

Peter Jackson, Nick Stevenson, and Kate Brooks (2001) offer the only audience research in this area to-date, using focus groups to explore how different individuals and groups of men (and women to some extent) read and talk about men’s magazines. Jackson et. al. conclude that the range of discourses and dispositions utilized in the process of making sense of the magazines suggests an ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction around contemporary conceptions of masculinity. In this context, the magazines offer a form of ‘constructed certitude,’ providing reassurance for men’s insecurities, anxieties, and apprehension. Hence, this conclusion resonates with the arguments of both Gauntlett and Rogers.

However, Jackson et. al. differ from Gauntlett in their skepticism of the alleged strategic irony used in the magazines. They argue that “the tone of ‘knowing’ sexism may serve as a way of deflecting potential criticism” since “irony is, of course, always double-edged, capable of exerting political critique but always in danger of undermining

the very seriousness of that critique” (p.20). Thus, although Jackson et. al. highlight the complexities and contradictions of the magazines, they contend that the ultimate response to the ‘crisis of masculinity’ is a return to and celebration of ‘laddish’ forms of masculinity, or at least, that the magazines keep that open as a possibility. As they note:

Irony was, in fact, surprisingly rare in our content analysis of the magazines, given the extent to which it is regarded as fundamental to the genre in most media accounts. Contrary to such accounts, laddishness was embraced in an uncritical and unreflexive manner in most magazines rather than via an ironic sense of distance. (p.190)

The focus group research suggests that readers negotiate these ambivalent spaces in contradictory ways, meaning they search for advice and reassurance while also celebrating a return to a more ‘natural’ (laddish) form of masculinity.

Feona Attwood (2005) asserts that contemporary men’s lifestyles magazines move beyond “the ‘ironic’ stance of earlier lad portrayals to a ‘post-ironic’ celebration of all things male,” where the distinction between lifestyle and pornography are increasingly blurred and the understanding of irony is complicated (p.94-5). For Attwood, contemporary constructions of masculinity restore “a more traditional set of masculine signifiers embodied by the new lad, but drawing on older forms of signification from earlier playboy portrayals” associated with soft-core porn as well (p.94). She contends that an uncertainty exists around the extent to which representations of heterosexuality seem to be new, but simultaneously appear to stay the same. Within the format of lifestyle magazines, a new figure of masculinity – ‘the lad’ – is said to emerge; however, a recycling of traditional sexual difference is evident as well. As she explains, the contemporary construction of masculinity “is, oddly, at the same time a bricolage of

those familiar and rather old-fashioned signifiers of masculinity ‘tits and ass and porn and fighting’” (p.97).

#### Across the Atlantic: A Look at *Maxim* in an American Context

All of the research discussed thus far is situated in a British context; however, James Davis (2005) offers a discussion of these magazines in an American context. Mainly, he questions “how much of what the British sociologists say about *Maxim* and the influence that it has on ideas of masculinity applies to this side of the ocean” (p.1013). He accomplishes this through the exploration of three questions. The first of which is:

If the young British men have been reading *Maxim* in a culture saturated with discourse about “lads,” how might the magazine be read differently when it is imported to a culture without such an ongoing dialogue in the press? Have we imported a species without its natural predators to keep its influence in check? (p.1013)

Here, Davis wants to acknowledge the important differences between the cultural contexts in which these magazines are emerging. He notes that while the popularity of men’s lifestyle magazines is dropping substantially in Britain, it is increasing in the United States. In the US, *Maxim* has moved beyond just being a magazine and is now an identifiable brand, with subsidiary projects such as hair care products, events planning, a music spin-off magazine (*Maxim Blender*), and even furniture.

Secondly, Davis explores the editor-advertiser dynamic in magazine publishing. He suggests that the two contexts offer inverse relationships. In Britain, the editors are considered to be held in check by corporate pressures, advertisers who do not want the editorial content of the magazines to become too trashy as it will give their products a bad image. Rather than playing the sanitizing role, in the American context it is thought that



the editors are pressured by advertisers who want an environment that will sell their products. Thus, Davis asks:

What if hip and rad British editors, accustomed to some restraint at home, meet the hip and rad American advertising culture at a time when it is immersed in shock advertising, slacker-bashing, envelope-pushing rebellion that is anti-PC as it attempts to strike an antiadvertising pose? Again, a case of importing a species to a cultural ecology that offers it no restraint? (p.1014)

Lastly, Davis tackles the issue of irony. He notes the British editors posit “an additional cultural antidote to the toxins in the magazines in England, namely a sensibility among its readers that enables them to read the magazines *ironically*, as if the magazines are a kind of found satire on hyperbolic manhood” (p.1014, emphasis in original). However, he draws on the British studies, many of which are cited in this literature review, to indicate a skepticism about how many readers actually view the magazines ironically. As noted earlier in the Jackson et. al. study (2001), rather than demonstrate an ironic distance, most readers were uncritical and unreflexive in their responses. Thus, Davis contends that the claim of irony is used merely to fend off criticism. As he says, “In effect, they say, ‘just kidding!’ as an unconvincing and feeble attempt to deny the explicit ideas in the magazines and to imply that their critics just don’t get it” (p.1015). His last question proclaims:

We have, then, in Britain, pervasive attention in the popular press to competing portraits of contemporary manhood. The press hails the emergence of the new man, while the lad magazines contest the type as a hypocritical media falsehood. Without such context, young American men – never famous for their ironic sensibility – are purchasing *Maxim* in record numbers. What do they find in it? (p.1016)

Davis concludes, “Ostensibly a celebration of unexamined, untheorized, unselfconscious pleasure in the joys of ‘natural’ manhood, *Maxim* magazine is a

kaleidoscope of omnidirectional contempt and anger” (p.1016). While Davis offers one of the only attempts to examine these magazines in an American context, he does not actually provide a systematic or empirical analysis on which to base his conclusions. In addition, he is clearly not working from a framework of ‘neither condemning nor celebrating’ these magazines, as others have claimed to do; it is quite clear how he feels about them. A critical, or negative, reading is not in and of itself inappropriate; it just seems that there should be a disclaimer to his conclusions as preliminary, since his cultural criticism lacks empirical backing. Nevertheless, Davis transitions the discussion to the United States, and his questions offer a useful starting point for further examination of these texts.

In reviewing this literature, it is clear that there are many openings for future research in this area. Perhaps most obvious is the fact that all of this research has been done in the UK; therefore, the analyses are embedded in a particular British context – both historically and culturally – and relate to the specific textual content of the British version of these magazines and to the British male consumer. Since the issues remain relatively unexplored in an American context, it will be interesting to investigate them in the US to see what applies and what is different – in all stages of the circuit of culture. In addition, the setting of the research in the men’s magazine market of the 1990s almost seems outdated now. One could ask: How do these issues play out in 2007, ten years later? Are the same issues even relevant or is something different going on? How have the magazines changed since their inception? Of course, my research is not a longitudinal study of *Maxim* magazine, from its inception in 1997 to the most recent issues today, so it does not to address all of these questions.

However, my study explores the content of the 2004 publications of American *Maxim*, thus contributing an empirical analysis of a cultural product that has yet to be examined in the US. It will build on the circuits of culture paradigm that emphasizes the inseparability and overlap between sites of cultural production. This project is a textual analysis, thus focusing on a formal and systematic deconstruction of the text; nevertheless, it acknowledges the importance of understanding this type of analysis as only one aspect of the meaning-making process. In addition, the debates between competing explanations for changing masculinities which emerge from the literature reviewed (e.g., ‘the crisis of masculinity,’ backlash to feminism, post-feminism irony, risk society and ‘constructed certitude,’ and the rise of consumer culture) introduce important auxiliary questions for exploring the main research question. To repeat, my central research question is: What story does *Maxim* tell about masculinity? Additional sub-questions include: Is there evidence pointing to or away from these explanations for the manifestations of masculinity within the magazine? In what way does *Maxim* illustrate or disconfirm the various theories of how masculinity is represented? Or, does *Maxim* do something else altogether, complicating current conceptions of masculinity? Lastly, an investigation of irony will be carried through into my research as a category of analysis, as the role of humor in the magazine is contested, although clearly significant for understanding the constructions of masculinity present. The following chapter discusses the methodology of this study in greater depth.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY

Not much empirical research has been done in the US to substantiate or refute the various explanations of the manifestation and popularity of particular forms of masculinity in men's lifestyle magazines reviewed in the previous chapter. Most of the research in this area continues to be produced from the British context, as discussed earlier. However, there may not be a direct 'transatlantic translation' in regards to the content of the magazines themselves or the analyses of them. While the British and American contexts are similar, it is not a straightforward connection, especially considering the different class, racial, and sexual politics as well as humor of the two cultures. Since *Maxim* stands as an industry leader in the US, it offers a good place to explore the competing explanations for the contemporary manifestations of masculinity that exist within men's lifestyle magazines – 'the crisis of masculinity,' backlash to feminism, post-feminism irony, risk society and 'constructed certitude,' and the rise of consumer culture – in an American context. In addition, American *Maxim* is said to have a more clear-cut 'jock' masculinity, with an added macho factor and increased homophobia as compared to other versions of the magazine (Gauntlett, 2002).

Douglas Kellner (2003), among other media and cultural studies scholars, suggests that a comprehensive, multiperspectival approach to analyzing media is stronger than other narrowly focused studies that highlight only one dimension of the project to the exclusion of others. This approach includes: (1) an analysis of production and the political economy of media institutions, (2) textual and/or content analysis, and (3) an examination of the reception, use, and impact of cultural texts. A truly holistic approach

is ambitious in the context of one study. This project, a textual analysis, serves as a necessary starting point that establishes a foundation for further research, specifically institutional and audience analyses. Analyses of these other aspects of the circuit of culture – other processes that also affect meaning – can benefit from and be informed by a thorough and nuanced textual analysis. Considering that there is little research on these types of magazines in an American context in general, my project lays useful groundwork for study on this topic.

In addition, while it is true that “each reading of a text is only one possible reading from one critic’s subject position,” Kellner (2003) also notes “[t]here are limits to the openness or polysemic nature of any text, of course, and textual analysis can explicate the parameters of possible readings and delineate perspectives that aim at illuminating the text and its cultural and ideological effects” (p.15). Thus, textual analysis is a logical starting point, as it establishes one possible interpretation before moving on to investigate audience interpretations of the media product or the media’s social impact. Accordingly, this is not an audience analysis; I do not know how others interpret *Maxim* magazine. However, this textual analysis works to illuminate the parameters and limits that Kellner describes.

As a close reading and interpretation of the text, textual analysis solidly engages with both the manifest and latent content, meaning both the apparent and underlying (insinuated) themes present. This textual analysis formally and systematically engages with images and text as well as editorial and advertisement content. The main focus is on the depiction of gender relations, sex and sexuality, and humor. As a result, this study is driven more by themes than by various sections or features of the magazine. Thus, I

investigate areas of the magazine where these themes are evident. Emphasis on product reviews, fashion spreads, and other similar advertorial<sup>14</sup> not seemingly related are examined when it is relevant to the discussion of the above-mentioned themes.

The sample consists of a year's worth of *Maxim* issues, January through December of 2004.<sup>15</sup> First and foremost, this is a result of the magazine copies made most easily accessible to me via donations (thus making it convenience sampling). I backordered some necessary issues to complete the sample as well. In addition, fourteen issues are both a sufficient and manageable amount of data, while one year covers a coherent time segment. *Maxim* has been in publication for over ten years, since April 1997. Thus, 2004 serves as a relatively recent look at the magazine, as to be useful for an examination of contemporary constructions of masculinities. As a check, I review the most recent issue of *Maxim* to note any substantial change in content or style. Finally, there was an important editor shift in 2004 (Ed Needham replaced Keith Blanchard's four year reign as Editor-in-Chief), which will allow consideration of changes due to editorship. Jimmy Jellinek has been Editor-in-Chief since May 2006, so the most recent issue would fall under his editorship.

Unlike much of the research on 'lad mags' discussed earlier, this study relies on a more 'holistic approach' to *Maxim* magazine. Other studies have been more feature-driven or limited in sample size. In addition, many of the other studies in this area seemed to 'cherry-pick' examples to demonstrate their claims. However, I work to paint a picture of the magazine as a whole by looking at the magazine in its entirety over an extended period of time. I began the process by reading through each magazine from

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<sup>14</sup> Content that is not strictly advertisement nor editorial, but rather a combination of alluring photography with very little text except for names, prices, and purchasing information.

<sup>15</sup> It is actually 14 issues, as both the April and December 2004 issues have double-covers.

cover to cover, initially noting the general structure, format, and layout of the magazine. Then, I annotated each issue in the sample, marking and highlighting places of possible interest related to my guiding themes. I divided these themes into categories based on humor, gender relations, sex and sexuality and ‘coded’ them accordingly. From there, I photocopied regular sections of the magazine from each individual issue so that they could be grouped together and examined as a whole. For instance, the jokes page from all 14 issues were separated out and looked at as a unit, although also still examined as part of their individual issue and *Maxim* as a whole, both within specific features and also across features.

As a result, I was able to pinpoint patterns and consistencies of representation. The iterative nature of the magazine became clear, and eventually I reached a point of data saturation, as consistent themes reemerged and became predictable. In this way, a sample of one year proved to be substantial. I compiled lists of examples to illustrate my arguments and then selected representative examples to actually include within the written thesis. However, I also considered exceptions to these themes and discuss the importance of these contradictions. In this way, I avoided ‘cherry-picking’ and demonstrate my approach to be empirical and systematic; I let the evidence lead me to my conclusions rather than look for evidence that confirmed pre-existing conclusions. In this way, the text of *Maxim* magazine, contextualized with academic and trade press literature, serve as the form of evidence from which I draw my conclusions.

Thus, this study also relies on triangulation. Thomas Lindlof and Bryan Taylor (2002) describe the process as follows:

*Triangulation* involves the comparison of two or more forms of evidence with respect to an object of research interest. Underlying most uses of

triangulation is the goal of seeking convergence of meaning from more than one direction. If data from two or more methods converge on a common explanation, the biases of the individual methods are thought to “cancel out” and validation of the claim is enhanced. (p.240)

In the context of this study, triangulation refers to multiple sources. I examine both academic and trade press literature, the actual content of the magazines, and the larger socio-cultural context in which they exist, specifically the expansion of the men’s lifestyle genre; the American import of British ‘lad mags;’ and contemporary theorizations of masculinities. Together, these sources illuminate convergences of meaning around masculinity in *Maxim* magazine and thus, improve validity claims about the study’s findings. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) describe the question of validity as having “to do with the truth value of observations: whether a research instrument is accurately reporting the nature of the object of study and variations in its behavior” (p.239). Examining a full year of *Maxim* (and a more recent issue as a check) as well as the magazine in its entirety speaks to external validity. Being conscientious in identifying patterns and dealing with counter-examples as well as relying on detailed examples from the text in my argument speak to internal validity.

My study moves beyond particular features and makes important conclusions about the magazine as a whole. In addition, rather than exclude alternative explanations of masculinity, this project was open to the possibility of not only confirming or disconfirming existing theories but also of complicating and offering new explanations. In this way, my thesis builds on, elaborates, and moves beyond existing conceptualizations of contemporary masculinity. The examination of *Maxim*’s 2004 publishing year is useful for further research, including studies that might investigate *Maxim* longitudinally, American *Maxim* in comparison with the original British *Maxim* or



any of the other international editions of the magazine, or *Maxim* in comparison to other men's titles in general. The subsequent three chapters discuss my findings in regards to humor, male bonding, and gender relations.

## CHAPTER 5

### *MAXIM'S* MASCULINITY: THE CENTRAL ROLE OF HUMOR

A fundamental element of *Maxim* is the humor that pervades the pages of the magazine. Humor, in this context, has a variety of meanings, serving different purposes in different situations. It ranges from the obvious funny jokes to offensive mocking to witty satire to the randomly absurd. But it also, and perhaps more importantly, underscores the general tone and approach of the magazine. *Maxim's* use of ironic humor sets a joking precedent for all matters, whether they are funny, serious, or anything in between. In general, the magazine is constantly making jokes or sarcastic remarks. It rarely maintains a serious tone, even when it addresses serious issues. There is almost always a wise crack or some sort of last word comment. In this way, *Maxim* embraces the benefits of ironic distance – “Everything is a joke. Forget responsibility or accountability. Let’s just have a good time.” This chapter explores humor as a central feature of *Maxim* and discusses the role humor and irony play in the magazine. I argue that its main function is to act as insulation from critique given the tensions and contradictions present in the magazine; essentially, humor and irony are used to negotiate potential threats to masculinity. I will begin with a discussion of the more transparent forms of humor in *Maxim* and then continue to address the less obvious yet more pervasive irreverent and ironic tone of the magazine.

