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1-1-2005

# Construction of Readership in *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *O, the Oprah Magazine*

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Published version. *Media Report to Women*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Winter 2005): 5-13. [Publisher link](#). ©

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# The Construction of Readership in *Ebony*, *Essence* and *O, The Oprah Magazine*

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*This paper was presented to the Magazine Division at the 2004 convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, held in August in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.*

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### *The birth and rebirth of definitive black culture*

The earliest African-American-specific lifestyle publications were born in the wake of a burgeoning Freedom Movement. The need was intrinsic: In the mainstream press there was an innate invisibility of black people and black life. Historically, images depicting black culture were littered with racial stereotypes grounded in slave culture and were further accepted by society as "the way things were" or "common sense."

The founders of both *Ebony* and *Essence* magazine in 1945 and 1970, respectively, recognized the need for a media source that accurately constructed the black race in a racist society and gave voice to black aspirations. American culture was replete with racial and cultural ideology that circumscribed for them what "black" was and even more so, what blacks were not.

Black publishing entrepreneurs believed that readers would appreciate a resource for definitive black culture. The news vehicles would not only highlight the intelligence and achievement of black Americans; in this renewed sense of racism and oppression called the Civil Rights Movement, the magazines were also viewed as a medium for the onset of African-American discourse.

The rebirth of African-American-specific publications is less motivated by politics and racial ideology and more driven by the demands of popular culture and gender self-affirmation. Current examples include *Today's Black Woman*, *Savoy*, *Honey*, *Black Hair* and *O, The Oprah Magazine*. The most successful magazine launch in American magazine history, *O* appears as a major competitor with *Essence* and, according to an interview with Oprah by *Essence* contributing writer Audrey Edwards (2003), Oprah's monthly cover image is positively changing the world's perception of African-American women. Along with *Essence* and *Ebony's* longstanding and successful run of black faces on their covers, *O* magazine joins them to deconstruct the belief among magazine publishers that "blacks on covers don't sell."

### *Self-identity, self-respect and "somebodiness"*

This research study examines the construction of readership in three prominent African-American owned and/or operated lifestyle magazines: *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *O, The Oprah Magazine*. The authors argue that *Ebony*, *Essence* and *O* profess to set a social and political agenda for their target audience to privilege them and their ways of experiencing a patriarchal and disconnected world by invoking self-definition and a heightened idea of "somebodiness." The self-awareness/self-respect doctrine is principally defined in the individual mission statements and fuels the magazines' content, thereby demonstrating how mainstream publications encompass the ability to start a revolution, be it political, racial or spiritual.

In an effort to articulate the specifics of black culture and the black family in relation to American society, *Ebony*, "founded to project all dimensions of

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Black personality in a world saturated with stereotypes," (Ebony, 1995, p. 80) builds a bridge linking history — from slavery to the appointment of an African-American in the White House — with present-day accomplishments and black intellectual thought. The crux of self-definition, according to *Essence* editors, is the discovery of one's spiritual self in reference to definitive black culture and ancestry. By befriending the reader and providing testimonial shared experiences, *Essence* intends "to give Black women what they need to make them feel whole" (*Essence* Editorial Objectives, 2001, p. 1). The uncertain post-9/11 era propels *O* magazine readers to consume the relatively new monthly committed to intimately addressing the epistemology and "unshakeable" belief system of each reader (Granastein, 2000).

In addition to publishing, production and mission similarities and an ethnic bond, *Ebony*, *Essence* and *O* were created in response to a social and political urgency, according to the respective founders. The post-WWII political atmosphere and racial tension inspired the founding of *Ebony* magazine. American society overlooked African-American life, directly criticized African-Americans' employment capabilities and further ignited racial stereotypes. *Ebony* sought to define black culture and polarize the depth of the black personality and intellect (Ebony, 1995). Now the longest-running African-American magazine, *Ebony* is published by the Johnson Publishing Company under the direction of John H. Johnson, an early magazine entrepreneur and one of the most important names in African American publishing.

