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## **Playboys and the Cosmo Girls: Models of Femininity in Italian Men's and Women's Magazines and the Popularization of Feminist Knowledge\***

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### **Abstract**

This article offers a historical and textual reading of soft-core pornography in Italy by analyzing a group of men and women's magazines, including the Italian editions of Playboy and Cosmopolitan, and the soft-core magazine for women, Libera, which was published from 1972 to 1978. As part of the 'sexualization of western culture' (Attwood 2009), porn produced new discourses regarding femininity, which openly challenged second-wave feminism and, at the same time, assimilated some of its aspects. Sexiness, self-care, monogamy and compulsory heterosexuality became foundational values for a new, modern, emancipated woman, one who was able to enjoy the benefits of the 'sexual revolution'. Soft-core images also contributed to the spread of new knowledge about female sexuality, both in visual and narrative terms, and was also able to absorb some

key aspects of the second-wave feminist political discourse on sexuality. In particular, the introduction of soft-core images in women's magazines was presented as a 'feminist move' towards women's empowerment. By illustrating the complex cultural function of soft-core pornography for women, this article aims to investigate the historical impact of porn in women's lives and their relationship with popular culture.

**Keywords:** soft-core pornography, women's magazines, feminism, self-help, mass culture.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The advent of pornography in Western countries is an under investigated historical process, one that has influenced, at many levels, popular culture and people's everyday relationship with media. Today, soft-core images are a common trope in contemporary visual cultures, and their proliferation in mainstream media has been investigated by scholars from different perspectives. Brian McNair, for example, emphasizes the liberating aspects of what he calls the «strip-tease culture» (2002), while post-feminist scholarship has argued that sexualized representations have affected women differently, imposing normativity and the re-traditionalization of gender roles. By means of patriarchal and heterosexist discourses, the «post-feminist sensibility in media» (Gill 2007) has promoted a model of an empowered, sexualized and consumerist woman who is constantly engaged in practices of self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline. However, despite the fact that post-feminism was mostly linked to the sexualization of mainstream media in the 1980s and 1990s, it is still unclear how it has broadly intersected with, in the long term, the sexualization of Western culture, especially outside of the Anglo-American context.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are by the author.

Utilizing an archival perspective, this article aims to provide a historical and empirical foundation for the diffusion of post-feminism by studying the impact of soft-core pornography in Italian men's and women's magazines of the early 1970s. To do so, the essay focuses on the use of soft-core images in popular culture and puts them into dialogue with the mainstreaming of second-wave feminist sexual discourse. As most of the post-feminist and porn studies scholarship have focused on the Anglo-American context, this article uses feminist historiography as a «corrective» to these theoretical frameworks and as «the best way to respond to absences from contemporary accounts» (Hemmings 2011, 13). In her research on Finnish porn, Susanna Paasonen stresses the importance of local patterns of cultural negotiation in order to «make evident the diversity of the values and associations attached to pornography» (Paasonen 2009, 586). As such, by analyzing the discourse on femininity in soft-porn, and its impact on the media products specifically targeting women, the study of the Italian case offers an innovative perspective on the global development of the «post-feminist sensibility» in the following decades. Here, Anglo-American popular culture was extremely influential, but at the same time, perceived as foreign; therefore, its formats were carefully negotiated for the domestic audience. Similarly, the local feminist movement has developed autonomous reflections on sexuality, which only partially mirrored the American and French debates. Moreover, the relationship of the movement with the cultural industries was complex and not necessarily antagonistic. For instance, they didn't engage in a systematic opposition to pornography as the Americans did, but they still harshly criticized the objectification of women's bodies and sexuality in popular culture. This research thus aims to stress the coexistence of similarities and differences in the way local media and sexual cultures have negotiated the advent of mass pornography.

Here, terms such as *soft-core pornography*, *second-wave feminism* and *post-feminism* are intentionally put under stress. Given their unstable definitions, they will help me trace their trans-historical influence on sexualized media products and people's everyday lives. For this reason, the article's empirical approach, which is mainly based on archival research and textual analysis, provides a sort of methodological and theoretical corrective to the slippery nature of these terms, tracing a cartography of sexual images and cultural practices. To this extent, this article focuses on a heterogeneous array

of sources, from up-market men's magazines, to glossy women's magazines, to feminist independent press and publishing, which provide varied examples and empirical case studies.