#### “Die Laughing”: *Maxim's* Brand of Humor

Perhaps the most obvious place to examine humor is in the jokes page of *Maxim*. Here, readers send in jokes to compete for the title of “Joke of the Month” and a \$150

prize.<sup>16</sup> Originally titled “Nyuk, Nyuk, Nyuk!” (January to June 2004),<sup>17</sup> this magazine regular was renamed “Laugh, Stupid!” beginning in August.<sup>18</sup> The humor represented on the jokes page reflects quite a range, from silly to witty to offensive. The jokes chosen to be published reflect *Maxim*’s perception of what constitutes humor appealing to its readership, largely male. In addition, the jokes are submitted by readers, again mostly male. Thus, the jokes page could be said to reveal *Maxim*’s definition of ‘male humor.’ Two favorite categories are ‘blonde jokes’ and ‘dirty jokes.’ Some examples of the former include:

A broke blonde decides to ask God for help. “Dear Lord,” she prays, “if I don’t get some cash, I’m gonna lose everything. Please let me win the lottery.” Lottery night comes, but the blonde doesn’t win. She prays even harder, saying, “God, why have you forsaken me? My children are starving. Please just let me win this once.” Suddenly there is a blinding flash of light, and the blonde hears God speak. “Sweetheart, work with me on this,” he says. “Buy a ticket.” (July)

Q: What do you call a blonde standing on her head? A: A brunette with bad breath. (August)

Q: Hear about the new paint color, “blonde”? A: It’s not very bright, but it spreads easy. (September)

Incidentally, this last joke summarizes the main premise of the ‘blonde joke’ genre, i.e. that blondes are dumb and easy. This latter point connects with the premise of the ‘dirty joke’ category, where a crude sexuality is asserted, particularly in regards to women. The jokes in *Maxim* are obviously not as vulgar as other possible ‘dirty jokes’ because *Maxim* is a mainstream magazine. Nevertheless, their sense of humor indicates *Maxim*’s perspective on gender relations. Here are some examples:

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<sup>16</sup> From January to July, it is a \$150 prize. Starting in August, the prize becomes \$200.

<sup>17</sup> All issues, January to December, referenced throughout the thesis refer to the 2004 publishing year unless otherwise specified.

<sup>18</sup> July experimented with the title “World’s Funniest Jokes!” However, it only lasted for a month.

A woman standing naked in front of a bedroom mirror says to her husband, “Honey, I look fat, ugly, and pale. Give me a compliment to cheer me up.” The husband thinks for a second and replies, “At least there’s nothing wrong with your eyesight.” (January)

A woman visits a holistic doctor and asks him to cure her migraines. He tells her, “When you get a headache, repeat out loud, ‘I don’t have a headache,’ over and over.” She tries this, and it works. The next day the woman has her husband see the same doctor to treat his impotence. He comes home from the appointment and drags his wife to the bedroom, then jumps on top of her and says, “You are not my wife, you are not my wife...” (April)

Q: How do you turn a fox into an elephant? A: Marry her. (June)

Both of these types of jokes demonstrate a disdain for women, blondes in the first instance and wives especially in the second. This type of insulting or offensive joke at the expense of a target exists beyond sexism. In addition, it also perpetuates stereotypes.

Examples include:

Q: What do you call 1,000 heavily armed lesbians? A: Militia Etheridge. (January)

Q: Why couldn’t Helen Keller drive? A: She was a woman. (March)

Q: Why do Italians wear gold chains? A: So they know where to stop shaving. (April)

Q: What’s blue and doesn’t fit? A: A dead epileptic. (April)

Q: Did you hear about the Arkansas farmer who thought he had an STD?  
A: It turns out he was actually just allergic to wool. (August)

These examples demonstrate jokes at the expense of disadvantaged groups – lesbians, people with disabilities, non-white ethnicities, rural communities, and the poor. Not all of the jokes submitted and published fall into the offensive category, although they dominate as indicated above. Some jokes are just silly potty humor, like this January joke – Q: What do you get when you mix Ex-Lax with holy water? A: A religious

movement. Others are just average run-of-the-mill funny jokes. Here are two examples of what I mean:

A man sees a snail on his doorstep, picks it up, and heaves it over his house. Two years pass, and the guy sees the snail back at his door. It looks up and says, “What the fuck did you do that for?” (May)

Two hydrogen atoms walk into a bar. One turns to the other and says, “I’ve lost my electron.” The other says, “Are you sure?” The first replies, “Yes, I’m positive.” (October)

There is even the occasional political joke.<sup>19</sup> The September winner takes a jab at President Bush with the following joke:

After giving a speech at an elementary school, President Bush lets the kid ask questions. “How come you invaded Iraq without the support of the U.N.?” asks one boy. Just as Bush begins to answer, the recess bell rings and he says they’ll continue afterward. Half an hour later the kids come back in. “Where were we?” says George. “Oh yes – does anyone want to ask me anything?” A different boy raises his hand and says, “I have three questions: First, why did you invade Iraq without support from the U.N.? Why did the recess bell go off 20 minutes early? And, lastly, where the hell is Billy?”

Also included on the jokes page is a comic strip called “Rock Bottom,” which pokes fun at different celebrities each issue. The comic strip represents an absurdist humor that I will discuss in more depth later. “Rock Bottom” is only present in the January through September issues. This corresponds with an editor change at *Maxim* and subsequent format and content changes that occur at this time as well. Beginning with the August issue, “Stand-up Spotlight,” which as its title implies spotlights a stand-up comedian, enters the magazine. This is perhaps an attempt at a more serious look at comedy compared with the “Rock Bottom” comic strip’s absurdity and silliness. This would make sense given the apparent differences in style between the two editors.

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<sup>19</sup> Here, I mean to use political as in Politics not politics, given most of the jokes around social identity are indeed very political.

Nevertheless, all of the comedians featured are males with a sense of humor that complements that of the *Maxim* joke page, as evident in this portion of comedian Mike Birbiglia's routine:

I've got a girlfriend right now, and she's starting to get to the age where she's thinking about getting kids, which is exciting...because we're going to have to break up. She and I worry about different things. The other day, I asked her, "What do you fear most?" She said, "I fear you'll meet someone else, you'll leave me, and I'll be all alone." And she asked, "What do *you* fear the most?" And I was like, "Bears!" (emphasis in original, September)

Again, the humor 'works' based on presumed gender differences and is ultimately at the expense of women. The implication is that adult men do not want to be burdened with responsibility and desire a care-free life, ultimately suggesting men do not want to grow up. In addition, this is set in opposition to the needs and desires of women.

Another place in the magazine where humor is obviously encouraged is a contest called "Outsmart *Maxim*: Beat this Caption!" Located in the Readers' Letters section, readers are challenged to write their "best one-liner" to serve as a better caption for a random photo shown by *Maxim*. Some examples of *Maxim*'s taunts: "Think you can outsmart us?" (January); "Think you can outwit our sweatshop caption writers?" (March); "Think you're funny? Prove it!" (June); and "At last! A chance to prove you're funnier than we are" (October). Like the jokes page, readers write in and *Maxim* selects a winner, so we witness the ideal sense of humor from both *Maxim* and the *Maxim* reader. Despite *Maxim*'s love for sexual innuendo and double entendre, the caption winners and runners-up are generally tame and quite witty, neither overly offensive nor crude as much of the humor on the jokes page seems to be. For instance, the July contest, a photo of three figures sporting pig heads in black trench coats and sunglasses and smoking

cigarettes is captioned, “Michael, Janet, and LaToya 2015 benefit tour.” The winner’s caption reads: “We have to take these coats off – we’re bacon in them!” This is typical fare for the caption writing contests.

Thus, there is an interesting mix of juvenile, stupid humor and then witty, mature satire within the pages of *Maxim*. The former relies on easy jokes and silliness that manifest as potty humor, ‘your mama’ style jokes, insults, personal attacks, and mocking whereas the latter depends on cultural insight, clever word play, astute observation, cultural reference, and self-reflexivity. Picture captions are a prime location for the demonstration of wit. The caption writing contest discussed above offers *Maxim* readers the opportunity to display their cleverness. However, captions throughout the magazine showcase *Maxim*’s wittiness: the caption on a photograph of two protesters leading a cow through a McDonald’s drive-thru reads “Moo, if you could stop killing us, that’d be great” (January); an article about Tiger Woods features photographs of his fiancée, Swedish model Elin Nordegren, and only one tiny picture of him peaking out from the centerfold with the caption, “Hey, where are the pictures of me?” (February); an accompanying photograph for an article on new concept cars has the caption “A sleek red sports car? *Now* we’ve seen everything” (emphasis in original, October); and a *Spider-Man 2* DVD review captions a picture of a Kirsten Dunst’s distraught character waiting to be rescued by Spider-Man as “I’d free you, but the audience needs to ogle you first” (December). Of course, captions also have the possibility of being silly, absurd, or offensive as well.

In this way, the magazine oscillates between praising stupidity and laziness as cool while also clearly coming from a knowledgeable place about culture, media, politics,

history, literature, etc. At times, it offers intelligent social, cultural, and political critique around certain issues. Thus, while *Maxim* pretends to glamorize stupidity, it must have knowledge to make the cultural references that it does and its readers need the same knowledge to appreciate the references. A useful example to explicate this distinction is the coverage of the 2004 presidential election, which permeates many of the issues of the magazine given the prominence of the event in the cultural landscape at that time.

The fact that *Maxim* covers the election at all represents a concession to the importance of this event in general and of this election in particular. Technically, *Maxim* could have ignored it all together; however, election coverage is present in five of the twelve issues from 2004. Yet, *Maxim*'s coverage of the election varies in its level of seriousness. First, the section of the magazine dedicated to election coverage is entitled "Smackdown '04," referencing professional sports, particularly wrestling. Similarly, the different article headlines indicate a flippant approach to the election coverage – "Primary Suspects: Everything you need to know about the Democrats who hope to lick Bush (but not in an Affleck kinda way)" (January); "Bush's Secret Playbook: First Nixon had one, then Clinton...Now it seems Bush has his own Deep Throat" (May); "Kerry's Top Secret Election Memo!: Does a mysterious cabal of cultural elites pull the strings of the Democratic Party? This shocking memo seems to prove it...and smells real pretty" (July); and "Electoral Dysfunction: Five of America's biggest loudmouths sound off on the most contentious election campaign in, like, four years" (November). The fifth article is actually presented in comic strip format (September).

Despite the humorous presentation, each of these articles is actually jam-packed with information. The mock memos and comic strip are amusing, but the humor is based



on facts and specific details about the individual candidates, election politics, and current events. As a result, the humor can look like informed social critique or political satire. For example, “Bush’s Secret Playbook” (May 2004) is a mock letter to President George Bush from Vice President Dick Cheney outlining a strategy for how Bush can manage his public image better. It chronicles eight criticisms made against the President, such as “You’re a rich patrician pretending to be a regular guy;” “You spent Vietnam fighting the Cong...in Alabama;” and “The war on terror is just a way to keep the country perpetually afraid” and also includes Cheney’s proposal for how to “accentuate the negatives as positives.” For instance, a *Maxim* written Cheney response to the skepticism about Bush’s authenticity reads:

Keep your cowboy hat on. Notice how the hard-working blue-collar folk in the South who voted for you actually think you’re a regular Texan and not a spoiled Yankee blue blood with milky skin? It’s a good thing Mr. & Mrs. Chili Dog U.S.A. are God-fearing yokels without any sense of irony. If anyone questions your work ethic, just show off that one monster callus you got while chopping down cider trees on your hobby ranch.

This informed humor demonstrates a level of intelligence and ingenuity.

However, in case the reader might think that *Maxim* is too smart or too engaged, the ‘stupid humor’ works to combat that image. For example, in “Primary Suspects,” a January feature article that presents a cartoon illustrated breakdown of the potential Democratic candidates, *Maxim* follows the affirming remarks about Carol Moseley Braun being the first African-American woman to break into the U.S. Senate with the modifier, “That’s like being the first man invited to a lesbian orgy.” Similar remarks are dispersed in other candidates’ profiles as well. After this breakdown of the potential Democratic candidates, the magazine offers its readers “The *Maxim* Plan.” The article headline reads, “Lower taxes, equal rights...blah, blah, blah. It’s time to put the gender back in, uh,

agenda.” The *Maxim* Plan advises the candidates that “whoever meets these righteous demands may consider this a receipt for the votes of 12 million faithful and dutiful *Maxim* readers.” The demands read as follows:

- 1.) Home openers for all major sports teams will be paid federal holidays.
- 2.) Shortfalls in the federal budget will be made up by Canada. “Nice little country you got here Prime Minister. Too bad if something were to...happen to it.”
- 3.) The nation’s “drug czar” will finally become what we always hoped he was.
- 4.) A blue-ribbon committee will be established to find out who that one kid who always has the best lunch is. His mom will oversee the federal lunch program.
- 5.) Immigration and asylum priority will be given to Swedish females between the ages of 18 and 25.
- 6.) Especially twins.
- 7.) Any man can claim his right hand as a dependent.
- 8.) Once a year every army base in the land shall set up a bunch of beer cans and let the nearby townies fire off any weapon they want at no charge.
- 9.) Any man who messes with another man’s car or girlie gets publicly caned.
- 10.) New cabinet post: Secretary of “Shh! I’m watching TV.”

This article is advertised with the cover line, “A Lap Dance in Every Lap! Campaign promises that’d get *our* vote.”

Here, *Maxim* undermines its own knowledge of and interest in politics, specifically the 2004 presidential election. This example illustrates how *Maxim* alternates between cleverness and stupidity; engagement and indifference; and knowing (satirical) and dismissive (flippant) styles of humor. Another quick example to illustrate this point: an article entitled “Bard to the Bone” (August), which offers plot summaries for ten of Shakespeare’s most important works. The ability to summarize each play into a short synopsis (written in today’s vernacular) takes great skill and knowledge of the work. In addition, there is the reference to Shakespeare as “the Bard” and also, the

inclusion of the article in the first place. However, this is all undermined by the tagline in the table of contents that reads: “Memorize this list of Shakespearian plots, then come to our office so we can beat you, nerd.” In this way, *Maxim* and its readers get to have it both ways, meaning having a mature perspective that is involved, engaged, and knowledgeable while also playing at being a teenager where there are no responsibilities, everything is a joke, and dismissiveness reigns. Thus, it offers a fantasy world for adult men, where they do not have to grow up and deal with serious responsibilities.

This raises interesting questions around politics. The magazine expresses a rather liberal, anti-establishment position in some regards but its politics, especially in relation to gender issues, are not progressive in an equivalent way. Of course, a coherent political outlook may be rare, so why should *Maxim* be any different? Nevertheless, politics are at stake in the humor of the magazine. As seen earlier in the discussion of the jokes page, *Maxim* endorses politically incorrect and border-line, if not downright, offensive humor. Particular groups are targeted as the ‘butt of the joke.’ There is obviously mocking of certain non-hegemonic lifestyles or characteristics, e.g. fatness, homosexuality, disabilities, and foreignness, as was made evident in the discussion of jokes earlier. This also occurs in other places within the magazine.

For example, in response to a reader’s letter that asks for advice on how to not laugh at a potential hook-up’s bed talk because she is deaf, *Maxim* answers: “Give her the silent treatment” (February). In response to another readers’ letter about slow response time at traffic light changes in the South, *Maxim* writes: “Southerners can’t distinguish colors? Let’s lay off the stereotypes, OK? After all, those dallying ‘Bama drivers could simply be drunk on ‘shine, having trouble reading the street signs, or just very busy

making out with their sisters” (June). In their coverage of *Maxim* Worldwide model Jordan, described as the British answer to Pamela Anderson, *Maxim* writes: “England makes up for generations of pale, snaggle-toothed, cockney drunken cows with one – well, two – fell swoops” (March). Other examples include: describing New Jersey’s population density as “1,164 hairy-backed guidos per square mile” (May); joking that it takes six “Polacks” to change a light bulb in a review of Polish Whiskey and correcting itself by saying, “Just Kidding. Poland has no electricity “ (May); and representing Yu Zhenhuan, a Chinese man with 96% of his body covered with hair, with the following descriptor, “Even granola-crunching hippie chicks never get it this bad” (November).

The last form of humor I want to address is the random or absurd category. Absurdist humor is also prominent in *Maxim*. This kind of humor differs from those discussed so far in that it does not really have a logic to it; it is trying to get laughs through being random and wacky. For example, beginning in May, *Maxim* started publishing a new supplement in the Readers’ Letters section called “Random Object Sent to Random Person.” Here, the magazine announced what random object it sent to which arbitrarily selected subscriber. Some examples include: Talking (middle finger) Lighter (May); Squirt Wee-Boy (June); Green Embryo Mothra (July); Stadium Snack Bowl (August); Flying Pig (September); Voodoo Vince doll (October); Sock puppet (November); and Toxic Teddy (December). Here, the humor lies in the randomness.

Perhaps the most obvious place of randomness in the magazine is the Circus Maximus section, taglined “A *Maxim* View of the World.” Circus Maximus is a regular component of *Maxim*, actually the first substantial piece of content in the magazine after the table of contents, editor’s and readers’ letters, and jokes page. It usually runs about

fifteen pages, is full of random information, and as the title suggests, offers a circus of facts worthy of a *Maxim* reader. Each Circus Maximus opens with “The Big Picture,” which highlights an obscure event from around the world. Usually the topic is serious, but *Maxim* finds some way to make it goofy. Examples include: Om Prakash of India who was born without arms and legs due to a toxic pesticide spill 20 years ago that still poisons groundwater today (January – “Stand Tall: This Indian holy man could use a helping hand or two”); centuries-old mummies venerated by tribes in Papua New Guinea (March – “Jerky Boys: Pacific Island tribes prefer their beloved relatives baked, not fried”); a refrigerated truck accident in England which resulted in 600 sheep from a slaughterhouse spilling onto the roadway (September – “Lamb Drops: An Australian’s wet dream is a Brit commuter’s nightmare”); and a fight between a tiger and an alligator at northern India’s Ranthambore National Park (October – “Wild Animals: An angry tiger discovers what we already know: Crocodiles taste just like chicken!”).