*Essence* magazine will soon be wholly owned by media giant Time Inc., which announced in January 2005 its plans to purchase the 51% of the shares of *Essence* it did not own from *Essence* Communications Partners Inc. The black power movement, fused with a feminist movement that marginalized black women, motivated the launch of *Essence* magazine in May 1970. The initial goal was to differentiate this publication from traditional magazines by illuminating the black woman and addressing her cultural, social and political needs. *Essence*, which is the first African-American publication to make Advertising Age's "A-List," ranked seventh among top 10 magazines in 2003 (*Essence.com*, 2004).

Oprah Winfrey (Harpo Productions), the celebrity phenomenon who energizes *O* magazine, co-owns the publication with Hearst Corporation's magazine

division. Though not as demographically specific as its counterparts, *O* purports to intimately connect with *all* women on a level beyond the superficiality of weight loss and elevated sexual pleasure. The *O* editors seek to guide their readers in a spiritual exploration of their lives, to encourage her to explore what she wants as opposed to what is wanted of her (The Magazine Guys.com, 2004). According to Winfrey, the events of September 11, 2001, in line with the cultural, social and economic divide, all paint a picture of societal disconnect. "What this magazine does is reconnect people to what deserves priority and to bring meaning to their lives" (O'Leary, 2001, p.53). Ironically, Oprah's magazine has a predominately white female readership (95% women and 86.6% white) with a median age of 38 and nearly two times the median household income of *Essence* and *Ebony* readers (\$61,204) (Carr, 2002).

This research is grounded in cultural materialism, Raymond Williams' theory of the "specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism" (Williams, 1977/88, p. 55). From this perspective all cultural practices are forms of material production that exist as explicit practical communication found in a historically specific society, that is produced under particular social, economic, and political conditions. Specifically, this essay draws on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to recognize the completeness of the entire social process, including the dominant ideas, meanings, and values.

In contemporary society, the hegemonic process does not attempt to brainwash "the masses" but instead focuses on the ability of public discourse to "make some forms of experience available to the consciousness while ignoring or suppressing others" (Lears, 1985, p. 577). Williams suggests that hegemonic forces deeply saturate the consciousness of society, as a highly complex combination of internal structures that must be continually renewed, recreated, and defended. From a cultural materialist perspective it is possible to evaluate cultural practices to see how a dominant hegemonic position is constructed as well as to see how oppositional forces may arise to challenge the dominant worldview.

In his seminal article "Encoding/Decoding," Stuart Hall rejects the traditional mass communication sender/message/receiver model that envisions a passive audience absorbing ideologically dominant messages. Instead Hall conceptualizes an active

audience that decodes messages in a variety of ways: audiences may align themselves with the dominant hegemonic position; however, they may also decode messages from a negotiated understanding, or even from an oppositional stance (Hall, 2001). Hall also sees as problematic the encoding or production process suggesting that, within the creation of cultural products, producers construct an intended audience based on professional ideologies, images, assumptions, and past knowledge about the audience. It is the construction of an intended audience within the hegemonic process that we seek to understand in our evaluation of *Ebony*, *Essence* and *O* magazines.

In an effort to discern how an intended audience is constructed in the magazines we employ a critical literary method of analysis in which we examine the January 2004, February 2004 and March 2004 issues of *Ebony*, *Essence* and *O*, *The Oprah Magazine* in their entirety. Hall suggests that because critical literary methods of analysis focus on the complexity of language, they are particularly useful in delving the latent meanings of a text. A critical literary analysis provides relevant contextual evidence to situate the analysis, identifies key themes and concepts, and offers strategies for understanding a particular emphasis in a text. Such strategies focus on the placement, positioning, and style of the elements of a text, the tone and emphasis of the material, word choice, mode of address, as well as the use of visual elements. Yet Hall suggests that the most "significant item may not be the one which continually recurs, but the one which stands out as an exception from the general pattern – but which is also given, in its exceptional context, the greatest weight" (Hall, 1975). A consideration of the absences found in a text would focus on the avoidances that are the aspects of the text that one would normally expect to see but which are missing. Absence is often crucial to a text's ideological structure and can be a critical aspect of a literary analysis. "It virtually becomes the *raison d'être* of the text, that which is constructed to avoid (rather like a bypass – a road built specifically to a void a place but which only exists because of that place" (Cormack, 1995, p. 31).