With these premises in mind, this article is broken down into three main sections: the first analyses the relationship between Italian feminism, mass culture and pornography; the second offers an overview of discourses on sexuality and femininity in the local edition of *Playboy*; and the final section considers the use of soft-core images in the conservative women's magazine *Annabella*, the Italian edition of *Cosmopolitan* and *Libera*, the glossy soft-porn magazine for women<sup>2</sup>.

## **2. Italian Feminism and the Mainstream Media in the Age of Mass Pornography**

In Italy, a country foreign to the so-called 'sex wars', the public and feminist debates on pornography have been less polarized than in the United States. The cultural and political heritage of the Italian feminist movement has been mainly discussed in relation to its institutional achievements, such as the reform of family law in 1975 and the legalisation of abortion (1978). However, despite the efforts by scholars and feminist institutions to investigate and valorise other aspects of the movement, there is still a lot of work to do, especially in regards to topics such as the impact of second-wave feminism on Italian sexual cultures, and its reaction to the advent of mass pornography.

In the 1970s, newspapers, magazines and tabloids discussed feminism on a daily basis, not only reporting actions and protests, but also interviewing activists and asking for their comments on current events. However, the movement was able to influence the public debate well beyond the stream of the news. Throughout the decade, journalists, intellectuals and academics published several books on topics such as women's emancipation and feminist theory, and large Italian publishing companies such as Feltrinelli and Einaudi released the translations of American and French classics, such as Juliet

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<sup>2</sup> The article is based on the study of the magazines: *Annabella* 1958-1966; 1973-1974; *Playboy* (Italian edition) 1972-1978; *Libera*, 1974-1976; *Cosmopolitan-Arianna* and *Cosmopolitan* (Italian edition) 1973-1977; *effe - rivista femminista* (1973-1978).

Mitchell's *Women's Estate* (1972) and Luce Irigaray *Speculum de l'autre femme* (1976). The movement itself was active in the editorial market with independent publishing ventures like the *Green books* (Libretti Verdi) series by the group Rivolta Femminile. In 1973, the activists of the Roman Feminist Movement published the first issue of the monthly magazine *effe*, which reworked the traditional format of women's magazines by publishing articles on politics, cinema, literature and bulletins to inform readers about the campaigns of Italian and international activist groups<sup>3</sup>. The magazine was distributed on a national level and sold at regular newsagents; it survived thanks to subscriptions and the publication of few advertisements. *effe* well exemplifies the attempt of the Italian feminist movement to create a new political and cultural space for women, with the explicit aim to reach a broader non-activist audience. These concerns are also mirrored in a handful of feminist and independent studies addressing topics such as the absence of women in the cultural industries (Buonanno 1978; Bellumori 1972), and the representation of women in films and television shows (Cif 1977; Garaguso and Renzetti 1978; Frabotta *et al.* 1979). In these examples of feminist cultural critique, notions such as "objectification" and "objectified woman" (*donna-oggetto*) are frequently used, also becoming part of the feminist vocabulary used to discuss pornography. A typical example is the feminist activist invited to a talk show aired by the Italian public broadcaster Rai in 1977, who described as "victims" the actresses Eleonora Giorgi and Ines Pellegrini, and the porn star Ilona Staller<sup>4</sup>. Despite Giorgi and Pellegrini saying they were proud of their bodies and their careers, the activist seemed indifferent to their perspectives. Pellegrini, for example, explicitly affirmed that she was aware of the compromises she was making for her career, and explained that soft-core films were the only option to start a career in Italian cinema. By saying this, she was reclaiming a form of agency that the activist refused to acknowledge or address. Indeed, Italian feminists understood the diffusion of pornography as a consequence of male hegemony in the cul-

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<sup>3</sup> The magazine is fully available on-line at the url: <http://efferivistafemminista.it/> (last accessed: 5 May 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, I could not identify the activist, who was just presented as "a feminist". The other guests were the priest Leandro Rossi, a therapist and the porn producer Riccardo Schicchi. This episode of the talk-show "Proibito", hosted by the journalist Enzo Biagi, aired on the Italian national broadcaster Rai on July 4, 1977.