Another component of Circus Maximus that follows this pattern is “Planet *Maxim*” where *Maxim* “prints the stories other news organizations are too responsible to report.” This section is present in the issues from January to August and highlights random and obscure news from countries around the world and also one from the United States. Beginning in September, this is renamed “World Events,” with the tagline of “Those Wacky Foreigners! What kind of mischief have other countries been up to lately?” This also contributes to the ‘playful’ mocking of foreigners that I mentioned earlier. Another favorite staple in this segment of the magazine is “Found Porn,” referring to unintentional pornographic material found and sent in by readers. Or as *Maxim* puts it, “Someone actually thought this stuff was innocent...Yo, pervert! Have

you seen any unintentional smut lately?” Examples include: a photograph of a church sign which reads “Looking for a new position? Try your knees” (January); a napkin from a pizza restaurant with the slogan “We want to spread our spicy little secret all over town. Not on your face” (March); a photograph of cross-sectional street signs named Gott St. and Hiscock St. (August); and a phallic shaped birdhouse (November).

These are just some specific examples that regularly appear in *Circus Maximus*, but the section also includes a ton of other random material (at least ten more pages worth!) from statistics to quotes to “fun facts” to reviews to just about anything one could imagine. Although randomness is primarily located in *Circus Maximus*, it does move beyond this one section of the magazine to permeate the rest of the magazine. This is evident in captions for photographs as well as some of the monthly feature articles that cover random topics. For instance, “Eureka!” (January) highlights some of *Maxim*’s favorite inventions waiting approval by the United States Patent Office, such as the automated butt-kicker; “Chimp Daddy: *Maxim* for Monkeys” (March) offers a parody of *Maxim* for a hypothetical monkey audience; “The Great State Debate” (May) pits the top 50 states in the country against each other in order “to find out which one kicks the most ass,” using random and absurd facts to bolster their decisions (May); and “Wacky Racers” highlights a number of random contests and races held worldwide (July). Also, the April (Fools) issue is almost entirely one random joke with articles about a fake asteroid predicted to collide with Earth on September 27 (“Impact!); tag as an official Olympic sport (“Athens, Here We Come!”); a count-down of the 125 cutest animals of all time (“The 125 Cutest Animals of All Time”); and a tour of Osama bin Laden’s secret hideout (“Osama Q’Ribs”).

While I said the random and absurd brand of humor has no logic to it, it does not mean it has no function. Although there does not necessarily seem to be any rhyme or reason to what is selected to be represented, the common thread is just that the content is random and wacky and essentially, that it does not seem to fit. Playing up this type of humor adds to the lighthearted and jocular tone of the entire magazine. It suggests that it does not take itself all that seriously. All of the different humor styles discussed thus far combine to promote an overall attitude of levity and irreverence. Essentially, it promotes a Peter Pan-like syndrome, with a fantasy of extended adolescence where nothing need be taken seriously. This point will be elaborated in the following discussion of the general tone and approach of the magazine.

#### Irony: The Linchpin of Irreverence

In the context of the jokes page, there is an existing pretext that the content is a joke, thus giving the material a bit of leeway or freedom from critique. After all, jokes are not meant to be taken seriously. As Peter Lyman (2004), a researcher on joking relationships, observes, “Joking is a special kind of social relationship that suspends the rules of everyday life in order to preserve them” (p.170). Thus, in order for the joke to be recognized, there must be a ‘cue’ to establish the frame (Lyman, 2004). But what happens when this same sense of humor is no longer easily identifiable as a straightforward joke, i.e. the cue ‘this is a joke’ is ambiguous? How should it be understood?

Subsequently, the tone of the magazine is less obvious than the transparent attempts at humor in the magazine. While the overt attempts at humor work to maintain a light-hearted and jocular tone, ironic humor serves a parallel function, which is to

insulate the magazine from critique. Other scholars writing on men's magazines have come to similar conclusions (see Benwell, 2004; Jackson et. al., 2000). An ironic sensibility creates a self-referential closed loop, where it is difficult for an outsider to intervene or criticize. Essentially, irony has the ability to reject a particular political or critical position, to render identity ambiguous, and to avoid the formation of stable meanings (Benwell, 2004). The rhetoric of irony "either liberates by destroying all dogma or destroys by revealing the inescapable canker of negation at the heart of every affirmation" (Booth, quoted in Benwell, 2004, p.9).

Here, I want to explore the irreverent tone of *Maxim*, with its 'last word' tendency and lack of seriousness. This is evident right from the front cover of the magazine. Running across the top, a ticker-tape banner announces what the contents of this magazine include; it is the magazine's own synopsis of what is inside its pages. It is generally some combination of the following words – sex, girls, sports, music, beer, gadgets, gear, and clothes. However, a final word arbitrarily related to that particular issue is added to the list. Examples include pottery (February), pastry (March), garlic (May), cherries (July), Shakespeare (August), hobos (September), and shrimp (November). Here is the reader's first glimpse of how *Maxim* does not take itself seriously as a lifestyle magazine, or perhaps how *Maxim* proclaims that it does not take itself seriously as a lifestyle magazine. In this way, there is an element of performativity here, where *Maxim* consciously communicates to its readers a jocular yet irreverent attitude.

Another example of *Maxim*'s marked disavowal of seriousness appears in both the Editor's Letter as well as the Readers' Letters, both of which come very early in the



magazine's format. Keith Blanchard serves as Editor-in-Chief for the January through September issues, while Ed Needham takes over in October. Blanchard's letters are always accompanied by a humorously captioned photograph of the Editor-in-Chief, which generally depict Blanchard in costume or his face imposed onto or edited into another image. For example, in the March issue, the photograph is of a dancing leprechaun with Blanchard's face and the requisite pot-of-gold and four-leaf clovers. The caption reads: "Keith O'Blanchard. Ladies and gents: The Lord of the Pants." The May issue pictures Blanchard's face on a baby in a diaper with a huge Uncle Sam hat holding an American flag. For this photograph, the caption is: "The two-party system stinks...and so do I!" These two examples are standard for Blanchard's letters. Given that the Editor's Letter is the only direct communication from the Editor-in-Chief to the *Maxim* reader and that it appears as the first direct address to the reader after the table of contents, Blanchard's flippant approach sets the tone for the magazine. The lighthearted and dismissive attitude that pervades the rest of the magazine is not only sanctioned but also promoted by the Editor-in-Chief.

Unlike Blanchard, Needham's Editor's Letters are not quite as silly. He still aims for a sarcastic sense of humor, but his letters suggest a level of seriousness and sophistication that does not exist under Blanchard's reign. One obvious difference is the photograph of Needham. It is a black-and-white headshot of Needham in a sports jacket with dark-rimmed glasses and a clean-cut hairstyle. He is not smiling in the photo but looks straight out at the reader, as if making eye contact. In addition, Needham includes his title, Editor-in-Chief, in his signature whereas this is absent from Blanchard's letters; the former announces his authority position within the magazine, while the latter tries to

hide it or at least deemphasize it. Lastly, Needham ends his letters with a simple closing of “Enjoy the issue.” However, Blanchard tends to include one last parting irreverent remark. A few examples include “Enjoy the issue, and 2004; I’m off to rifle through the guests’ coats” (January); “Enjoy the issue; I’m off to chop down a cherry tree and toss it across the Potomac” (July); and “Enjoy the issue; I’m off to road-test cold showers” (August, in reference to Anna Kournikova’s cover shoot for the issue). Although Blanchard is sillier than Needham, the latter still relies on humor in his letters.

This irreverent tone is clearly present in the Readers’ Letters section as well, where readers write in to the magazine. Save for a few instances, each printed letter is followed by a sarcastic response from *Maxim*. The response takes four different general forms, often overlapping in nature – flippant, antagonistic, mocking, and self-reflective. I will discuss the first two here, as the latter two will be addressed in more depth in the next chapter about the role of humor in male bonding. The response tends to be dismissive when the reader attempts to ask a serious question or to pay a compliment to *Maxim*. *Maxim* rarely, if ever, gives a straightforward answer or a sincere reply. Two examples of a flippant answer from *Maxim* include:

Reader’s Letter: I’m disappointed in you guys. Hiroki’s been on staff for seven years and you’ve yet to help him with his English. How’s he supposed to learn anything, the poor bastard?<sup>20</sup>

*Maxim*’s Response: Look, the last thing we need is Hiroki learning words like pay raise, sweatshop, or dignity. (January)

RL: Question 1: How do you go about getting a book published, and how much money would I make? Question 2: How much does it actually cost to make a car? Question 3: If you have cancer, would there be any physical signs or pain?

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<sup>20</sup> Hiroki, an Art Assistant from Japan, is frequently used as a tester for crazy *Maxim* stunts, usually which involve eating food. He also appears in photographs and reviews restaurants. There is much emphasis on his being Japanese and not speaking English well, although it is not clear how much of this is true and how much is fabricated for humor’s sake.

MR: In no particular order: yes, 20 bucks, and you don't want to know.  
(April)

In another April letter, a reader asks *Maxim* if it has any suggestions for packing condoms in one's luggage when traveling so as the condoms do not become damaged and thus ineffective. *Maxim* replies to this legitimate concern with a one word response, "Nah." However, this type of response is also oddly present when a reader writes in to praise *Maxim*. A September letter exemplifies this point. The reader thanks *Maxim* for the perfect present, as his fresh new issue arrived on his birthday. *Maxim* offers this sarcastic response: "Aw, don't thank us – thank your relatives. Clearly, they raised you with such low expectations that you'd have enjoyed any crappy old gift." *Maxim*'s responses to these sincere inquiries and communications again demonstrate a lack of seriousness.

This humorous and playful banter from *Maxim* tends to turn particularly aggressive when a reader questions, critiques, or corrects *Maxim*. Again though, there is no serious engagement with the issue raised; *Maxim* still only offers a dismissive response, albeit more hostile. In a January letter, a reader points out an error made by *Maxim* in an article about the 1969 lunar landing hoax.

RL: You cite Buzz Armstrong as the first man to step onto a top-secret sound stage. Actually, it was his shuttle-mate Neil Aldrin who took that historic leap. C'mon, guys! Get your facts straight.

MR: Let us guess: You're a stammering pinhead from Bumfuck, Canada who has nothing better to do than stuff his face with Saskatoon Pie and try to find errors in what's obviously a joke. Did we get the facts straight on that one?

In another similar situation where the reader corrects *Maxim* regarding misinformation about the poison cyanide, *Maxim* responds aggressively with, "Actually, Ed, cyanide does smell like bitter almonds to some people; it's hard to detect when you're always sportin' a Stinky Hitler. In the future, do not presume to lecture us on tastelessness"

(March).<sup>21</sup> While the above two examples represent an instance where the reader points out a factual error only to receive the wrath of *Maxim*, this next example indicates a typical response to a reader who tries to critique *Maxim*:

RL: Please think before you give out advice. In your “Stayin’ Alive” feature [March], you tell people lost in a forest to set signal fires. Well, I live next to a small forest, and last July some drunk kids who thought they were lost set a fire and burned down the tree house I built when I was seven. A piece of my childhood went up in smoke!

MR: Just think of it as us doing our part to help you grow up. We’re also holding Mister Fluffy hostage until you give up your blankie. (May)

In the context of constant irreverence, it is almost, if not, impossible to have a serious discussion about anything or to offer a legitimate critique.

There are exceptions to these standards; however, they are few and far between. The window for exceptions is rather narrow but demonstrates that *Maxim* does at least have some standards of decency, although appropriate within a certain view of masculinity. While they do not necessarily embrace the hostility described above and instead demonstrate a greater seriousness than in any other responses, there is still a strong sense of sarcasm. For example, a reader writes:

I’ve had Crohn’s disease for more than 12 years and was recently diagnosed with cancer. I don’t spend much time with friends anymore, except for a few buddies who’ve stuck with me during these hard times. Anyway, I’d like to thank you guys, because your magazine is one of the few things that keeps me laughing.

*Maxim* begins with a sarcastic comment, “Aaron, your letter certainly puts our hangover into perspective” but then continues with the surprising sentiment, “We wish you the best. Meanwhile, we’re sending you a new Microsoft Xbox and an assortment of games

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<sup>21</sup> According to urbandictionary.com postings, a ‘Stinky Hitler’ refers to the act of sticking one’s finger up another’s rectum and then smearing feces on the upper lip of that person, resulting in a Hitler-style mustache. Related terms include ‘Dirty Sanchez’ and ‘Dirty Rodriguez.’ These latter two are sometimes explained as a similar act but where a male sexual partner removes his penis after anal sex and spreads the feces on his partner’s upper lip, resulting in a supposed Latino-style mustache.

from Electronic Arts, including *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*. Thanks for being a loyal reader” (February). Here is a similar example, where the reader thanks

*Maxim* for its companionship:

RL: I’m a longtime *Maxim* subscriber, and I recently moved to North Carolina. Having no friends, no money, and no wheels, and working all the time, I just wanted to say that your magazine is the one thing I have to look forward to every month.

MR: It’s nice to know we’re the only thing keeping you from grabbing a rifle and climbing up to the top of the clock tower, Zac. Thank you for not pressuring us to keep producing. (June)

In this instance, *Maxim* demonstrates a kind of playful banter without the expected mocking of such a sentimental thought. *Maxim* does still manage to get a wisecrack in but not at the expense of the reader who is writing in. *Maxim* particularly seems to restrain from cheeky responses when the reader writing the letter is a member of the military, either formerly or currently serving in Iraq. This seems to be a group that *Maxim* particularly shows deference to (e.g., the following *Maxim* response to a Sergeant writing from Iraq: “We’re proud to be Americans, Sarge, and you embody several of the reasons,” September)

Sarcasm and irony also surface to smooth over contradictions within the magazine, and tension is mediated through the use of humor. There are numerous examples of tension and contradiction within *Maxim*, the most obvious being that a lifestyle magazine is seen to inherently threaten masculinity. On one hand, *Maxim* is a lifestyle magazine with the requisite advice columns and consumerist focus, including grooming, men’s fashion, and fashion accessories. However, *Maxim*’s vision of masculinity is constructed in opposition to femininity and homosexuality, both more traditionally associated with the lifestyle genre. Thus, the disdain for metrosexuality and

for the feminization of men that is represented in the editorial content of the magazine through both the emphasis of stereotypical masculine traits and the denigration of alternative masculinities potentially conflicts with the reality that *Maxim* is indeed a lifestyle magazine.

This phenomenon is best illustrated in the advice and self-help columns. The idea that ‘real men’ know everything and do not ask for help is clearly put into question by the existence of a magazine that offers advice and self-help for men. However, the magazine negotiates this with humor, always providing some sort of wisecrack so that the advice or knowledge-seeking cannot remain in the realm of the serious. For example, a regular feature called “How To” (which alternates with “Instant Expert”) provides readers with step-by-step guides on how to do everything from joining the circus (January) to installing an outlet (March) to escaping an elevator (May) to making your girlfriend prettier (June). The tagline of this feature reads: “Do Everything Better (Except \_\_\_\_\_),” with the blank filled in by prance (January), gossiping (February), manicures (March, April), sharing (May), and magazines (June). This self-referentiality acknowledges that while the magazine is indeed offering assistance to its readers, it is decidedly not in unmanly ventures (of which magazines is included!). In addition, the fact that absurd actions, such as how to train a tiger (March) and how to raise a serial killer (June), are included diminishes the seriousness of the advice overall.

Thus, humor helps create a distance so the reader can obtain the advice or information but still feel okay about it because it is done in a joking way, often times in a mocking way. In “G’Head, Ask Us Anything,” where readers write in with questions for *Maxim*, the answers from the magazine include humorous quips, often at the expense of

the writer of the question. For instance, a reader asks: “How’s the weather predicted?” (February). Mid-way through its response, *Maxim* writes: “That’s all then fed into your mother’s gaping vagina...OK, just making sure you’re still awake.” It ends its answer with: “Which *still* doesn’t explain why you insist on taking your own temperature anally.” Another illustrative example comes in the response to the following question: “Where do porn producers find all their talent?” (August). *Maxim* ends its response with this dig: “As for men, there’s actually a shortage of studs who can get wood, keep it up, and paint a stomach in front of an audience. Yet *another* job you’re shamefully unqualified for.”

This mocking or making fun seems central to fraternal bonding. Male bonding is sometimes negotiated through humor, perhaps as a way to ease intimacy that is not expected or allowed of ‘real men.’ Here, the reader-magazine relationship acts as a mediated version of the interpersonal interaction between males. Thus, the humor eases taking advice, while also making it feel as though the reader is getting advice from a buddy. I will further explore the role of humor in male bonding in the next chapter. For now, this analysis suggests a parallel with David Gauntlett’s (2002) conclusions about men’s lifestyle magazines. Gauntlett argues that men want advice articles, but they do not want others or themselves to think they need them. Thus, irony has a strategic purpose, as “irony provides a ‘protective layer’ between lifestyle information and the readers, so that men don’t feel patronized or inadequate” (p.168).

Another tactic utilized by the magazine to achieve this same goal is the presence of scantily clad females accompanying articles that have nothing to do with these scantily clad females. While there are features in the magazine that specifically spotlight a

particular female, the cover model being the most obvious, there are other times where the scantily clad females that accompany articles are not featured as themselves but are props to visually support the theme of the article. Examples include “95 Things To Do This Summer” and “Survey of the Sexes,” both in the July issue. The first article suggests various activities to consider for the summer, with skimpily dressed and bathing suit clad female models posing as to represent these activities. Similarly, the second article discusses the results of a joint survey between *Marie Claire* and *Maxim* magazines. Female models, in naughty Catholic school-girl attire a la Britney Spears in the “...Baby One More Time” video, pepper the accompanying pages of survey results.