### *Channeling spirituality*

Black culture is grounded in religion, mostly structured aspects of Christianity. However, spirituality, not formal religion, is the new feel-good trend in

women's and lifestyle publications. This new "holistic genre" has branded itself and substantially motivates magazine sales and reader's attitudes toward, and acceptance of, magazines.

The media define *O* as a no-nonsense feel-good emotional energizer free of product materialism but high on spiritual worthiness. The publication brings solace to its readers in a time of international political unrest and instability, according to critics (*MediaWeek*, January 2001 / October 2000/2001; *Newsweek*, January 2001; *MediaWeek* April 2000/January 2001; *Folio*, February 2003; *Spring Magazines*, 2001). Oprah's humanitarianism, in accordance with the fact that "people just like her," garners a global readership that includes and considers every woman, from the Fifth Avenue socialite to an impoverished mother in a South African village. The magazine uses spirituality to set trends in the media industry and in the lives of its readers. According to media critics, *O* elegantly weaves its way around common magazine themes so that it can focus wholly on self-acceptance, self-affirmation, emotional stability, and a balanced home life through spiritual enlightenment. Says Amy Cross, *O*'s editor-in-chief, "We're speaking to a set of values, not a set of demographics. We try to create a very intimate conversation with readers" (O'Leary, 2001, p. 53).

A direct linkage to her ancestors spiritually motivates the *Essence* reader, along with sharing the intimate details of the physical, intellectual and emotional lives of other black women. However, unlike *O*, the *Essence* reader and *Essence* magazine acknowledges a specific "higher being." *O* and Oprah Winfrey have both received criticism from religious leaders because of the absence of the term "God" in the publication (Hoffman-Goetz, 1999; Hamlet, 2000).

### ***Ebony*: A glamorous urbanization of the black power movement**

Political overtones emerge as a primary signifier of readership construction in *Ebony* magazine. The increased exposure to symbols of black liberation and measures of equality, in accordance with a narrative and semiotic emphasis on the African-American family and the social progression of blacks in America, implies that there is a visible awareness of several different audiences and an apparent assumption that readers are highly invested in politics and consumed with black culture and black life. The

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combination of three critical agendas — race politics, black political economy, and socio-cultural mobility — work to create a subject, or a defined people, rather than an objectified and stereotypical Other. The objective of this conscious shift from object to subject is to move away from racism, oppression, sexism and primitivism so “that those relations are no longer abusive” (hooks, 1992, p. 47). *Ebony* makes an attempt to elevate racial consciousness for the African-American reader who is not racially and socially aware by playing on spatial relationships between blacks and America, blacks and whites, urbanites and the elite, male and female, and the liberal and conservative.

Cover blurbs and headlines incorporate terms such as “you,” “your,” and “our” to imply ownership and possession and authorize the African-American reader. bell hooks revisits the invisibility of ownership that surfaced with desegregation, “What I remember most about that time is a deep sense of loss. It hurt to leave behind memories, schools that were ‘ours,’ places we loved and cherished, places that honored us” (hooks, 1990, p. 34). Such vocabulary revises the implied meaning of the word *American* in the hierarchy of American society to identify a collective space in a place in which black culture is commonly made invisible or negatively categorized by the dominant society. “The Martin Luther King *Nobody Knows*” (January 2004, emphasis added), a literary strategy used by many publications, attracts the reader by again giving the illusion of possession, but in this sense the reader is granted access and offered an intimate look at a prominent African-American political figure. The intrigue with the particular piece, which is positioned in prime magazine cover space, the upper right corner, is the placement of this newly discovered information in an African-American-specific publication.

Front-of-book departments “For Brothers Only” and “Sisterspeak” strive to give a place and individual physical space to black women and men. The terms brother and sister are specific to black culture. Language, here, is a primary component of cultural and social identity. For instance, “No More Drama,” the title of a January 2004 cover story, is also the title of a contemporary rhythm and blues song. “Soul Yoga” is reminiscent of other cultural traditions — soul music and soul food. The intent here is to strengthen readers by reacquainting them with the past and black life, and also to privilege them or build upon what blacks have accomplished thus far.