tural industries, and interpreted the triumph of eroticism and sex in media as the result of men's inability to represent women's «inner reality» (Frabotta *et al.* 1978, 22). The idea that a woman acting in soft-core films, or modelling for erotic and porn magazines, was in the position to negotiate patriarchal power was not simply part of the plan. However, despite the few violent protests organized by feminists against theatres screening porn films, as reported in the newspapers and by feminist press (Grattarola and Napoli 2015; Carrano 1978), there is no trace of a more articulated, specific reflection on pornography. The movement understood that the commodification of women's sexuality was a product of patriarchy, a trivialization of their bodies, and as such, pornography represented just an aspect of a broader and systematic pattern of women's subalternity.

That said, the feminist intervention in mainstream and public discourses on sexuality was complex and articulated, but ultimately more constructive than oppositional. At its peak of popularity and influence in the public debate, the prevailing concern of the movement was the creation of a space for feminist cultural production, as the impact of the militant film *Processo per stupro* (1979) and the TV show *Si dice donna* (1977-81) testifies. In other words, despite mass culture being heavily criticised, it was also productively used to disseminate a wide range of «feminist protocols» (Murphy 2012) and «situated knowledges» (Haraway 1988), especially about pedagogy and sexuality<sup>5</sup>. A good example of this trend is the Italian edition of the feminist medical manual *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (t.t. *Noi e il nostro corpo*) by the Boston Women's Health Collective, which appeared in 1974. The publishing company Feltrinelli asked a group of Italian activists to work in collaboration to amend the original text with practical information on the local healthcare system, which included adding a bibliography of feminist books and sexual manuals available in the peninsula. This edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was reprinted 24 times in 8 years, and became a classic for an entire generation of young women who had access, for the first time, to direct and simple knowledge about their bodies and sexuality. Until then, most information about female sexuality and intimacy passed through the advice columns of women's magazines, which combined religious

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<sup>5</sup> The essay *Little Girls: Social Conditioning and Its Effects on the Stereotyped Role of Women During Infancy* (o.t.: *Dalla parte delle bambine*, 1973) by Elena Gianini Belotti is a good example of feminist pedagogy going mainstream. It was translated in English and French and is still in print by Feltrinelli.

and moral prescriptions with sexology, although no programs on sexual education were provided in Italian schools. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* discussed wide aspects of women's emotional lives and relationships, linking first-hand experiences with medical information. The chapter «We are lesbians» offered, for the first time in a Italian mainstream publication, a non-sensationalist and political understanding of female homosexuality, which also helped some Italian women to come out as lesbians (Biagini 2018, 98)<sup>6</sup>. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* certainly contributed to introducing feminist self-help in the Italian mainstream discourses on sexuality, disseminating the notion that women's direct experiences represent the primary, and thus more relatable, source for sexual knowledge. By touching broadly on topics such as emotions, relationships, and fantasies, this book well exemplifies how feminism has «contributed to rationalizing intimate relationships, that is, to submitting them to neutral procedures of examination and argumentation, predicated on an intense work of self-examination and negotiation» (Illouz 2007, 36). Such a tendency translates in a complex relationship with the body, which puts together emotional health and self-care, and establishes a broader «ontology of emotions» (Ivi, 33), based on reflexivity, self-policing and psychological introspection. In Italy, the activist translation of this practice was the «consciousness-raising groups», which consisted of women-only discussions where participants shared their affective and intimate experiences, as well as their desires and aspirations. In this context, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* enabled radical politics to connect with a vast audience of young Italian women who were seeking answers to their growing concerns about sexuality.