This phenomenon is also clearly evident in the advice/self-help columns. “Ask Dr. *Maxim*,” a semi-regular feature which answers *Maxim* readers’ questions about medical concerns, includes a brunette model in a red bikini with the white medical cross symbol over the nipples and crotch of her bathing suit posed throughout the pages. One photograph shows her pretending to inject a needle into the behind of a blonde model in a white bra and panty set sprawled on a doctor’s table (August).

However, there is also an element of absurdity to these photographs, as some are just plain weird, e.g. one where the model has cow legs and hooves for her arms and hands respectively (April). Similarly, the actual responses to readers’ questions include the requisite *Maxim* cheeky quips. A reader asks: “When I’m driving at night, I often can’t read signs. What can I do to make my night sight better?” (April). *Maxim* includes the following in its response: “...Just pull out your dorky glasses from high school. Unless they got stomped on by the popular kids.” The July installment of “Ask Dr. *Maxim*” is an entire spoof with questions like, “The other day I was in a store with my



girlfriend when I inadvertently picked up a teak-scented candle and an Enya CD. Do you think I have a brain tumor?” and “I recently yanked out a nose hair that was six inches long and braided, in three colors. It smells like beeswax. Is that normal?” Thus, it seems clear that both humor and the scantily clad females are used to ease the process of receiving advice or help. Ironic humor works to lighten the advice and make it seem less serious, to keep it in the realm of the nonchalant. If that is not enough, the scantily clad females work as heterosexual reassurance. These two strategies work in tandem to thwart this potential threat to masculinity.

However, while humor is foundational to *Maxim*'s modus operandi, the magazine is not completely fun, games, and jokes (although it is most of the time). There is usually one 'serious' feature article per issue. Interestingly, these features tend to glorify stereotypically manly activities that are associated with danger, adventure, and/or violence. Examples include: illegal street bike racing (February); the Army's top-secret Delta Force (April); the lawless war zone of Rio de Janeiro (May); a discussion of Robert Bryce's book *Cronies: Oil, the Bushes, and the Rise of Texas, America's Superstate* (June); a gang of New York (August); and The Swat Olympics (September). There are also many serious articles about sports.

Nevertheless, humor does play an important role in the magazine overall. Therefore, humor can be said to be an important component to understanding masculinity in this manifestation. The irreverent and indifferent attitude of not caring enough to take anything seriously or to engage with it seriously seems to be an important marker of *Maxim*'s version of masculinity. As result, it also seems to promote stupidity and ignorance as cool. This combination makes a lack of seriousness and disengagement

fundamental to masculinity. It reflects a rather juvenile or immature way of functioning in the world, a reverence for permanent adolescence and its absence of responsibility.

In addition, the main form of humor – irony – has the function of insulating one from critique. In response to the jokes page style of humor, one can legitimately say, “It’s a joke.” Of course, this does not necessarily absolve its insulting or offensive nature; it does not free it from critique. However, in the instance of ironic humor, the joke is more subtle, if a joke is even really present at all. One can claim he is kidding in order to evade responsibility or accountability. The presence of knowingness and self-reflexivity also aids in this process, as it suggests that the joker is actually aware of the potential offensiveness of what he is saying.

Therefore, being self-referential serves another important function, in that *Maxim* again avoids criticism by calling itself out before someone else can do the same. *Maxim* is able to exploit its publishing power to maintain the role of alpha male. While the intra-male relationship requires a back-and-forth, *Maxim* ultimately has the last word. Thus, *Maxim* does most of the mocking and teasing, while simultaneously insulating itself from the same. In addition, this self-referentiality complicates the use of irony and the subsequent concerns of accountability. As discussed, irony insulates from criticism because of its built in excuse which provides deniability – “Just kidding. It’s just a joke.” However, both *Maxim*’s knowingness and acknowledgement raise questions of its intentions, as though ultimately it is aware that it is pushing the boundaries in order to try and get away with as much as possible. This is perhaps best represented in the *Maxim* logo: a red circle with a white M inside that has both devil’s horns and tail as well as an angel’s halo. If that is not self-referential, I do not know what is. A definite wink-wink,

nudge-nudge that implies someone is trying to get away with something – the bad guy who jokes his way to being good or the good guy who wants to play bad. Either way, both are only kidding. While this chapter explores the general sense of humor of the magazine, the next chapter extends the discussion of humor into the specific domain of male bonding.

## CHAPTER 6

### MALE BONDING IN *MAXIM*

Following from the previous chapter's discussion, it is obvious that humor is central to the makeup of *Maxim*. It is also extremely important to how *Maxim* negotiates the tensions created by its identity as a men's lifestyle magazine on the one hand and its rejection of this classification on the other. This chapter explores the specific role humor plays in cultivating male-male relationships. I argue that the reader-magazine relationship stands in for a larger homosocial interaction – a symbolically mediated expression of the dynamic between males. So if in everyday male-male relationships male bonding is sometimes negotiated through humor, then it would follow that this would also exist in the para-social relationship of this context.<sup>22</sup> Para-social interaction refers to communication between media consumers and media personae (Horton and Wohl, 1956).<sup>23</sup> Here I discuss the oscillation of the editorial voice which alternates between creating distance with the reader and then establishing an allegiance or alliance with the reader. Also included here is the form of masculinity that *Maxim* does celebrate and endorse. Through this discussion, *Maxim*'s expectations of an ideal masculinity become evident.

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<sup>22</sup> In her discourse analysis of men's magazines, Bethan Benwell (2001) suggests that the interactive nature of the magazines – through written prose meant to suggest interaction, the presence of the reader strongly foregrounded, the encouragement of real interaction in the form of letters and jokes, shared cultural references and humor, and special promotions – works to emulate the processes of male bonding (p.20). However, she refers to this interaction as mediated and thus, “clearly” synthetic. She also notes the importance of humor in creating a bond of masculinity between readers and the editorial team (p.21).

<sup>23</sup> I recognize Handelman's (2003) critique of the term para-social, where he argues that using “para” as a qualifier implies that this form of interaction is less real or less authentic than face-to-face communication. He suggests the term “virtual encounter” in order to recognize multiple realities and a variety of socialities. However, as his term applies specifically to television, I will maintain the use of para-social to describe the distinct interaction between magazine readers and magazine editors. Nevertheless, following Handelman's critique, I wish not to imply that this mediated interaction is merely a poor imitation of ‘real’ face-to-face communication, but rather that it is “a different but equally real form of communication” (p.139-140).

### Male Bonding through Mocking, One-Upmanship, and Self-Deprecation

Male friendships are typically characterized by low levels of self-disclosure; where women seek intimate confidantes, men base friendships on activity partnerships (Sherrod, 1987). Humor plays an important role in male friendship. Thus, the use of humor and bullying/mocking/teasing “frames” (Goffman, 1974) the discourse of the magazine in a particular way. The tone and banter mirror real life interactions between some men. In his work on male bonding in fraternities, Peter Lyman (2004) concludes that the male bond is built upon a joking relationship. He writes, “Fraternal bonding is an intimate kind of male friendship that suspends ordinary rules and responsibilities of everyday life through joking relationships” (p.174). He suggests that joking works to negotiate men’s fear of losing control and autonomy, both threatened by intimacy with women (marriage and family) and the authority of the work world. I would add, from the discussion in the previous chapter, that joking and playing at adolescence allows men to avoid the adult responsibility that comes with both of these territories as well. According to Lyman, a ritual exchange of insults functions to create group solidarity and ‘taking’ the joke demonstrates strength and coolness, two primary masculine ideals. Thus, crudeness and vulgarity are justified as necessary for the formation of the fraternal bond (p.173). This teasing and joking style of interaction can be called “male banter” (Easthope, 1990).

Utilizing the style of communication that these men are already accustomed to constructs a familiarity. *Maxim* probably seems natural and normal in this context because it reflects how many males have been socialized to communicate in embodied interactions. In this way, what might read as aggressive or cruel to an outsider of this cultural mode of communication may play a normalizing and comforting role to those

familiar with it. Obviously, not all males communicate with each other in this way; however, for those that do, *Maxim* successfully replicates this dynamic. This demonstrates the way in which niche market materials strategically segment their audiences by targeting certain readers through particular signals (Turow, 2000). Target or niche marketing segments different groups in order to provide them with specific messages about how certain products tie into their lifestyles, thus forming primary media communities (Turow, 2000). As critical media studies scholar Joseph Turow (2000) explains, “Making sure that people who do not fit the desired lifestyle profile are *not* part of the audience is sometimes also an aim, since it makes the community more pure and thereby more efficient for advertisers” (emphasis in original, p.243). This is accomplished through “signalling,” which “involves the creation of media materials in ways that indicate to certain types of people that they ought to be part of the audience and to other populations that they do not belong” (Turow, 2000, p.243). Thus, readers are either attracted to or repelled by the style and tone of the magazine based in part on their own way of communicating and interacting, which works to the magazine’s advantage of creating a certain community of readers.<sup>24</sup>

This parasocial phenomenon is evident throughout the whole magazine but is best exemplified in the Readers’ Letters section, where we witness a direct interaction between readers and *Maxim*. Except for a few rare instances, each printed letter is followed by a mocking commentary on the letter by *Maxim*. As outlined in the previous chapter, *Maxim*’s responses to readers’ letters tend to fall into four overlapping categories: flippant, antagonistic, mocking, and self-reflective. All are heavy on the

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<sup>24</sup> Benwell (2001) argues that while the magazine readers do not constitute a single social group, a solidarity is manufactured through the employment of an in-group sociolect, which ultimately reinforces a homogenous and uniform gender identity (p.30).

sarcasm. I discussed the first two earlier, arguing that a flippant response is present when a reader attempts sincere correspondence with *Maxim*, while *Maxim*'s response turns antagonistic when the reader critiques or corrects the magazine. Now I want to address the latter two. The mocking style of response seems to fit in the male interactive dynamic hypothesized above, where teasing and back-and-forth banter is a common way of communicating in male bonding. In this context, mocking makes the recipient more included in the *Maxim* culture, as if the reader is seen as a friend. Here, the reader has been accepted enough to be made fun of and to obtain approval from the ultimate alpha male, *Maxim*. Between male friends, there is a jockeying for status, and in this magazine's world, *Maxim* always gets the final word. Yes, *Maxim* will mock you, but mocking in this cultural context means you are in the inner echelons to some degree. In this culture, mocking can stand in for or act as intimacy. Examples of this type of interaction in the Readers' Letters pages include:

Reader's Letter: My wife loves a tidy region and insists I shave myself, too, but whenever I try to fulfill her request, I get these itchy red bumps. Is there some sort of special technique or cream I should be using?

*Maxim*'s Response: Try these simple steps: (1) In the shower, liberally massage the area with baby oil. (2) Using a mug and shaving brush, mix up a good head of warm lather. (3) Firmly grasp a straight razor and plunge it into your eye. Now call a good divorce lawyer. (February)

RL: I read with great disappointment that Dale Earnhardt Jr. tries to cheat when he races [We Want Answers!, May]. He's desecrating the proud legacy left by his father and taking away from the credibility of NSACAR. You should be ashamed to have featured someone so dishonest in your magazine.

MR: Dear M (if that is your real name): Are you insane? What he said was every driver tries to get an edge without violating the letter of the law. You know, like you and those antisodomy statutes. (July)

RL: I recently bought my first-ever copy of *Maxim*. My girlfriend found it and, as a joke, has started teasing me about liking other girls. It is hurting my feelings. What should I do?

MR: We're not sure, because we think you might be joking about liking other girls, too. (October)

RL: I was wondering where I can find those pink panties with cherries on them that Kim Smith wore on the cover of the July issue of *Maxim*. I want to get them for my girlfriend. MR: You want her panties, we want to get in her panties – same difference. Anyway, the undies are made by Stella McCartney, but we can't promise they come in your size, Pinocchio! (October)

These examples demonstrate *Maxim*'s tendency to offer a sarcastic response that is at the reader's expense, essentially making fun of them. However, while seemingly cruel to an outsider, it should be expected by the reader. The fact is that *Maxim* responds sarcastically across the board, and readers still continue to write in. This is the case even considering that *Maxim* introduced a "Worst Letter" section (beginning in September) to expose and humiliate one super-loser. What is the motivation here? Why else would a reader knowingly write to *Maxim*, when he can expect to be mocked within the pages of the magazine? In this context, it makes sense that *Maxim*'s insults, jabs, and low blows are seen as simply part of normalized male-male interaction. Rather than being offensive, it is all in good fun. It must be mentioned that if a reader's letter is printed in an issue, he receives a gift. Examples of past gifts include: a bag and shirt from Under Armour (January), a pair of Smith Optic sunglasses (March), *The Sopranos: The Complete Fourth Season DVD* (April), and a \$50 gift card from FYE (For Your Entertainment) (October). Perhaps some readers write in just for the prize since it is typically something of high-quality and/or of value as indicated above. It is also possible that the gift acts as compensation for taking the abuse from *Maxim*. However, it seems most likely that the readers do not mind, expect it, and want to participate in that form of interaction. Of course, without an audience analysis, we cannot know for sure what



individual readers' motivations are. Interviews with readers would allow for further confirmation of this theory.

Nevertheless, examining the exceptions supports this argument as well. Sometimes readers write in very seriously, usually with some sort of critique or complaint (as discussed in the previous chapter). These can seem sincere, as if they are not expecting to be totally mocked and are hoping to actually engage *Maxim*. They may even sign their full name and geographic location. This seems to represent a moment when two males are entering into communication with different expectations, essentially a mismatch of cultural codes of masculinity. The reader might think he can reason with or make a logical argument/plea to *Maxim*, but *Maxim* only works in the realm of mocking, bullying, and sarcasm. However, these incompatible modes of communication and their related codes of masculinity work to uphold and benefit the relationship between *Maxim* and those readers that are familiar with and relate to the magazine's style of communication. Again, this suggests the act of signaling discussed earlier.

Also consistent in the *Maxim* responses to readers' letters is the type and style of insult. In the examples provided, which are indicative of the responses in general, the insult comes from comparing the reader to a girl or suggesting that he is gay. It appears that insinuating that a male is gay is the worst possible and also, the most common insult. As Dave Itzkoff (2004), a former *Maxim* editor, acknowledges in his memoir about working at the magazine, "Gay, to [the readers, is] a fate far worse than death" (p.253). However, it is not necessarily a direct reference to homosexuality, but can also be an allusion to another form of subordinated masculinity or a comparison to femininity, both exhibiting non-masculine traits. In this way, homophobia, as Michael Kimmel (2005a)

argues, is more than just the fear of homosexuality; it is the association with anything not masculine, i.e. homosexuality, femininity, metrosexuality, etc. As C.J. Pascoe (2005) describes it, “[B]ecoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength or in anyway revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with sexual identity” (p.330). For instance, the first example apparently deserves mocking because of the metrosexual (i.e., the feminized) act of a male shaving his pubic hair. For *Maxim*, this behavior solely belongs in the realm of the feminine. In addition, the reader implies that he succumbs to the demands of his wife, particularly in an instance that threatens his own masculinity, thus he is weak, not a real man in the eyes of *Maxim*.

Another example of this is *Maxim*'s disdain for Canada and Canadians. *Maxim* responds to one reader's letter with: “No ladies? And you're Canadian? Go figure” (September). Not only in the Readers' Letters, but throughout the magazine, this is slung as an insult. *Maxim* qualifies All-Pro Nathalie Girard's two-time Canadian national taekwon do championship titles with: “Granted, her opponents were only Canadians” (March); All-Pro Alissa Scharfer, a shark diver and scuba instructor, says that she always regrets having Canadians on the boat, to which *Maxim* adds: “If by boat you mean continent, we know how you feel” (June); and in the April table of contents, *Maxim* writes: “Canada Fights Back! Our northern neighbor tries in vain to stand up for itself.” Canada is the most prominent, but insulting comparisons to and mockery of France are also common. In describing *Maxim* Worldwide model Michelle Hunziker, it says: “Meet a Swiss-born, Italian-raised, German-employed uber-hottie. (Once again France proves useless)” (February). In a December story about the 2005 calendar by French lingerie

company Aubade, *Maxim* claims, “The French may suck at war and insist on eating quiche, but they *do* know how to keep a date the right way” and includes the fact, “Not all Frenchmen are effeminate, despite studies to the contrary.”

For *Maxim*, these work as insults and deserve ridicule because of their associations with peacefulness, sensitivity, and metrosexuality, i.e. non-masculine traits. Ultimately, *Maxim* is calling into question the sexuality of Canadian and French men and subsequently, subordinating their masculinity. Further evidence is *Maxim*'s frequent jabs at celebrity males like Clay Aiken, Siegfried and Roy, Michael Jackson, Ashton Kutcher, David Schwimmer, Matt Damon, and Ben Affleck. Bethan Benwell (2001) contends that this form of “male gossip,” a pejorative form of gossip, ultimately reinforces normative values and group identity by mocking those men – homosexuals and metrosexuals – who do not fit molds of hegemonic masculinity (p.22). She argues that “othering” in this way suggests a heterosexual anxiety about homosexuality, saying “Men can only gossip pejoratively about men who are ‘different’ from them since identifying with, rather than against them constitutes the taboo desire for other men” (p.23).

*Maxim* is clear about its homophobic, anti-metrosexual stance.<sup>25</sup> In response to the growing trend of male grooming, including waxing, tanning, shaving, and manicuring, Charles Coxe, Executive Editor of *Maxim*, told *The New York Times*, “Guys are losing everything that makes them manly. The unibrow is there for a reason. How are you going to keep that spot warm? Besides, that’s your plumage. It’s the equivalent of a bird’s big red chest. Be proud of it” (quoted in Jacobs, 2004). He also referenced the *Maxim* coined word ‘mantropy,’ which refers to the growing feminization of men.