*Ebony* addresses several components of African-American life, and most likely because of recent criticism in African-American scholarship, incorporates articles that consider intellectual discourses. The unfortunate reality, however, is that *Ebony* suffers from sub-par writing standards, and although they display potential, interviews rarely delve below the surface of issues, even those of a complex nature. The word choice paradigm, “All of these outstanding young people represent not only themselves but also thousands of other talented young African-Americans,” (February 2004, p. 91) for example, resonates with that of the traditional suburban newspaper. In the case of scholarly driven articles, and those formatted for the purposes of the celebration of academic and professional achievement, the rhetoric and overall expectation of education or reading level of the audience are also ostensibly low in comparison to *Essence* and *O* magazine.

Accomplishment/economic mobility is yet another theme. The original intention of this publication was to highlight the intellect and talent of black Americans, not to emulate the conventional construction of a capitalist patriarchal society, but to combat the notion that blacks are professionally and intellectually incapable and inferior. Departments such as “Front Row” underscore professional, intellectual, and artistic accomplishments by placing scholars, noted corporate figures and entertainers on the forefront of mainstream society because historically, they were once marginalized and downplayed.

*Ebony* is produced under the notion that American identity is established through the ability to be successful and the capability to withstand the internalized norm of incompetence that defined blackness. A parenting guide in the January 2004 issue teaches “How to Prepare Your Child for Success.” In the same issue, “The “Brothers Only” column continues the theme with “A Roadmap to Success.” And “Sisters Speak” features the “Fruits of the Kingdom,” a descriptive historical analysis of how Martin Luther King was the preeminent “seed [that] was sown that became an oak tree in the modern civil rights forest” (Kinnon 2004, p. 38) and incubated black female leadership. The feature references “disciples of the King” in an effort to accentuate central and otherwise unknown women “who also had a dream.”

Even more significant than editorial elements in this reading of *Ebony* magazine is the methodical practice of addressing the intended audience. The

potentially progressive content is supplemented with politically instructive tones that warrant a radical reaction or engagement. On the January 2004 cover a twenty-something Alicia Keys (R&B singer and pianist) offers the illusion of black liberation and social awareness. Keys is dressed in a black leather suit with an accompanying black leather cap, which is very reminiscent of the Black Panther Party, yet feminized with an urban contemporary bent. In activist mode, she assumes an Uncle Sam-like stance, pointing in the direction of the reader. The reader is reminded of the plight of African Americans and the social and political consciousness that resonated with political rallies during the Civil Rights Movement. The message is enforced by Keys' stark stare and commanding pointed finger.

*Ebony* also understands the concept of the sexual object and the male gaze. Below Keys' visible abdomen is a blurb communicating a story of black men and a recently introduced sex pill. The cover model's physical appearance juxtaposed with the political overtones is an attempt to bridge generations by recreating the agony of a now-glamorized black power movement atmosphere and manipulating images and tendencies of a sexually liberated popular culture. In her attempt to center sexuality in the crux of the race revolution, hooks declares that black power and liberation literature reveals the manner in which "black women and men were using sexualized metaphors to talk about the effort to resist racist domination" (hooks, 1990, p. 58).

#### ***Essence*: A testimony of shared experience**

Scholars (see for example hooks, 1990; Hamlet, 2000; and Balkin, 2002) agree that although language and rhetoric have always been a place of struggle for minority groups who live and work among the dominant culture, it is also a place of liberation and identification. For *Essence* readers, testimonial rhetorical speech fused with an understanding of the spiritual importance of their history and ancestry, is the cultural artifact with which they identify to construct their identity. *Essence's* unified mode of direct address assumes that its readers share interconnecting ideologies about fashion, beauty, love, life, spiritual growth and self improvement, and that they "buy into" the notion of a "spirit led" life (McCormack, 1995, p. 34). In the January 2004 issue, Susan Taylor's "In the Spirit" column encourages readers to acknowledge

and experience God's light in their lives, "Our soul and psyche need breathing space—a respite from leaping from one to do to the next...Prayer, meditation, walking, journaling, spiritual reading, help us see clearly and hold depression and disease at bay. Moments free of work, worry, stress, and strain let our insight rise like sunlight." In this conversational letter Taylor uses the first person to describe her spiritual insights and merges it with direct intimations on how readers might incorporate these self-discoveries into their personal spiritual missions.