### **3. American Models, National Playmates and Beauty Icons**

While feminism, on multiple levels, promoted new forms of sexual knowledge based on the scrutiny of the self, soft-core pornography and erotica were invading the Italian edi-

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<sup>6</sup> This chapter also reveals the difficulties of the Italian feminist movement to acknowledge female homosexuality, as evidenced in an opening note from the Italian editors which clarifies: “The Americans talk about lesbians and lesbianism without necessarily comprehending the negative meanings generally attributed by us [Italians]: homosexual relationships between two women which reproduces the sexist roles of man and woman” (75). An accurate reconstruction of the difficult position of lesbians in the Italian feminist movement is in Biagini, 2018.

torial market. The first soft-porn magazine legally sold in Italy was *Men*, an erotic weekly launched at the end of 1966 by two publishers based in Rome, Adelina Tattilo and Saro Balsamo. Before then, porn and sexually explicit pictures circulated clandestinely, or were confined to down-market publications, which were regularly targeted by Catholic associations or individual citizens who claimed to protect the morality of the community.<sup>7</sup> After a few requisitions and trials for obscenity, *Men* and its monthly edition, *Playmen*, eventually succeeded in the legitimization of a niche market for erotica, which would grow dramatically in subsequent years (Passavini 2016; Maina 2018)<sup>8</sup>. By translating Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* philosophy for Italian middle-class men, Balsamo and Tattilo's top-shelf magazines created a new public arena for porn consumption, one that was considered transgressive, but at the same time, modern and culturally informed.

In November 1972, the main publishing company Rizzoli eventually released an Italian edition of *Playboy*, which previously circulated clandestinely or via international subscriptions. However, this operation was not as simple as the publisher probably imagined, since Italian readers immediately wrote asking for more original content and expressing their preference for the "natural" and "less artificial" Italian models over the big breasted American "Playmates of the Month". Evidently, the prototype of the girl next door did not work for the local readers, who explicitly requested nude images of the young actresses starring in Italian soft-core and erotic films, like Agostina Belli, Laura Antonelli, Eleonora Giorgi, Barbara Bouchet and Gloria Guida. In accompanying articles, these girls were characterised as care-free and independent, as former students, or travellers who aspired to good careers and success. When asked about their choice to pose naked, most of them claimed it was part of their professional duties, or something they did with the hope of reaching bigger career goals. Like many American playmates who were looking for fortune in the Hollywood dream-factory, these young stars of

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<sup>7</sup> Documents held at the archive of the Catholic association "Azione Cattolica" (Isacem, in Rome) are evidence of the existence of systematic campaigns against the "immoral publications" legally sold at the newsagents. The censorship of press was abolished in the aftermath of WWII, with the advent of the democratic regime. From that moment, the associations for morality generally appealed to the existing laws for the preservation of "public decency", which basically gave the judge case-to-case discretion.

<sup>8</sup> Balsamo and Tattilo developed a well-aimed editorial approach by promoting a branding strategy similar to *Playboy*, by means of a cat logo. When the first issues of *Men* were confiscated, the magazine introduced a campaign inviting readers to put a sticker on their car with the logo and motto, "I read *Men*".



erotic cinema were generally waiting for a real opportunity to demonstrate their talent in films with an important director. As opposed to the inaccessible divas of the previous generations, such as Gina Lollobrigida and Sophia Loren, these younger women were not afraid to display their bodies in the hope of improving their professional status. In the heterosexist framework of *Playboy*, the ambitious and sexually available young woman takes part in a multifaceted ‘sexual theory’ in which the relationship between sexuality and consumerism establishes priorities and rituals for both men and women. As such, heterosexual intercourse is just a tool for the fulfillment of broader individual aspirations of social mobility, a strategy that also applied to men. In her seminal analysis of *Hustler*, Laura Kipnis examines the magazine’s «relation between discourses on sexuality and the social division of labour, between sexual representation and class» (Kipnis 1992, 373). Soft-core magazines like *Playboy* gave readers advice on many aspects of men’s everyday lives, in which women, rather than being mysterious and threatening sexual creatures, were key to accessing a world of pleasure and commodities. However, some Italian readers evidently felt challenged by the high price of the magazine and the advertisements of expensive bottles of wine and jewels, so much so that they openly complained about the magazine’s classism and the inaccessibility of the *Playboy* philosophy for factory workers (Brandone 1972). The editorial staff responded to these critiques by claiming the right to present an ideal and satisfactory lifestyle, which invited readers «to be happy and enjoy the lighter side of life». *Playboy* Italy thus offered a utopian, escapist site for men, which promoted expertise (about cooking, home design, art, amateur film and fashion) and a visual, strictly heterosexual, pleasure. Indeed, while down-market magazines, including porn comics, displayed a variety of sexual practices and orientations, including male and female homosexuality, *Playboy*’s compulsory heterosexuality substantially prevented any manifestation of homoerotic desire by categorically excluding naked male bodies from its pages. In this respect, Rizzoli’s magazine was much stricter than *Playmen*, where a dedicated section, which appealed to female readers, included pictures of naked men<sup>9</sup>. However, even in