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<sup>25</sup> Although, there is a Human Rights Campaign (the nation’s largest gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender civil rights organization) advertisement in the December issue. It depicts twin brothers, one of which is gay, asking “which twin is the second-class citizen?”

*Maxim* even has a website, entitled the Mantropy Control Center: A Service of MAXIM Magazine dedicated to treating the ‘disease’ ([www.mantropy.com](http://www.mantropy.com)), where one can learn about the symptoms, take a self-diagnostic quiz, read about recent outbreaks, and report witnessed mantropy violations. It also includes treatment options; one of which is “a monthly dose of *Maxim* magazine and strict adherence to the lifestyle outlined in its pages.” The other, a preventive measure, leads the user to another website, Endangered Man ([www.endangeredman.com](http://www.endangeredman.com)), dedicated to the preservation of “Man” by “expounding on the virtues of man and educating the public on his current plight.” The goal is “to derail Man from the fast-track to extinction and preserve him for generations to come.” Similarly, in 2004 at a *Maxim* sponsored conference, there was much talk amongst advertising and marketing executives about dispelling the term metrosexual, as it alienated a certain audience who did not want to associate with the term (Carracher, 2004).

However, if *Maxim* has not made its stand clear on appropriate expressions of masculinity, readers can also act as monitors. An example from the November Readers’ Letters section illustrates this point. The reader writes:

Who the hell is Steve Kandell, and what hippie commune did you drag him out of to write music reviews? The Polyphonic Spree gets album of the month? The Polyphonic goddamn Spree? This is a men’s magazine, right? That CD would only be good for target practice, though using the actual members would be even better. The best thing for you to do with little Stevie Ken Doll would be to feed him a vial of acid and lose him at a Dead reunion...If you’re lucky, he’ll never find his way back to the office.

In this way, the relationship between *Maxim* and its readers and also amongst the readers of the magazine exemplifies Kimmel’s (2005a) characterization of masculinity as both a homosocial and homophobic construct, meaning that manhood is a performance for other

men's approval. Essentially, homophobia stems from men's fear of being identified as not manly enough by other men. As Kimmel describes it, "Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men" (p.35). Pascoe's (2005) research on 'fag discourse' among adolescent boys echoes this conclusion, observing that it is precisely the fluidity of the fag identity – the moving in and out of fag positions – that renders it a disciplinary mechanism with regulatory power, as the threat of the abject position polices boys' behavior in order for them to avoid the label and reject the identity (p.330, 333). In this way, it is not simply homophobia; it is "gendered homophobia" (Pascoe, 2005, p.335).<sup>26</sup> As a discourse rather than a static identity, the fag is "a position outside of masculinity that actually constitutes masculinity. Thus, masculinity, in part becomes the daily interactional work of repudiating the 'threatening specter' of the fag" (Pascoe, 2005, p.342).

Consequently, Pascoe concludes that homophobic language and joking rituals reveal this process. In addition, this homosocial interaction of male bonding – intimacy between males – is mediated through humor so as not to be mistaken for homosexual desire (Lyman, 2004). As Peter Lyman (2004) concludes from his research on sexist jokes in male group bonding, "Male bonding in everyday life frequently takes the form of a group joking relationship by which men create a serial kind of intimacy to 'negotiate' the latent tension and aggression they feel toward each other" (p.170). Jokes targeted at homosexuality serve "to draw an emotional line between the homosocial male bond and homosexual relationships" (Lyman, 2004, p.174). In her work on male friendships,

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<sup>26</sup> Hence, as Pascoe (2005) notes, in "fag discourse" it is entirely possible to be both gay and masculine. However, I would argue that in the realm of *Maxim*, homosexuality and gayness are presumed to be inherently linked to effeminacy.

Karen Walker (2004) points to an important function of jokes in male friendships – the ritual reaffirmation of heterosexuality among men whose social circumstances create a level of physical and emotional intimacy culturally regarded as unmasculine. Lyman (2004) also suggests another social function of sexist jokes in fraternal bonding: to control the threat that individual men might form intimate emotional bonds with women and withdraw from the group.

Here are three examples which demonstrate *Maxim*'s attempts at negotiating its relationship with its readers:

Have we ever told you how much you mean to us, beloved readers? Without you we wouldn't have jobs. There, we've said it. Intimacy is awfully rewarding. Wanna make us sappy? Send your memorable words to the address on the right. We're waiting... (May)

We pledge allegiance to our devoted readers who graciously send us their drunken rants each month. What? You haven't been preserved in the pages of *Maxim*? What are you waiting for? Send all missives to the address to the right. (July)

Just for once, we pretend to care. (Don't go getting used to it.) (October)

Again, a lack of seriousness when it comes to intimacy is present, perhaps because this is typically mediated through humor since men feel that they cannot openly express this to one another due to feminine connotations.

However, since *Maxim* does not seem to have trouble making fun of anyone or anything in any context, it does not necessarily always maintain consistent opinions or values. The only real consistent theme is the mocking and ironic brand of humor. *Maxim* could assert something and then someone else could agree, but it will still mock him. This is evident in a number of the readers' letters, where the reader appears to echo *Maxim*'s sentiments or make a *Maxim* style comment yet still gets made fun of. Below

are two examples of this point. The first reader looks to *Maxim* for affirmation and the second attempts to compliment *Maxim*:

Reader's Letter: I share an apartment with two other guys. It used to be great; now one of them has a girlfriend who's always here. He complains when we stay up late and yells at us for being loud. Plus, her shit is everywhere. I can't walk across the floor without getting strands of her hair stuck between my toes. Worst of all, we have chick mags next to our beloved *Maxims*! Help!

*Maxim's* Response: First, those creatures with breasts are called women, and they're a good thing. Next time one enters the room, instead of yelling "Cooties!" and cowering behind the armoire, try asking her if she has any friends. If she says yes, send 'em our way. (August)

RL: I received your mag two days before Hurricane Jeanne. Since I knew I would be out of power for a couple of days, what could be better than spending time with my favorite mag? *Maxim* and my flashlight were my best friends during the hurricane. Thanks again.

MR: Thanks, Carlos, but we can think of a few things we'd rather spend a few days with: like, say, electricity, or a beautiful woman, or a house. Oh, well – different strokes. (December)

The second example is interesting, as the reader demonstrates reverence for *Maxim*, as it wants, yet *Maxim* then mocks the reader for this. This seems to be the central function of the magazine, for alpha male *Maxim* to always be one step ahead and to always get the last word.

Therefore, we have *Maxim* bullying and teasing its readers, creating a distance or gap between itself and its followers, effectively using its alpha male status to assert its place at the top of the hierarchy. This is clearly evident in the readers' letters and the corresponding mocking and sarcastic *Maxim* responses shown above. *Maxim* distances itself from its readers in other ways besides mocking. The following example shows *Maxim* trying to one-up its reader:

RL: My friend and I are going to break a world record. The two of us are going to drink a keg in less than 56 hours, 22 minutes, and 18 seconds. We

work at a strip club, so we're going to make this a huge blowout. If you need to corrupt an intern or reporter, send 'em our way.

MR: Strippers plus gallons of beer, followed by an inevitable trip to the ER? Sorry, that ain't a world record – that's Wednesday. (July 2004)

This is another common strategy utilized by *Maxim* to dissociate from the readers, to do them one better. However, both of these strategies – the mocking/teasing and the one-upmanship – exist throughout the magazine, beyond the readers' letters pages, where *Maxim* quizzically asks its readers, "What are you saying?" The Readers' Letters section allows a look at the only real forum where the readers and the magazine are in conversation, although *Maxim* always has the final word. Other spaces in the magazine suggest a similar dynamic at work as well. In the Found Porn section of *Circus Maximus*, *Maxim* calls the readers "perverts" when asking them to send in unintentional smut, i.e. found objects that are inadvertently pornographic like the phallic shaped birdhouse described in the previous chapter. On the jokes page, *Maxim* demands the reader to "Laugh, Stupid!" At the back of the magazine on the last page, *Maxim* offers a quiz of sorts called "Bar Exam." *Maxim* asks the reader, "Are you as dumb as you look?"

Bar Exam could also fall into the category of absurd humor described in the previous chapter, where *Maxim* provides the reader with random, obscure, and essentially useless trivia. The quiz format is meant to test the readers' knowledge of what *Maxim* deems important for a man to know. Again, parameters put on masculinity are evident here through the supposed "correct" answers. The following questions from Bar Exam quizzes exemplify the homophobia present in the magazine, from general intimacy between men to actual homosexual behavior:

**3. Match the number of Jager shots to the liquored-up gibberish:**

- |      |                                      |
|------|--------------------------------------|
| a. 2 | 1. Check out my air guitar.          |
| b. 4 | 2. What are you lookin' at, asshole? |



- c. 8                      3. I really love you, man
- d. 16                     4. Let's dance.

(Answer: a-1, b-4, c-2, d-3) (January)

**11. Which confession would probably put the biggest kink in a guy-guy friendship?**

- a. "I peeked at your hand."
- b. "Your girlfriend's herpes...that was me."
- c. "I watch *The Bachelor*."
- d. I want to fall asleep inside you."

(Answer: d) (January)

**8. Nice shirt!**

- a. What? It's blue! It matches!
- b. Justin Timberlake has one!
- c. After the coming apocalypse, everyone will be wearing this!
- d. Thank you. It's a U.S. postal worker's shirt, and this would be my AK-47.

(Answer: d) (June)

**5. What's the favorite summer bonding ritual among you and your buddies?**

- a. Breaking up with girlfriends.
- b. Road trippin'
- c. Touching, crying, and hugging while watching the John Candy movie *Summer Rental*

(Answer: b) (July)

This exemplifies the kind of confrontational or mocking, but jocular, tone that is obviously not meant to alienate the reader who is already schooled in this style of communication. However, it also regulates masculinity in the process.

Yet, the editorial voice of *Maxim* also readily acknowledges its shortcomings. The magazine is quite self-reflexive, mostly in a self-mocking way. Benwell (2001) classifies this type of magazine humor as both victimizing and self-ironizing, the former because of how it targets the "other" and the latter because of its anti-heroic sentiments (p.21). Here are some examples from the Readers' Letters section, where *Maxim* responds with a self-deprecating remark:

RL: I caught my husband treating our nine-week-old son to *Maxim*. I thought you'd like to meet your newest reader.

MR: Couldn't you find anything more challenging for a nine-week-old to read? (January)

RL: I finally decided to empty my closet, but as a longtime subscriber, there's no way I could throw out my old issues! Since I was in the Vietnam War, I figured veterans would enjoy them. Whenever I can, I take me old issues to a nearby hospital. I've never actually seen the faces of the men and women who get them, but I'm sure they keep them smiling. MR: Thanks for doing your part, James. *Maxim* salutes you and all the others who have kicked ass for Uncle Sam, freedom, and the right to slap a bunch of sexy pictures and fart jokes together and call it a reputable magazine. (July)

RL: I received two copies of your magazine today. Should I give one away, keep it, or send it back? I figure since I'm being honest, you'll send me something in return. No matter – keep on writing, partying, and doing whatever else you guys do there. My rowdy days are over because I broke my neck after falling 30 feet and am now paralyzed from the chest down. Thank God my hands and brain are functional. Otherwise, how would I be able to enjoy your magazine?

MR: See? You do need a brain to enjoy *Maxim*. Take that, Noam Chomsky! (August)

RL: Either you guys are overworked, drinking on the job, or just plain overpaid. Item 10 of "Death Awaits" [September] says, "Ben Franklin was on to something before the one dollar bill..." Sorry, guys, but Franklin is on the \$100 bill. If you prefer to stand by your article, feel free to send me any bill you have with Mr. Franklin on them, and I'll gladly trade you straight-up for some fantastic bills sporting George Washington!

MR: As you can see, we've received many letters this month pointing out our general stupidity. To atone, we've all decided to give up this whole magazine nonsense and go back to preschool. (November)

Two other related examples, not responses to readers' letters, also demonstrate this self-reflexive, self-mocking style. The first is a correction printed in the November issue, the only correction in any of the magazines in the sample. It reads:

Correction: We promised we would thank Mara Wallis, director of the documentary *Entertaining Vietnam*, in our October issue for her invaluable help researching our feature "The Most Rock'n'Roll Deaths of All Time." Then we didn't do it. Not only do we regret the error – we also hereby admit that we're friggin' morons. (November)

Secondly, on the last page of the magazine, *Maxim* encourages readers to subscribe with the tag: “Want to learn more startling, useless trivia?”

In this context, *Maxim* does not only make fun of others, it also makes fun of itself. In addition, it makes fun of people who work for *Maxim* in the pages of its magazine to its readers, suggesting hierarchy within the alpha male organization. For instance, Executive Editor James Heidenry is consistently teased in the table of contents section for Bar Exam – “James Heidenry has resolved to love his body, no matter what his cup size” (January); “Executive Editor James Heidenry’s handicap? Low-hanging man-boobs” (February); “Enter a raffle to touch Executive Editor James Heidenry” (June), and so on. In August, *Maxim* mourns: “No more James Heidenry to kick around.”

Hiroki Tada (credited as Art Assistant Hiroki Tada!) is also frequently the butt of the joke. In an article on how to build a time capsule, *Maxim* includes Hiroki’s hair as an item, saying “We bequeath you this lock of Hiroki. May its DNA let him be cloned and humiliated forever” (July). Throughout the issues, Hiroki is indeed mocked for a laugh. He is used in various test situations – steakhouses in New York City (January), pizza in Chicago (March), and torture devices (April). In the latter, he is pictured in a diaper with a pacifier in his mouth and large-sized baby bottle in his hand, crouching inside a cage. The captions read: “Loss of dignity” and “*Maxim* disavows any knowledge of Hiroki.” A short feature on the world’s smallest things is entitled, “Smaller Than...Hiroki’s Sushi Hog!” Much of Hiroki’s representation focuses on his being Japanese and his apparent difficulty speaking and writing English. As I mentioned before, it is not clear whether this is true or simply exaggerated to enhance the joke. Nevertheless, it seems that this style of relationship based on teasing and banter also exists among the *Maxim* staff.

Benwell (2004) also identifies this oscillation between two masculine positions, which she names heroic and anti-heroic masculine identities. The former, a more traditional masculinity, tends toward physicality, violence, autonomy, and silence whereas the latter suggests a more ironic, humorous, self-reflexive, and self-deprecating masculinity (Benwell, 2003b). Benwell (2004) argues that “heroic masculinity is aspired to by the magazine male; anti-heroism is what he inevitably falls back on when this ambition either fails or is deemed to be too narcissistic or insufficiently ironic” (p.14). Benwell (2003b) calls this “process of marking and identifying what is simultaneously negated or denied” a “fascinating tension within men’s magazines” (p.162). This “politics of irony” works to destabilize the notion of a coherent and visible masculinity, as ironic knowingness, self-reflexivity, and oscillation construct a lack of closure and essential ambiguity (Benwell, 2003b). Thus, Benwell (2003b) concludes that the ambiguity and continual oscillation of masculine identities acts “as a shield against the explicit markings of masculinity” and “to refuse a stable position for masculinity” (p.162), which ultimately protects it from critique.

Thus, in relationship to the readers, this plays out as the editorial voice of the magazine oscillates between aligning itself with the readers and then being condescending to the readers. There are times when the editorial voice of *Maxim* switches from “you” to “we,” suggesting an allegiance with its readers. Like the ticker-tape running across the front cover of the magazine, *Maxim* works from the assumption that it has things in common with its readers, it knows its readers, and essentially, it is its readers. The magazine editors and the readers both have the same interests and desires and thus, are ultimately both just a bunch of regular guys. This works to contradict the

instructional nature of the lifestyle component of the magazine. However, this assumption of commonality becomes essentializing and universalizing when it presumes that all men are this way and like these things and where the implication is that if they are not or do not, then they are not real men. As a result, an ideal of masculinity is proposed and endorsed.

Thus, in some cases, it is as if the creators of the magazines are in the same boat as the readers, establishing a connection of ‘we all know that we are losers’ through self-deprecation. However, at other times, the magazine quite transparently mocks the readers. While the mocking or making fun works as a tool of one-upmanship in the jockeying for status between males, it also seems central to fraternal bonding. Consequently, I suggest that when the editorial voice is engaging with the reader in a male-male way, it tries to take the upper-hand but when issues of relationships with women arise, *Maxim* concedes to its inadequacies and aligns itself with the readers. Thus, when only maleness is at stake, the males banter with each other; however, when femaleness enters the picture, males depend on their unified experience as males against that of females.

For example, in the table of contents listing for the Readers’ Letters section, where it is predominately male-male communication, *Maxim* pokes fun at its readers: “Find out what our readers are crying about this month” (July); “Join us as we lovingly mock your valuable feedback” (August); and “You do know that harassing us by mail is a felony, right?” (December). However, in the interviews with the featured females, where male-female communication is foregrounded, *Maxim* switches to an alliance with its readers. For example, *Maxim* Worldwide model Barbara Mori (January) says that she

sometimes toys with the fragile hearts of men, meaning “If a guy is used to getting his way with women, I like to make him beg.” *Maxim* retorts: “That means guys like us, who aren’t used to getting our way with women, are in like Flynn, right? Sweet!” Similarly, *Maxim* Worldwide model Collien Fernandes (June) reasons that it is not improbable that she might date a fellow Maximite. However, she mentions that hygiene is extremely important to her, saying “I hate men who don’t wash their hands after they pee. And I find drunk men who get out of hand unattractive.” *Maxim*’s response: “Damn – just when we thought we had a shot.”