The transformation, consciousness raising and empowerment potential of testimonial cultural rhetoric are employed here to not only connect with readers through shared experience and communal knowledge, but also to break stereotypical barriers that oppress and objectify the black woman. Permeating the psyche are images of an incompetent, hypersexualized, demeaned, unattractive and evil woman who occupies the very bottom rung of the socioeconomic and sociocultural ladder. *Essence*, with a spiritual manipulation of emotional, societal and political instruments that disenfranchise and disempower, takes the African American woman and man, and many other women of color, on a spiritual journey through an identity movement beyond the socially unexpected.

The March 2004 issue embarks on a discussion regarding the solitude experienced by two disconnected African-American female executives in one patriarchal corporate structure. Taylor reminds the women that blacks collectively exist in "two worlds" and "must know the language and landscape of both." They "could have brought sunlight, support and strategy" to each other. Taylor's direct advice to her readers is to "don our spiritual armor," "have a plan" [of action in order to learn the navigational skills of one's workplace], and "stay connected to the community." In the February issue Taylor's column assumes a political stance and addresses the absence of America's attention to homeland issues such as homelessness, hunger, suicide rates, the presumed heirs to this country's wealth—young white males and the mediated portrayals of African Americans. Exceptionally reminiscent of Martin Luther King who urged American citizens seeking cultural and societal affirmation to embrace communalism, Taylor again encourages readers to "have faith in black people... the forces arrayed against us would wither before a unified, spiritually fortified, determined people," pick

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an issue, [and] hold a vision of what shall be."

The positioning of the front-of-book, feature well and back-of-book departments in *Essence* are strategically calculated to communicate several points. Amid several middle-to-high-end advertisements, "In the Spirit" is the first department. The popular feature appears before "contents," "contributors," "your letters," "straight talk," the editor's letter, and the masthead, indicating that black women are multidimensional and their lives must be nurtured on the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual level; however, spiritual development is necessary to holistically progress through the layers of individual life. Reverting to the nineteenth-century practice of the implementation of religion and spirituality in popular magazines, it is suggested that practicing religion is traditionally natural and "the real test of readers' faith lay in the feeling they brought to their daily activities (Kitch. 2001, p. 20).

Following the preliminary introduction to the *Essence* "spiritual journey," the next portion of the publication features instructive health, fashion, beauty and lifestyle information, including those articles magnified in the cover blurbs, which instruct readers how to successfully progress to a specific place, be it physical — "Winning at weight loss" (January 2004), spiritual — "Inner peace: How to create 'Me Time'" (January 2004), or economic — "Money: 5 Easy Steps to Credit Repair" (February 2004). The testimonial approach attempts to forge a link between the speaker and the audience through the African-American Christian tradition.

"I'm a Survivor," (March 2004) "diary of my weight loss," (January 2004) "7 Deadly Dating Sins (#1: Sex too Soon)" (January 2004) and "Healing Heartache" (February 2004) exemplify testimonial rhetoric that insinuates lived experience and implies understanding and triumph. For most African Americans, culture is grounded in spirituality and religion, more specifically, the black church. Therefore, *Essence* readers find comfort in the testimonial assertiveness of "Godly" or biblical messages. Of primary significance in the January 2004 issue is, "The Seven Deadly Dating Sins." The illustration that accompanies this relationship how-to depicts an Afrocentric version of Eve in the Garden of Eden picking the forbidden fruit. Graphic elements are used to visually overdramatize *deadly* and *sins*.

Interestingly, the covers of the February 2004 and March 2004 issues picture celebrities, an editorial

method most mainstream magazines exercise to attract readers. The January 2004 issue, however, is an exception. It features a black female model who is representative of the race, yet does not represent the political overtones of the month of January, Martin Luther King's birthday. The cover image and editorial content, though saturated with highbrow intellectual verse and spiritual innuendo, avoid the social, cultural and political significance of the King holiday. Although *Essence* does not relegate a significant amount of editorial space to politics directly, the magazine does commonly demonstrate social awareness and makes a visible effort to celebrate African-American accomplishment, most notably in the area of political leadership.

This shift away from traditional celebratory content is also visible in the March 2004 issue, "The Career Issue," which features an *Essence* Exclusive on Shoshana Johnson, the first African-American female POW. Editor-in-chief Diane Weathers makes a direct connection between Johnson and "The Career Issue" in her editor's letter, which is focused primarily on the ex-soldier. "It's fitting that Shoshana's story appear in this issue, the theme of which is work and career," Weathers says of the woman who presumably represents the true image of *Essence*. Again, *Essence* avoids the political significance of Women's History Month and instead of Johnson, readers are greeted by a semi-exposed Eve (hip-hop artist and actor) on the cover. The cover story, a combination of a fashion spread and Q&A, is oddly titled, "Blonde Ambition." The phrase is customarily used in a pejorative fashion against Caucasian blonde women who rely on physical appearance for social and professional acceptance.

### ***O, The Oprah Magazine: Consumer culture and a commodification of class***

Like *Ebony* and *Essence* magazine, *O* relies on elements of the familiar to construct its preferred reader. Unlike the aforementioned publications, *O* resists the use of cultural references and historical tenets with which readers identify. Language, here, is that of the dominant culture only and, therefore, it does not act as a cultural indicator or identification vehicle. These visible absences, in accordance with the avoidance of gender, socially or economically diverse content, work to construct not a reader consumed with ethnic or political culture or an aspect of a socio-cultural environment, but one who is financially apt to

embrace consumer culture. *O* magazine assumes a homogeneous class of product-oriented educated readers who, because they are devoid of financial need, identify with this consumerist construction of life and lifestyle. Both the film and music industry are saturated with portrayals of abundant wealth accumulated easily, through circumstantial inheritance or as in the case of most mass-mediated portrayals of elitism, the desired socioeconomic position was acquired unrealistically. Movies such as *Clueless* revert to the Mistress-Slave paradigm in which the blonde, blue-eyed wealthy young girl flaunts her wealth frivolously while her less financially privileged black acquaintance is consumed with desire for an unattainable lifestyle that is seemingly "the only aspiration that has meaning" (hooks, 2000, p. 83).

The examination of *O* revealed an obvious assumption by the editors and publishers that Oprah Winfrey's celebrity would bridge class, race and gender; consequently, there is no conscious effort to discuss class-based information, feature economically and culturally diverse content and products or examine current political issues. Winfrey's phenomenon provides the privilege of not creating class distinctions in the publication or in the circulation information that publicly traded companies provide to current and potential stockholders. The resulting readership construction excludes several groups, most notably the group from which Winfrey originated. In a magazine that is a self-professed connection of diverse groups in a disconnected world rocked by war and racial and religious politics, the dominant message in both the content and advertising appeals to affluent white women age 30 to 60 years old. Ads for Nexium, a prescription drug used to treat Acid Reflux Disease, and a three-page advertising spread for Zelnorm, used exclusively to treat Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) in women, are featured along with a two-page layout for Effexor, Xr, a doctor-prescribed drug used to treat symptoms of depression. Both the advertising copy and the images in the ads target women. A similar strategy is used in a three-page Botox advertising spread that pictures women dermatologists who not only have used Botox themselves but also recommend it to their patients. While Botox may be used to reduce wrinkles in both men and women, the focus of these ads is primarily on women between the ages of 30 and 60. Interestingly, this is one of the few ad layouts to target women from various ethnic backgrounds. While the vast majority of the ads use Caucasian women and

men, the ads for Botox depict one African American physician, one Asian doctor, along with one Caucasian male doctor and two Caucasian female physicians.

With a production mix of about 50 percent for both advertising and editorial content, very little of the content of these ads appeals to older women, regardless of background, and only a few car advertisements might be of interest to male readers. Approximately one fourth of all of the advertisements present make-up, perfume and skin care products. They include an abundance of those most noted in the cosmetics industry—Clinique, Elizabeth Arden, Neutrogena, Dove, Jennifer Lopez, Eucerin, and Vaseline. These particular product advertisements do not target women of color, for her image is nearly absent. The pastel pink lip gloss, nail polish and blush in beauty features such as "beauty girls' toys" in the February issue complement only women with a light complexion and blond hair. The fashion layout in style pages such as "One Suit, Four Ways" (February 2004) and "Fashion: Viva Las Vegas" in the March 2004 issue seem best suited to slim, white women with blond hair. More importantly, the fashion, beauty and lifestyle editorial products are not realistically cost effective. In "Workstyle: The *O* Memo" (February 2004) a back-of-book fashion feature depicting appropriate career attire pictures a striped silk Michael Kors blouse valued at \$750 and \$980 for the coordinating pleated skirt.