#### Ultimate Alpha Male: A ‘Maxim’ on Masculinity

From the above discussion, it is evident at this point what *Maxim* considers a threat to masculinity, i.e. femininity and homosexuality. This is useful in articulating *Maxim*’s ideal of masculinity in terms of opposition, i.e. what it strives to not be like. However, it is also important to note what version(s) of masculinity *Maxim* praises and celebrates. There are various points throughout the magazine where this is made apparent. Firstly, I want to discuss a regular section in Circus Maximus called “Great Quotes,” where *Maxim* provides readers with some of its favorite quotes. Interestingly, all of the quotes are by males, with the majority taken from films. Examples include: “Col. Trautman on why you shouldn’t make *First Blood*’s John Rambo mad” (April); “Mr. Blonde explains his behavior to an officer of the law in *Reservoir Dogs*” (July); “Businessman Tony Montana makes a scene in a posh Miami restaurant” (August); “*Full Metal Jacket*’s ornery D.I. reminds his charges that guns don’t kill people – U.S. Marines do” (September); “*Swingers*’ miserable bachelor Jon Favreau is so money he doesn’t even know it” (October); and “Agent Smith decides to let Morpheus in on a little secret”

(November). Most use foul language, reference violence, and have connections to specific genres of film typically associated with a male audience (although not exclusively), such as gangster, action/adventure, and science fiction films. In order to elucidate this point, I provide one of the quotes in full as follows:

Listen, kid, I'm not gonna bullshit you, OK? I don't give a good fuck what you know, or don't know, but I'm gonna torture you anyway, regardless. Not to get information. It's amusing, to me, to torture a cop. You can say anything you want 'cause I've heard it all before. All you can do is pray for a quick death, which you ain't gonna get. (Mr. Blonde, *Reservoir Dogs*, quoted in July 2004 issue)

This is emblematic of the others mentioned above, and these are the quotes that *Maxim* selected as great quotes. Inherent in this selection is an appraisal of a certain type of masculinity that reflects aspects of the traditional definition of hypermasculinity – violence as manly, danger as exciting, and toughness as self-control.<sup>27</sup> In a similar fashion, *Maxim* honors this type of masculinity in the *Maxim* Hall of Fame. Its inaugural inductee (February) is Merle Haggard, “a honky-tonk legend and a criminal mastermind.” *Maxim* congratulates Haggard on finally finding marital bliss – after four divorces – with a woman 23 years his junior. The second inductee, actor Richard Harris, is honored for his alcoholism. As *Maxim* eulogizes, “May we all follow his shining example...except for the working part, that is” (March). Here, a man is being praised for his drinking problem, while his hard work and successful career are put aside as trivial.

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<sup>27</sup> These are characteristics of the macho personality constellation, which includes five components: (1) calloused sex attitudes toward women; (2) violence as manly; (3) danger as exciting (risk taking behavior); (4) toughness as control over emotions; and (5) negative attitudes towards sexual minorities. The original Hypermasculinity Inventory (the first three components) designed to measure the macho personality constellation was created by Mosher and Sirkin (1984). The fourth component was added by Hall (1992), and the final component was added by Beckett (unpublished).

This same attitude is evident in The *Maxim* Scholarship (October), where the magazine is “searching for a few students with no class.” *Maxim* proclaims that it wants to give back to the educational system. *Maxim*’s request for applications reads:

We’re handing over cold, hard cash to the higher-ed student who can best prove his/her worth through stories of dedication, tenacity, and the ability to tandem-bong beers with his/her roommate while wearing bear suits on the dean’s front porch. Send tales of your most ridiculous campus shenanigans. The student with the best essay gets a gold star, extra recess time, and a cold stack of \$100 bills\* to spend on comic books and baseball cards. (\*One bill is technically a stack, kind of.)

Again, in parodying college scholarships, *Maxim* chooses to honor not an academically successful student but rather a prankster. This demonstrates, yet again, *Maxim*’s irreverence. Additionally, while open to both males and females, the scholarship praises a lack of seriousness and constant state of joking around; it welcomes Ariel Levy’s “female chauvinist pigs” as well (which will be discussed further in the next chapter).

Male role models are also highlighted in “We Want Answers!” This section of the magazine is a two page spread, the first of which is an interview and the second is a picture. The following males are featured here: Norm Mac Donald (January), David Carradine (February), Colin Quinn (March), The Rock (April), Dale Earnhardt, Jr. (May), Ben Stiller (June), Nelly (July), John McEnroe (August), Michael Vick (September), Russell Simmons (October), Sylvester Stallone (November), and Snoop Dogg (December). It represents quite a range, from athletes to comedians to actors to hip hop personalities. While the interviews obviously vary depending on the person, similar types of questions are asked. *Maxim* focuses the conversation on women and sex, drugs and drinking, gambling, sports, fighting and violence (and injuries). Again, there is an emphasis and appraisal of traditionally hypermasculine traits. If that is not clear enough



for the reader, there are even articles as obvious as “Crap You Should Know” (June), which offers the reader the “encyclopedia of crucial guy knowledge,” of course not without the obligatory *Maxim* cheekiness.

A final place to examine esteemed masculinity is in the various advertorial sections that recommend (or discourage) the purchase of certain products. Hot Zone appears in the middle of the magazine and provides information about “All the Entertainment You Need to Escape Reality.” It consists of reviews for movies, music, TV shows, DVDs, video games, books, and even calendars. Similar to the discussion thus far, products that fit hegemonic masculine culture are the most highly recommended, particularly in the video game section. Additional advertorial sections include *Maxim* Style, the fashion spread, and also Top Gear, a guide to tech gadgets and other similar products. This focus on consumerism, particularly fashion and accessorizing, contradict the anti-metrosexual leanings of the magazine. However, both of these sections are relegated to the back of *Maxim*. This is true in most magazines as well so I do not want to overstate the relevance of their placement in the magazine. It is interesting that *Maxim* Style preceded Top Gear but in July moves to the very end of the magazine before Bar Exam, thus putting the tech gadgets before the clothes.

Nevertheless, the self-referential language used to internally mock these sections is rather transparent. For example, the taglines for *Maxim* Style and Top Gear are “Your Ultimate Guide to Looking Good” (changed to just “Fashion” in July) and “Because the Best Things in Life Cost Money,” respectively. Also, each individual issue’s Top Gear begins with a cheeky quip: “It turns out money can buy happiness and a damn good hand job too” (January); “Only 340, 988 paper routes to go and you can afford all this

incredible stuff!” (February); “Nothing unleashes our inner geeks like a centerfold of extreme technolust” (March); and so on. While perhaps not exactly upholding stereotypical notions of hypermasculinity, the irreverent, flippant, and self-referential use of irony helps deflect the associations of consumerism with femininity and homosexuality, therefore protecting masculinity. In addition, women are also featured as models within the fashion spreads, so it is not just men alone to be looked at and admired by a primarily male audience. Again, this acts as a form of masculine protection through heterosexual reassurance.

Ultimately, it is not all that surprising that *Maxim* celebrates stereotypical masculine traits, like violence as manly, danger as exciting, and toughness as control over emotions. Earlier discussions indicate other connections to hypermasculinity through negative attitudes towards sexual minorities. In the next chapter, we will also see a connection to calloused sex attitudes toward women. However, as stated previously, while humor and irony are key components of *Maxim*'s version of masculinity acknowledged within the literature on 'lad mags,' they are not generally discussed in broader masculinity theory. Thus, an irreverent attitude could be thought of as an additional characteristic of a hypermasculine posturing. Through its denigration and validation of certain forms of masculinity, *Maxim* constructs its own acceptable masculinity. Given its name, it is no surprise that the magazine suggests a “maxim” (guideline or dictum) on masculinity. As a relational construct, *Maxim*'s masculinity also has implications for women and femininity, which is explored in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 7

### *MAXIM'S VIEW OF WOMEN*

Now that we understand the male-male dynamics of *Maxim*, where do women fit into all of this, especially considering their seemingly central role? In Michael Kimmel's (2005a) theorization of masculinity as both homosocial enactment and homophobia discussed in the previous chapter, he argues that "women become a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale" (p.33). From this perspective, even the "heroic conquest of women" is about homosocial evaluation, as it verifies and asserts one's masculinity, i.e. denies one's homosexuality, in the eyes of other men. Thus, the presence of women is often not really about women at all; women in *Maxim* are important, but not necessarily in the way we might think. The women are often more a part of the male-male interaction (here, between the magazine creators and readers and between the imagined community of readers) than anything else.

In his research on fraternal bonding in the locker room, Timothy Jon Curry (2004) concludes that the male bond is "strengthened by an effective display of traditional masculinity and threatened by what is not considered part of standard hegemonic masculinity" (p.205). Curry offers the following line of reasoning at work for athletes in the locker room:

(a) "real men" are defined by what they are *not* (women and homosexuals); (b) it is useful to maintain a separation from femaleness or gayness so as not to be identified as such; (c) expression of dislike for femaleness and homosexuality demonstrates to oneself and others that one is separate from it and therefore must be masculine. (p.212, emphasis in original)

The previous chapter's discussion confirms this as *Maxim*'s logic as well. In addition to the use of "homophobic talk" to defend one's masculinity, Curry also points to the importance of "talk about women as objects" in order to ensure one's image as a practicing heterosexual. As Curry suggests, "Perhaps just taking the view of women as persons is enough to evoke suspicion in the locker room" (p.211). The unfortunate result is aggressive and hostile talk toward and about women.

In *Maxim*, there is quite a bit of humor around sexual negotiation. The magazine makes light of the serious issue of sexual violence, thus reframing it as inconsequential and funny. For example, the introduction to the Readers' Letters page of the February issue says, "Are pesky restraining orders keeping you from delivering your valentines? We feel your pain. Next year, try stalk—er, talking to her in the letters pages of *Maxim*." An April (admittedly the April's Fool issue) "How To" article gives tips to reader on how to "Catch Her Eye." The parody article gives step-by-step tips on how to essentially stalk someone. *Maxim* jokingly suggests:

Pay attention to her daily routine so you get to know how she spends her time. Check out hacker-tools.com for the latest software to monitor her Hotmail account and keep tabs on her whereabouts. To track her habits 24-7, try pairing a set of ATN Viper modular night-vision goggles (\$269 at opticsplus.net) with a nifty meth habit (about \$50-\$100 per gram from your local dealer).

Their final advice, "Never give up. True love waits...25 to life when it has to." The photo accompanying this article is of a man in a trench coat flashing two women who are looking away in embarrassment. The caption reads: "Do these shoes go with this penis?" Similarly, in a March article called "Survival School – Stayin' Alive," *Maxim* informs readers "how to beat Ma Nature at her own game" by giving tips for when someone is lost in the desert, in the woods, at sea, in snow, and in New Jersey. One of the Lost at

Sea tips suggest, “If you’re with a group of survivors, form a tight, inward-facing huddle and drape arms around each other. This will increase heat retention – and as an added bonus, you can grope your fellow survivors and blame it on ‘sea creatures’.” In interviews with women models, *Maxim* responses include sentiments such as the following: “Permission to stalk? Sweet!” (All-Pros, November) and “But for some odd reason she thinks guys who ask for her underwear are creepy. Repressed limeys!” (*Maxim* Worldwide, September). In all of these instances, *Maxim*’s flippant and dismissive tone undermines the seriousness and severity of issues like stalking, flashing, and sexual harassment in women’s lives. It also makes these behaviors seem funny and negligible, when in reality they are controlling in nature and often cause trauma to women who experience them.

Another example of the lighthearted tone in which these issues are approached comes in the January article, “Rock of Pages: The 25 Greatest Moments in Metal.” The article “looks back at metal’s loudest, proudest, and just plain druggiest moments.” From the title, it is clear that the highlighted moments are being celebrated and glamorized. Number 25 on the list speaks of Def Leppard’s drummer, Rick Allen, who lost his left arm after a car accident on New Year’s Eve in 1984. The blurb mentions his recovery and subsequent ability to play drums again, despite people’s doubts otherwise. The article continues, “Then the people said, ‘Sure, he can drum, but can he still beat his wife?’ In ’95 Allen answered the naysayers by gallantly assaulting his missus in an LAX airport bathroom. His example remains a beacon to crippled assholes everywhere.”

Lastly, *Maxim* even jokingly advocates for legal protection in ambiguously consensual sexual situations. In the February article “Brave New Worlds: Mars Ho!,”

*Maxim* weighs in on “making the red planet our bitch.” The article happily suggests that “since the Martian year is twice as long as Earth’s, if a man is put on trial for sleeping with a precocious 16-year-old, the statement, ‘Your Honor, I thought she was 32,’ will be considered a valid defense.” A similar sentiment is expressed in a response to a 74 year old reader who writes in about his enjoyment of “the beautiful ladies who grace [Maxim’s] covers and inside pages.” *Maxim* writes: “Glad to hear we’re brightening your Cocoon years, J! Hopefully, when we reach your age, the courts will have decided to label us ‘harmless’ as well” (July). Curry (2004) concludes that talking about women as objects of sexual conquest may serve a function in male bonding but it ultimately “promotes harmful attitudes and creates an environment supportive of sexual assault and rape” (p.214). The way in which gender relations are presented within the pages of the magazine define and constitute masculinity and demonstrate how women and femininity are used by men to prove their manhood in this homosocial interaction. The subsequent sections of this chapter address the fantasy world that *Maxim* creates, where ‘real’ women are put in competition with *Maxim*’s ideal females.

### Women as Other

As discussed in the previous chapter, the closed cycle of ironic self-referentiality within the magazine seems to create a world of male exclusivity. However, it is not just men that are a part of this world, since certain women are part of this culture, too. *Maxim* generally purports the “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus” belief, although this adage is not explicitly stated. As a result, the opposite gender is viewed as beyond comprehension and ultimately, beyond reach. In this way, ‘real’ women are seen as other. They trap men in marriage (wives are commonly referred to as “the ball and

chain”), always have PMS, and like to nag. In the “How To Be A Best Man” article (May), the number two duty is described as such, “Once you’ve helped your doomed buddy suit up, keep him from acting on his sudden urge to change his name and flee to South America.” A perfect representation of this sentiment is the parody of classified advertisements found in the back of the April (Fool’s) issue, the exact opposite of what fantasy women are supposed to be like because they apparently emulate ‘real’ women too closely. One advertises “Fire Breathing PMS Honeys!,” pronouncing “She’s moaning...she’s groaning...and it’s all your fault!” The reader is instructed to obtain “Hot, bloated action!” by calling 1-555-PMS-YEAH! Another classified ad offers “Grouchy Housewives” who are extremely demanding (““Massage my bunions’ if you want dinner!”). In addition, this particular service purports to offer “Nag-a-matic!” options, where the user can pick from a whole list of specific “nags” – Hold the baby; Take out the trash; You’re driving too fast; Pick up your socks; Why didn’t you call; Ow! Cut your toenails; or I’m doing your brother. This service is available by calling 1-555-BLU-BALZ.

In the earlier discussion of the jokes page in *Maxim*, it was clear that there was a lot of hostility and animosity directed towards girlfriends and wives, largely because they are seen as preventing men from living how men would like to live. An example of one of these types of jokes follows:

A man comes home from work one day to find his wife on the porch with two suitcases beside her. “What’s going on?” he asks. “I’m moving to Las Vegas,” she tells him. “I found out that I can charge \$400 a night for what I give you for free.” The guy immediately runs inside, then returns to the porch with packed bags and says, “I’m going, too!” “Why?” she asks. “I want to see how you’re going to live on \$800 a year.” (March)

Here, the wife does not provide her husband with as much sex as he would like. Another example, a review of hardware tools (“Tools of Engagement,” August) reads:

You can't build your doghouse with one piece of straight wood, hoss, so use this 7 ¼ inch, 15-amp circular saw by Bosch to make perfect cuts with a bevel capacity of up to 45 degrees. Now get to work – your old lady's still miffed about all that stripper glitter.

While on the surface this review is about power tools, it also makes assumptions about masculinity and comments on gender relations. The final comment suggests that the wife is upset about her husband visiting a strip club. The implication of all this is that women try to change men or at least nag men in the process.

In addition, traditional women's interests and likes are derided, a prime example being Oprah. It is interesting because she is such a strong personae in women's culture that is targeted for mocking. Rosie O'Donnell is an even greater target for ridicule. This is especially telling given O'Donnell's identity as an outspoken lesbian. Does *Maxim* resent the success of these women? Two strong female personalities that arguably work for the empowerment of women could act as a potential threat to *Maxim*'s masculinity. The relentless assaults on Rosie O'Donnell (“All calls and faxes will be given front-row seats to a Rosie O'Donnell look-alike wet T-shirt contest” (February); “The worst show on TV? Obviously, you've never caught an episode of *Rosie O'Donnell's Tabletop Dance and Mayo Wrestling Party* (March); and so on) seem to epitomize what *Maxim* despises about women (and possibly feminism) – confidence, outspokenness, and defiance. She is the ultimate ‘nag.’ Not to mention, she is a lesbian and does not meet *Maxim*'s standard of beauty.