Each monthly publication consists of nearly one hundred full page advertisements. In the February 2004 issue there are only eight images of African Americans (including one image that exposes only the model's legs) four images of Asians, and three images of multiracial men and women. As is the case in the Botox advertisement, most of these diverse images are grouped together in the same ad, while images of white men and women proliferate throughout the magazine. "Advertising is especially persuasive when it offers the new through familiar imagery" (Kitch, 2001, p. 160). The dominant imagery in *O* is not the advertisements or the products placed within the sparse editorial pages. Readers are influenced by Oprah Winfrey and what she represents socially and culturally. Therefore, they approach the publication in search of self identity and self awareness through the illusion that it is attainable through economic mobility and material wealth.

Despite the absence of diverse material, there are several indications that the consumerist view is



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fueled according to an editorial hierarchy. Oprah's ongoing interest in dieting methods and exercise techniques is reflected in the advertising, as well. There are a variety of ads for diet programs such as Atkins, as well as those for power bars and healthy snacks. While issues of diversity abound on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, they are virtually absent in the January, February and March 2004 issue of *O*. Such an omission seems especially noteworthy, and may certainly aid in *O*'s construction of its preferred reader. Winfrey, as an African American and privileged member of an elite society, has assumed the role of mediator "between the black masses and the white folks who are really in charge" (hooks, 2000, p. 91). hooks further argues that with the emergence of African Americans into a society dominated by patriarchy and capitalism, "Allegiance to their class interests usually supersedes racial solidarity" (hooks, 2000, p. 96). From this perspective, class then becomes not a caste system but a commodified object available for purchase by upper middle-class groups. From its inception, *O* magazine has urged readers to "see every experience and challenge as an opportunity to grow and discover their best self" (The Magazine Guys.com, 2004). Through visual and pictorial content and advertising, *O* prescribes, offers and endorses the best of the best of life for the reader searching for personal and material improvement.

From columnists Dr. Phil and Suze Orman to celebrity interviews with Jennifer Aniston (February 2004), Madonna (January 2004) and Sarah Jessica Parker (March 2004), *O* magazine furthers the construction of a white middle upper class reader. Analogous with *Essence*, *O* avoided a celebration of both the King holiday in January and Black History Month in February, opting to instead feature white female entertainment icons, Madonna and Jennifer Aniston.

### *Alternative spaces and the culture of consumption*

This research study examines the construction of readership in *Ebony*, *Essence* and *O, The Oprah magazine*, three popular magazines that purport to be a vehicle of identity and awareness for their target audience. Upon evaluation we find that *Ebony* and *Essence* both challenge the hegemonic process with the incorporation of cultural artifacts that call upon collective memory to form reader association. Stuart Hall's concept of encoding and decoding is relevant

here in that the consumers of both publications, also members of a patriarchal society, are offered media messages that may help them to negotiate the dominant ideological position and help them to resist stereotypes and internalized norms. In some cases the magazines actually construct oppositional messages, challenging the dominant hegemony that audience members may embrace as resistant readings.

In *Ebony* and *Essence*, the primary method of reader construction is language in the form of testimonial rhetoric and black vernacular. Both work as cultural identifiers that manifest notions of shared meaning and collective ownership among African Americans. Language, as communicated by bell hooks, "is a place of struggle" (hooks, 1990, p. 46) for the minority who in order to remain productive and maintain individual space in the dominant society, must navigate the landscape of two dimensional communication. In contrast *O, The Oprah magazine* constructs a readership firmly entrenched in the dominant hegemonic culture. Celebrating a culture of consumption and excess, *O* encourages readers to fulfill themselves through conspicuous consumption. While *Ebony* and *Essence* construct an alternative space for their readers, *O* maintains that fulfillment and self-realization is the embodiment of fashion, make up, gold-plated stationery and Manolo Blahnik stilettos. Such is the publication's luxuriant language, the constructed reader, a middle upper class white woman is attracted to the magazine by its representation of a "luscious" lifestyle that implies holistic individual and social mobility.

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