In this context, women are “other,” supposedly impossible to comprehend and impossible to relate to. Thus, in order to understand the opposite sex (because they are



all the same so once you figure out how to deal with one you have obviously figured out how to deal with every other woman as well), males need tricks and techniques. The advice for how to interact with girlfriends is rarely about establishing good communication and honesty.<sup>28</sup> Most of the advice is presented as just another game to play to get what one wants or to get off scot-free, essentially promoting little personal responsibility. For instance, an article entitled “Make-Up Sex Tonight” (April) is introduced with the following sentiment, “Remember when you messed up...and she busted you? If you’d chosen your next few words just a bit better, you’d have gotten off scot-free. Our panel helps you score all-night forgiveness for all your future sins.” A similar article called “Win Your Girl’s Mind Games” (August) asks the reader, “Wish you could get your own way without her throwing a fit?” In both cases, the advice is to sweet-talk, finagle, and essentially, lie. This works with *Maxim*’s mission of getting away with as much as possible so then later one can avoid accountability. But, since it is advice, the hetero-masculine reassurance comes in the form of the essential *Maxim* ironic humor as well as pictures of the scantily clad women peppered throughout the advice pages and elsewhere in the magazine. It is these scantily clad women to whom I want to turn our attention, specifically to compare their representation in the pages of *Maxim* with the portrayal of ‘real’ women as discussed above.

#### “Female Chauvinist Pigs”: From Cover Girls to Hometown Hotties

As a contrast to ‘real’ women, *Maxim* provides the fantasy woman. She comes in the form of the cover model and other female “stars” featured in the magazine. Cover models include: Michelle Branch (January); Paige Butcher (swim suit issue, February);

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<sup>28</sup> Not to say that the advice in most of these types of magazines, whether geared towards male, female, heterosexual or homosexual, etc. readers are ever really giving good advice!

Elisha Cuthbert (March); Paris Hilton and Marge Simpson (double cover, April); Josie Maran (The Girls of Van Helsing, May); Jessica Simpson (June); Kim Smith (July); Anna Kournikova (August); Milla Jovovich (September); Avril Lavigne (October); Laura Prepon (November); and Brunettes of the Apprentice and Blondes of the Apprentice (double cover, December). We are introduced to these featured women on the cover of the magazine with both a sexy photograph (usually wearing a bathing suit, “bra and panties,” or lingerie and seductively gazing out at the reader) and a cheeky cover line. For example, Michelle Branch appears on the January cover in front of a fire-themed background wearing only a pair of black underwear tied at the sides, covering her breasts with her arm, and gazing at the reader over her left shoulder. The cover line reads: “Barbecue! Michelle Branch Dressed To Grill!” The photo caption says: “If she’s done on that side, isn’t it time to turn her?” Here, Branch is literally talked about as a ‘piece of meat.’ Of course, this is accomplished with *Maxim*’s essential ironic knowingness, although she ultimately is still being objectified. We are also encouraged to visit [maximonline.com](http://maximonline.com) to view additional photographs and videos of Branch. This is representative of the covers of *Maxim*. These cover models are then featured in a photo spread within the magazine, which also includes an interview with the various women.

The cover model is not the only woman featured within an issue, although she is meant as the draw and highlight. Within Circus Maximus, there is a subsection entitled “*Maxim* Worldwide.” This introduces various cover models from *Maxim*’s other world editions, including: *Maxim* en Espanol (January, April); German *Maxim* (February, May, June, July, November); British *Maxim* (March, September, December); Portuguese *Maxim* (August); and Russian *Maxim* (October). Similar to the cover models of

American *Maxim*, these women are presented wearing bathing suits or bra and panty sets (either barefoot or with high heels on), gazing seductively at the reader from a sexually suggestive position. Both a photograph of the original cover as well as at least one other photograph (probably from the original shoot) are included in the pages of American *Maxim*. There is also a short synopsis about the model called “Her Story.”

In addition to the cover models discussed, each issue also has short features of other B-list, lesser known, or up-and-coming celebrities. These women generally appear after the specific cover model photo spread. For example, the February swimsuit issue includes seven women in the central photo shoot; the December issue highlights “The Donald’s babes” and focuses on the blondes and brunettes of *The Apprentice*, highlighting five women who were on the show; the June issue features women from different reality television shows; the August issue includes a photo spread of various Olympic athletes; and the September issue presents NFL cheerleaders. Other examples of female features include: Victoria Pratt from the television show *Mutant X* (January); model-actress Nikki Bokal (March); *Entourage*’s Arielle Kebbel (July); *Nip/Tuck*’s Kelly Carlson (August); music video dancer Melyssa Ford (October’s special music feature); and Alana de la Garza from the WB’s *The Mountain* (November). Like the other women-centered features discussed thus far, each of these includes at least one sexy photo and also a short synopsis about the person featured. In *Hot Zone* (the entertainment review section of the magazine), an up-and-coming television or movie star is also highlighted in a similar way in “Have You Seen This Girl?” Again, a sexy photograph is accompanied by a short bio-synopsis. In photo shoots incorporating

multiple models, it is common to have lesbian-themed pictures, where the women pretend to kiss, lay on top of one another, or seductively claw at each other's clothing.

Within the magazine, these women act as a stabilizing and comforting force because they counter *Maxim*'s perception of 'real' women, meaning the women that *Maxim* readers interact with and have relationships with in their interpersonal lives. The women in the magazine do not challenge men. Heck, they actually like ordinary guys, particularly *Maxim* readers. And get this: Looks generally do not matter as long as the guy is nice and has a good sense of humor, which is what these women relay time and time again as the ideal qualities in a man. When *Maxim* Worldwide cover model Anna Shperova (October) is asked why she sent in pictures of herself to *Maxim*, she responds, because "your magazine's not like all the others. You have your own particular style and humor that appeal to me." Similarly, in the February swim suit issue, the models are quoted as saying over and over again how sexy and great *Maxim* is: "I'm so psyched to be in *Maxim*. It's, like, the epitome of sexy" (Shawna); "I'm thrilled to be doing *Maxim*. It's nice to see myself in a different light, to see a sexier side of myself that doesn't come out that often" (Paige Butcher); "*Maxim* is one of those magazines that every girl wants to be in, because every guy wants to see it. I mean, just look at the sexy pictures!" (Lauren James); "A girl doesn't walk around every day in a little bikini. This shoot let me play out the fantasy of being really sexy" (Amber Arbucci); and "*Maxim* is one of the sexiest magazines out there. Being in it makes me feel sexy" (Kim Smith).

From the focus on their oiled-up, scantily clad bodies that dominate the photo spreads, these women are clearly idealized for their looks and celebrated for their ability to meet a specific standard of beauty – light skinned but tanned (unless exoticized for

their non-whiteness), long hair, large breasts, thin, and waxed. Essentially, these women are evaluated on their 'hotness' factor. However, in some regards, this evaluation goes beyond looks to a certain attitude and personality, specifically one that not only accepts but extols the values embodied by a *Maxim* male. Thus, the purpose of the interview or bio-synopsis is to extend the fantasy of the female model. Not only is she attractive (which is of utmost importance), but she likes ordinary guys (even not particularly attractive ones) and identifies with their values, i.e. *Maxim* readers. She is not the type of girlfriend to get angry if her boyfriend goes to strip clubs or visits prostitutes; she actually encourages this kind of behavior (e.g., "I don't have a boyfriend, but if I did and he went out and blew \$200 at a strip joint, I'd be like, 'Hell, yeah, that's pimp!'" says Danielle, 20 year old Buccaneer's cheerleader, September). Thus, in the *Maxim* world, the perfect girl (because she is usually called a girl not a woman) is interested in "guy stuff" while still being girly. She looks good but does not care how her guy looks, and she is interested in everything he is interested in too (Danielle loves football, knows the entire script to *Old School* by heart, and envisions the perfect date as involving football and chicken wings).

Comments made by the featured celebrity women demonstrate this point repeatedly. Shawna, featured in the February swim suit issue, says that she likes guys who can make her laugh: "My mind's always in the gutter, so I love dirty jokes." Michele Branch, cover model of *Maxim*'s January issue, identifies herself as "kind of a pervert" and discusses how she and her makeup artist like to watch porn on the tour bus. When asked if she feels like she needs a break from testosterone, her response is, "No, I'd rather hang out with men than women, honestly. Women are insecure and cruel. Guys, you just sit around and tell fart jokes." The September Hot Zone "Have You Seen

This Girl?” focal point, Ivana Bozilovic, relies her adventurous interests: “I’ve jumped out of planes, swum with sharks, piloted a MiG fighter jet, *and* caught a 150-pound tuna!”

However, even the B-list celebrities, actresses, or models are out-of-reach for the *Maxim* reader. Therefore, the magazine also highlights ‘ordinary’ women who are just ‘one of the guys.’ Essentially, this is a continued celebration of those women with a guy sensibility but in an ultra-feminine body; however, these women are more attainable than the celebrities. Thus, certain women are indeed included in this world of male exclusivity, essentially what Ariel Levy (2006) calls “female chauvinist pigs” (FCPs) in her book of the same name, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. Levy defines FCPs as “women who make sex objects of other women and of [them]selves” (p.4). This term refers to the phenomenon that men are no longer the only ones promoting sexism but that women engage in sexist behaviors, including self-exploitation. According to Levy, these are women who attend strip clubs, eat at Hooters, like hanging out with men better than women, watch *The Man Show*, and read ‘lad mags.’ FCPs decided to “join the frat party of pop culture” (Levy, 2006, p.4), asking “Why try to beat them when you can join them?” (p.93). In this way, FCPs demonstrate that they are not “girly-girls” but rather are “one of the guys.” As Levy describes it, “She is post-feminist. She is funny. She *gets it*. She doesn’t mind cartoonish stereotypes of female sexuality, and she doesn’t mind a cartoonishly macho response to them” (emphasis in original, p.93). Those that do not ‘get it’ are shown to be uncool and out-of-touch. Therefore, participating in and supporting raunch culture provide an opportunity to distinguish oneself as laidback and different, i.e. “not like other women.” However, this

produces an inevitable bind because while the FCP shows disdain for “girly-girls,” men find them attractive. Thus, as Levy notes:

The task then is to simultaneously show that you are not the same as the girly-girls in the videos and the Victoria’s Secret catalogs, but that you approve of men’s appreciation for them, and that possibly you too have some of that same sexy energy and underwear underneath all your aggression and wit. (2006, p. 99)

Levy likens this process to what is now sometimes referred to as “Tomming,” where a person deliberately upholds the stereotypes assigned to his or her marginalized group in the interest of getting ahead with the dominant group. The above celebrity examples indicate some of this (e.g., In an April feature, Allison Dunbar from *The Sopranos* says, “What’s cooler than *Maxim*? I’m a visual lesbian. I think most women prefer to look at pictures of girls.”), but now I want to address the ‘ordinary’ women presented in the magazine.

In Circus Maximus, there is a regular sub-section called “All-Pros,” where photos of “gainfully employed hottie[s]” are submitted and selected to be featured in the magazine. The tagline reads “America’s Sexiest/Hottest \_\_\_\_\_” with the blank filled in by various professions. These include: police officer (January); roofer (February); stunt woman (March); paintball sharpshooters (three women featured, April); salvager (May); shark diver (June); radio DJ (July); medicinal marijuana doctor’s assistant (August); secretary (September); realtor (October); teacher (November); and ICU nurse (December). The professions seem to fall into the categories of more traditional ‘masculine’ jobs (police officer, roofer, salvager, etc.) and then supposed male fantasy-oriented jobs popular in pornography (secretary, teacher, nurse, etc.). These women submit photos because they want to appear in the pages of *Maxim* and thus, be

accepted by *Maxim*'s brand of masculinity. Their looks automatically qualify them, as they fit the stereotypical standard of beauty. Like the other pictures described thus far, these women also appear in bra and panties (either barefoot or with heels) posed suggestively and with pouty or inviting gazes.

Another example of 'ordinary' women highlighted in the magazine is *Maxim*'s Hometown Hotties contest. Here, women submit photos to compete for the title of "Sexiest Girl-Next-Door." *Maxim* readers vote for their favorite candidates and the five finalists are featured in the pages of the magazine, in the same way that all the other women who appear in the magazine are presented – sexy photo(s) with a short personal bio. Both the March and December issues exhibit Hometown Hottie contest winners. These women exemplify the *Maxim* fantasy girl, both hot and down with *Maxim* values, i.e. "female chauvinist pigs" as discussed above. For example, 5<sup>th</sup> place winner (March), Monica White from Las Vegas, works as both a real estate agent and an organizer of bachelor parties. She is quoted as saying, "Sometimes I even hang out at my parties. I love getting lap dances, and guys love to watch...so everybody wins." White describes her dream date, as "A huge steak dinner, dancing, lots of drinks to loosen everything up. Then we'd go skinny-dipping." Vail Bloom, 3<sup>rd</sup> place winner (March), says that "at school I dress pretty conservatively because everyone at Princeton is very buttoned-up. But I definitely have a wild side." This is apparently evident in her participation in the "intensely sexual" dance company called DiSiac (as in aphrodisiac). As she describes, "There's a lot of role-playing and girls groping each other onstage. You have to be very open-minded to watch us." 2<sup>nd</sup> place finisher (March), Diana Razinn, describes her dream party to *Maxim*: "the biggest orgy in the world, with strawberries, whipped cream,



champagne, hot fudge, caramel syrup, and toys. And I would direct the movie of it.”

Winner (March) Christina Dare claims *Dumb and Dumber* is her favorite movie and that beer breath is a turn on.

Amber, 5<sup>th</sup> place (December), and Stacie, 4<sup>th</sup> place (December), are both heralded for being big sports fans. Amber has attended Seattle Seahawks football games for five years, and Stacie hosts an ESPN radio talk show. Similarly, 3<sup>rd</sup> place winner (December), Ursula, loves bourbon, sports like hockey, and movies like *Kill Bill*. Self-proclaimed bad girl, 2<sup>nd</sup> place (December) winner Martina, is a hard-partying Hooters girl. She admits to having kissed girls (but pretending it did not happen the next day), which suggests that her same-sex experiences are more a performance for show than anything else. In addition, she reassures *Maxim* readers that “size doesn’t matter. Sex is more mental than physical.” Top Hometown Hottie (December) Brittany is a Southern belle with a pit bull and a taste for tequila shots.

Obviously, these Hometown Hotties are primarily chosen based on their looks and bodies; however, their celebration of *Maxim*-esque masculinity also makes them favorites with the readers (hence, the votes to win!). It is not to say that some, maybe even all, of these women truly share the same values and interests that *Maxim* espouses; however, it is more that *Maxim* glorifies this version of femininity at the expense of others. *Maxim* taps into a trend in representations of femininity that also appeals to men as an ideal or fantasy. As a result, there are incentives for women to occupy this particular subject position. These behaviors and attitudes are rewarded and put on a pedestal, where the women are deemed attractive, sexually appealing, or even just friend-worthy. As Levy (2006) suggests, when the woman is in on it and “gets it,” there is an ego boost, the

exceptional feeling of being the “loophole woman” or the “honorary man.” She is indeed rewarded with freedom, power, and acceptance. However, Levy also notes that while “[she] may be getting ahead in some way...[she is] simultaneously reifying the system that traps [her]” (p.106) because the process only reaffirms that womanhood is something inferior in need of escape.

*Maxim* offers other opportunities for women to get into the pages of the magazine. Sometimes it holds small contests, where it requests sexy photographs of women doing random things, like wearing roller-skates (March) or popping champagne corks (January). The winner’s photograph is published in the Readers’ Letter section, and she receives \$100. On occasion, women will simply enclose pictures of themselves with their letters (this could occur more frequently, although the number actually published is few). However, women not only submit photos of themselves to *Maxim* but they also contribute as advice columnists. *Maxim* has a semi-regular article called “Says Her,” where females provide advice to *Maxim* readers. Essentially, this feature serves as a way for women to provide the male readers with a female perspective, ultimately intended to help them bed women. Examples include: decoding her secret signals (January); Sapphic secrets (March); how an average guy can score out of his league (May); the secret to scoring “a hot, horny Mrs. Robinson” (June); the groupies’ guide to sex (October); sexy co-ed secrets (November); and secrets of a Hollywood harem (December). Most read like a soft-core pornographic fantasy.

In addition, females also contribute via the Readers’ Letters and joke pages, although not nearly as frequently as males (or at least, not published by *Maxim* as frequently as male readers’ letters and jokes). Here is an example of a female letter:

I can't seem to find a date. Since you guys are brutally honest, I figured I'd ask you why. I love football, drinking beer, cleaning, and screwing...but the guys I meet want to "cuddle by the fire" or "walk on the beach." Fuck that – let's go to a game or a concert. Why are men becoming dickless pansies? You all seem normal. So tell me: Where are men like you?<sup>29</sup> (July)

The following two examples signify female readers' glorification of *Maxim's* brand of masculinity:

RL: I'm a freshman girl at the University of Alabama and have yet to declare a major, but I know I'd be a great sexologist. What would I have to do in order to become one? I'm obsessed with your magazine and would love to work at *Maxim* one day. Talking about sex and learning more about it is exactly where my concentration lies. Get back to me soon. (April)

RL: Thanks for making my panties wet! Greg Dulli ["Burn This!" Hot Zone, March] is by far the sexiest man alive. I've wanted to jump his bones since I was 15. I'll always be grateful to both him and *Maxim* for keeping my undies moist. P.S. Panties enclosed. (June)

Here, we see female readers affirm the masculine posturing of *Maxim*; it is also evident that women can be just as sexist as men. Of course, there are different stakes, as misogyny from women works to validate sexism from men. Below are two examples of jokes submitted by female readers:

Q: How is a woman like a condom? A: Both spend more time in your wallet than on your schlong. (June)

Q: How many women with PMS does it take to screw in a light bulb? A: One. *One!* And you know *why?* Because no one else in this house knows *how* to change a light bulb. They'd sit in the dark for *weeks* before figuring it out, and then they wouldn't even be able to find the damn light bulbs despite the fact that they've been kept in the same fucking cupboard for the past *17* years! I'm sorry...what was the question? (emphasis in original, July)

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<sup>29</sup> *Maxim's* Response: Have you ever considered moving out of Canada?

Again, I am not trying to question the authenticity of these women. It is quite possible that they actually extol the “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus” axiom as well. Instead, I am arguing that *Maxim* upholds a certain ideal femininity, in some ways a fantasy, where all the women are extremely attractive and affirm *Maxim*’s masculinity. As Levy (2006) argues, it is not that exhibitionism is not necessarily a real, authentic experience of sexual expression for some women, but it is problematic when it is sold and held up as the only sexuality for all women. Rather than being regarded as one kind of sexual expression, exhibitionism is now considered sexuality in general, making performance more important than pleasure for female sexuality (Levy, 2006). Essentially, *Maxim* is asking all women, through its rewards system, to perform a particular sexuality, which ignores the great range of human desires and expressions of sexuality, ultimately stifling both women and men. As a result, women are pitted against each other and put into competition – ‘real’ women as other versus the ideal ‘fantasy’ women of *Maxim*’s world. Levy also notes that celebrities and models are paid to perform a particular sexuality yet ‘real’ women are pressured to adopt this same sexuality in their interpersonal relationships. She asks, “And how is imitating a stripper or porn star – a woman whose *job* is to imitate arousal in the first place – going to render us sexually liberated?” (emphasis in original, p.4).

In addition, the incessant importance placed on women’s physical characteristics reifies unrealistic beauty ideals for the majority of ‘real’ women and reduces women to their ‘hotness.’ The special features of female Olympic athletes and the women of *The Apprentice* epitomize talented and intelligent women being reduced to their bodies. While the photo spreads serve as male titillation and possible masturbation material, the

emphasis on *Maxim*'s particular version of ideal femininity validates its version of masculinity, as these are relational constructs. In addition, these women serve to confirm complete heterosexuality, and their conquest gives males status within homosocial interactions.

## CONCLUSION

The previous three chapters focus on my findings related to humor, male bonding, and women within the pages of *Maxim* magazine. The first discussion chapter explored the humor present in the magazine, particularly highlighting *Maxim*'s irreverent/ironic tone, and suggested its important role in negotiating potential threats to masculinity and insulating *Maxim*'s construction of masculinity from critique. In the second discussion chapter, examining the parasocial relationship between the readers and creators of *Maxim* revealed an emulation of embodied male social interaction reliant on humor. The last discussion chapter focused on women in *Maxim* and how the magazine sets up a dichotomy between 'real' women and *Maxim*'s fantasy women.

From these findings, it is evident that *Maxim* tells a rather clear story about masculinity, through its appraisal of stereotypical masculine traits and its disparagement of the "other," in this case anything and everything deemed "not manly." Thus, *Maxim* works to reinforce a rather homogenous and unified masculine identity constructed in relation to – in contrast to – femininity, homosexuality, and metrosexuality. At the center of *Maxim*'s masculinity is a nonchalant and irreverent attitude that takes nothing seriously, which also conveniently works to protect its retrograde or un-PC masculinity. This infusion of irony into masculinity suggests what Benwell (2004) calls "irony as a mode of existence or way of being" (p.10). Interestingly then, negotiating potential threats to masculinity and insulating oneself from critique are actually components of masculinity.

Thus, *Maxim*'s masculinity is not necessarily a rejection or backlash to feminism per se, as it is more a rejection of unmasculine traits and non-masculine males. It is a

rejection of the feminist-friendly SNAG with his feminine connotations, which ultimately connects to a rejection of femininity and homosexuality. Part of constructing masculinity is policing the masculinity of oneself and of other males, as is evident in the pages of *Maxim* which emulates this dynamic present in embodied male friendship. Subsequently, this balancing act manifests as an oscillation between “heroic” and “anti-heroic” masculinity, to use Benwell’s terminology (2003, 2004). Heroic masculinity is the ideal one strives to meet, the masculinity held up by *Maxim* magazine and levied against the readers, yet the anti-heroic side acknowledges the failure (or inability) to live up to this ideal, the reality of the ‘we are losers’ presented by the editors to the readers. In this way, *Maxim* self-reflexively and self-deprecatingly acknowledges the unachievable masculine ideal that scholars such as Kimmel (2006) and Pascoe (2003) describe.

C.J. Pascoe (2003), in a study on high school boys, problematizes the “multiple masculinities” model by finding that “regardless of his actual social status, each boy is able to construct himself as sufficiently masculine by discursively reworking his individual or group identity such that it mirrors some part of this masculinity of the Jock,” i.e. competence, heterosexual success, and dominance (p.1424). Rather than slot the boys into static typologies of hegemonic masculinity, complicit masculinity, or resistant masculinity (where Jock is hegemonic and all others are marginalized), Pascoe concludes that the boys attempt “to infuse their own identity with recognizably masculine characteristics” (p.1435). Perhaps this helps us to understand the success of *Maxim* magazine, as it offers “failed” or “marginalized” men a way to claim masculinity for themselves through competence, heterosexual success, and dominance, while also

appealing to the already hegemonic achieving “Jock” (although of course, in reality, no one can live up to this masculine ideal completely).

Irony is central to understanding *Maxim*, as its “mischievous knowingness [has enabled] it [to] survive in a post-feminist era” (Benwell, 2001, p.19). Rather than reflect a backlash to feminism, it seems *Maxim* is negotiating the prescriptive hegemonic ideal of masculinity with conflicting masculinities lived by men. Thus, *Maxim*’s representation of masculinity suggests less a backlash response to a ‘crisis in masculinity’ and more a struggle between these different masculine identities. In the process, *Maxim* does offer ‘constructed certitude,’ particularly as a stabilizing force in regards to gender relations. The magazine relies on a form of biological essentialism or sex role theory, where gender and sexuality are assumed to be natural and fixed. In enforcing “heroic” masculinity, perhaps *Maxim* is compensating for a destabilized identity that it does not feel comfortable with. However, this might be a result of the consumerist imperative, as *Maxim*’s ultimate goal is to sell magazines and push its readers into the arms of its advertisers. Of course, this is dependent on being able to identify with and speak to your reading audience clearly, which *Maxim* has successfully accomplished through its male bonding initiative.

But, what is the consequence of this type of masculinity? As Benwell (2004) notes, “For those interested in the surface play of language and the signifier, irony is wonderfully playful and liberating. For those more oriented to what is signified – that is, meaning – irony is potentially disastrous for its refusal of certainties and consequent apoliticism” (p.10). As seen in this study, irony, irreverence, and a lack of seriousness work to insulate this version of masculinity from criticism, thus creating strong



roadblocks for potential critiques from both feminists (who address beliefs and practices that are detrimental to women as much of the humor and sexual objectification in *Maxim* could be seen as, see Whelehan 2000) and from men (who question the constraints this masculinity puts on men). Essentially, it shuts down debate by preemptively implying that critics ‘don’t get it’ and as Benwell (2003) argues, by evading a clear definition of masculinity that can be pinned down and analyzed. In this way, irony helps ensure contradiction, ambiguity, and ambivalence.

Also, irony and self-parody always run the risk of simply reproducing that which they are ironizing or parodying, depending on how it is read. If it is understood as irony or parody, then it works as exposure and enlightenment; however, if the irony is overlooked, then it can reinforce that which was intended to be ironized or parodied. In addition, the constructions of ideal masculinity and femininity are stifling and constraining for both men and women, as they try to enact their gendered identities in the real world. Frankly, a masculinity that so resolutely roots itself in homophobia and defines itself in opposition to femininity can only be understood as insulting at best and dangerously oppressive at worst.

This study contributes to the literature on lad mags, as it offers a focused and detailed look at American *Maxim* magazine. This fills an important gap in the research on men’s magazines, as the United States has not been a site for investigation into these types of magazines. It is important to remind the reader that this study utilizes a sample from 2004. According to the trade press, in 2006, *Maxim* underwent its first major overhaul since its initial launch in 1997. The redesign incorporated more sophisticated and elite photography as well as more coverage of fashion and tech gadgets. Moving

away from the babes and booze emphasis, *Maxim* made an attempt ‘to grow up.’ This also coincided with the naming of a new Editor-in-Chief, Jimmy Jellinek, who came from another Dennis publication, *Stuff* (Smith and Granatstein, 2006). At this time, the tagline changed from “The Best Thing to Happen to Men Since Women” to “Your Life Made Better.”

Analyzing a more recent issue of *Maxim* (April 2007) supports this characterization made by the trade press, as there are some significant changes to the magazine.<sup>30</sup> First, there are far less pictures and photo spreads of females, and there is an increase in advertorial related to fashion and ‘gear,’ both of which are no longer relegated just to the back pages of the magazine. Features on clothing and other accessories appear throughout the magazine. The new Editor-in-Chief, Jimmy Jellinek, even discusses spring fashion in his Editor’s Letter. Although he attempts to ironize the importance he is placing on this topic, it comes off awkward and not really funny. It seriously lacks the cleverness which appears in the 2004 issues. Not to mention that Jellinek’s photograph screams metrosexual, with his trendy hipster shirt, gelled hair, and scruffy good looks. In general, the magazine is a real ‘glossy’ as a result of the more sophisticated and elite photography described above.

Following, the articles appear shorter, with a general one page maximum (although this is probably true for many mainstream magazines these days), and there are a lot more shiny photographs. The tone still attempts to be irreverent, yet it is not as successful as in the earlier *Maxims*. Rather than appearing natural and witty, it comes off

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<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note that April 2007 marked the 10 year anniversary of *Maxim* magazine. However, there was no mention or celebration of this fact. This could be a result of media products constantly needing to assert their freshness and hipness factor, although it could also be an indication that the new *Maxim* wants to distance itself from its older versions.

as forced and awkward. The tone is generally more serious overall. Advice and self-help columns seem to have simultaneously multiplied and lost their requisite dismissive responses, cheeky one-liners, and scantily clad females. Also, there are no longer the following regular sections: jokes page, Readers' Letters, or Circus Maximus. Indeed, *Maxim* has 'grown up.' It no longer seems adamant about proving and protecting its masculinity. In addition, rather than using the male bonding model seen in the 2004 issues, it seems to have adopted the traditional lifestyle format of support, advice, and consumption. As a result, it does demonstrate the non-static nature of gender, as constructions of masculinity shift and change. However, these are merely preliminary conclusions, as they are based on an examination of only one recent issue (decidedly not an April Fool's issue) and its apparent distinctions.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, my study of the 2004 issues of American *Maxim* corroborates many of the findings present in the existing literature on lad mags, thus acting as affirmation for those studies' conclusions in an American context. Like other scholars, this study suggests the importance of irreverence and irony in the lad mag version of masculinity (which does not appear to be as central in the more recent version of the magazine). It seems that the original ironic and irreverent humor style successfully transported itself across the Atlantic. However, unlike Benwell (2003, 2004), whose research is grounded in linguistics and discourse analysis of specific texts (of varying 'lad mags'), this study demonstrates the pervasiveness of an irreverent and ironic tone throughout the entire magazine. While my conclusions resonate with those of Benwell's, they are distinct in their holistic approach to *Maxim*. In addition, this study contributes to the area of research in its conclusions regarding male bonding: *Maxim*'s mediated male

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<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, the current *Maxim* website still mirrors the tone of the *Maxim* of old.

space demonstrates continuity with embodied male-male interactions. Finally, my analysis suggests an interesting set of gender relations, where *Maxim* takes on the role of “alpha male,” regulating both masculinity and femininity.

Scholars of lad mags argue that irony merely acts as a disclaimer for bad behavior (Benwell, 2004). James Davis (2005) says:

If there is irony and humor in these guides, it is not the kind that depicts hyperbolic sexual aggression for purposes of urging, by contrast, that the reader engage in kinder and gentler conduct. Instead, it is a ‘just we boys’ delight in how long the metaphors of conquest can be prolonged. (p.1017)

Irony in this context is the equivalent of saying “Just Kidding!” However, I question the implication that some scholars make that this type of irony is strategically employed.

Does it serve a strategic purpose? Yes, it creates a system that insulates from critique.

But from a textual analysis, how can one determine the motivations of its creators or whether the by-product is intentional? Rather than a conscious and deliberate strategy employed by the magazine, it could simply be that the editors are bearers of this masculinity and carry it into the product. In this way, the magazine does not create the masculinity (although it might reproduce it); this form of masculinity preexists the magazine (see Crewe, 2003).

This suggests production as an important place to further investigate these questions around irony and masculinity. However, “not only is the corporate ideology of the magazines unarticulated and the identities of the writers literally multiple, but we must also contend with the eternal philosophical problem of evaluating text; authorial intention is only one part of the meaning-making process” (Benwell, 2004, p.11). Thus, more audience research is necessary to identify how readers actually engage with the

magazine. In addition, audience research could investigate readers' attitudes and opinions about the recent changes in the magazine's format and content.

This textual analysis could inform future textual analyses examining *Maxim* longitudinally, American *Maxim* in comparison with the original British *Maxim* or any of the other international editions of the magazine, or *Maxim* in comparison to other men's titles in general. *Maxim*, the top selling US lad mag, could also be looked at in comparison with *FHM*, the top selling British lad mag, in order to illuminate possible differences across national boundaries. Beyond the world of *Maxim* magazine and lad mags, this study points to a potentially larger phenomenon regarding irreverent masculinity. We could ask: Where else in culture do we see this ironic pose and why? In addition, my research raises general questions about masculinity and humor and more specific ones about their role in male friendship. Contemporary research in this area is needed. In addition, research investigating the complexity of men's role in perpetuating an essentially self-defeating masculinity is needed. Also, the insights raised about "female chauvinist pigs" beg exploration of the female readership and advocates of *Maxim* magazine and its values.

Lastly, an investigation into the racial and class components of irreverent heterosexual masculinity would be illuminating. It was difficult to study the dimensions of race and class, as *Maxim* presents itself firmly in the frame of gender and sexuality to the exclusion of others axes of identity. In this way, it is hard to analyze the less explicit, less visible issues without simply relying on assumptions. Consulting literature on race and humor as well as on whiteness would be useful here. However, *Maxim* has a broad-based appeal, with a wide range of young males writing in, although actual reader (and

subscriber) demographics are difficult to find, partly due to the difficulty in pinning down magazine readership in general and also partly due to advertising pressure. However, as irreverence and irony are so foundational to *Maxim*'s masculinity, it is important to investigate if this is a race- and/or class-specific masculinity. Unfortunately, this project is unable to answer those questions. Comparative research and audience research would both provide better avenues for exploring the race and class dimensions of irreverent masculinity. Hopefully this project has set useful groundwork to make those studies possible.

## AFTERWORD

I want to take this opportunity to share a few brief reflections on the process of doing this research, particularly in regards to exposure to the content and genre of the material. Those who have followed my interest in these magazines would probably notice a remarkable shift in my approach and attitude towards them. In the early stages (perhaps before my interest was actually a research project), I was rather skeptical and dismissive of any claims that there might be value in *Maxim* or any other of these types of magazines. However, through the research process I underwent quite a transformation. While my interest in these magazines was indeed sparked by the (objectifying) portrayals of women in the magazines, I now also consider myself open to readings that do not necessarily affirm my original assumptions about the content and function of these types of magazines. Nevertheless, I still position my research as a critical analysis and exploration of the narrative *Maxim* tells about masculinity.

However, while I do not wholeheartedly celebrate *Maxim* and its essential ‘Maxim-ness,’ I have indeed grown to appreciate the magazine in a way I never thought possible. I have to admit that I laughed quite a bit while reading and analyzing the issues from 2004. Of course, I also groaned as well. But the interesting fact is that I laughed and gained an appreciation for *Maxim*’s sense of humor at times. Again, I have to admit that I was somewhat disappointed in the April 2007 issue, as it lacked the wit and irreverence that I had become accustomed to in reading the 2004 issues. I found myself thinking: “I want the old *Maxim* back!” All of this could possibly be a simple result of desensitization to the jokes, style of humor, lack of seriousness, and objectifying pictures of females. I have read and looked at quite a number of *Maxims* at this point. In the

beginning, when the seed for this research project was planted, I used to look at random issues of the magazine and become horrified and angry. This clearly changed over time. Perhaps, as my research indicates, I saw something more complicated going on within the pages of *Maxim* that provided a redeeming quality. However, I could just have easily become ‘used to’ it all as well, desensitizing me to its initial perceived crudeness and vulgarity. As a result, by the end of the project, I no longer felt the same conviction to not support the magazine financially. Initially, I sought out donations of magazines from various outlets so I would not have to purchase them. However, I eventually needed to order additional backorder copies and buy more recent issues. I paid for these out-of-pocket and interestingly, did not feel angry or guilty about it in the end.

Lastly, while I cannot confirm reading *Maxim* as the sole cause, I do believe that looking at many of these magazines over a period of time (as I do not read mainstream magazines often in general) had an effect on my body image. As a person not generally plagued by low body image, I found myself thinking more about my looks, weight, and appearance and also comparing myself to the models in the magazine. In addition, as someone who does not consume this sort of material (read: borderline pornographic) in their ‘normal’ everyday life, it was quite an interesting experience to be exposed to so much sexual content so often. I found myself thinking in a much more ‘sexual’ way on a day-to-day basis, evaluating other people, especially women, in terms of their looks and sex appeal.



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