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<sup>9</sup> This series, titled “The Naked Heroes”, lasted only two years (1971-72). Of course, it is very likely that this section stimulated forms of queer desire in the male readers, well beyond the explicit purposes of the editorial line. However, in the same period, the down-market weekly magazine by Tattilo and Balsamo,

this bastion of men's entertainment and escapism, which paid very little attention to politics and current events, there were a few references to feminism, which was generally addressed as a threat to the masculine utopia of the magazine<sup>10</sup>. In a letter, a reader accused feminists of wanting to «substitute men, dressing like men, criticize men, who, frustrated, ended up as transvestites to imitate the weaker sex» (Bernasconi and *Playboy* editors 1974). *Playboy* reassured him with these words, «feminists are very pleasant, as long as at the end of their 'anti-man speech' they take off their underwear and bra and do their duty. [...] The weaker sex shouldn't be imitated, but erotically defeated» (*Ibidem*). The engagement with feminism continued in a farce with the journalist Paola Fallaci, who regularly penned a column titled «The Enemy», in which she presented herself as a supporter of the movement and replied to critics who were against women's emancipation. Feminist claims were also discussed in many of the *Playboy* interviews, and excerpts from feminist books, such as Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, were translated from the American edition. This choice was explained by the Italian editors as the need to answer to the feminist magazine *effe*, which had published an article by Greer the month before that explicitly attacked *Playboy* for its mystification and objectification of women's bodies (Greer 1973).

#### **4. Soft-Core goes to Women: Cosmopolitan's Great Orgasms and Libera, a Porn magazine for her**

As Clarissa Smith notes, the *Playboy* philosophy «was not just maleness in opposition to femaleness but to a particular form of respectable, self-censoring femaleness» (Smith 2007, 20). By doing so, it presented a model of femininity which diverged significantly from the traditional stereotypes of the mother and wife, which were promoted in America by women's magazines such as the *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping*

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*Men*, included a section called "Adam's Mirror", edited by Giò Stajano - one of the most important gay public figures in post-War Italy, which was explicitly dedicated to the gay-male reader.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Fraterrigo identifies 1967 the beginning of a liberal turn in the American edition of *Playboy*, which openly endorsed the civil rights movement and the liberalisation of marijuana, and manifested a clear opposition to the Vietnam War (Fraterrigo 2009, 159-166). By contrast, despite the fact that Tattilo and Balsamo were supporters of the Socialist Party, their magazines mirrored the heterogeneous political views of their editorial staff, which gathered together left wing advocates and neo fascists (Passavini 2015).

(Ehrenreich 1983). Similar publications began to flourish in Italy after WWII, and despite their middle-class and relatively cultured readership, these magazines have been historically dismissed as low-culture, and considered, especially by feminists and left-wing intellectuals, as responsible for the subjection and political illiteracy of Italian women<sup>11</sup>. This opinion is not surprising, and recalls a classic and biased understanding of mass culture as a means of oppression, one that identified the housewife as the epitome of middle-class consumerist alienation (Garofalo and Missero 2018). That said, it is also true that in general women's magazines were far from holding any political commitment. Even in the 1970s, at the peak of second wave feminism, all of them had a male director and a majority of male contributors, and showed very little interest in current events. However, during the same time it is possible to observe significant changes both in terms of their representations of the female body and their discourses on women's sexuality, which increasingly included references to soft-core culture and self-help. A good example of this is *Annabella*, a conservative women's magazine published by the same Italian editor of *Playboy*, Rizzoli. Its readership was primarily composed of mothers and wives whose emotional and sexual education was deeply rooted in traditional Catholic ideas of family and marriage. Self-help culture and self-improvement were framed within the traditional schemes of femininity, and any transgression from the moral path was usually represented as a source of unhappiness, while self-sacrifice for the family and husband was portrayed as rewarding and self-improving. This notion, which aimed to combine American consumer culture with Italian Catholic values (Harris 2017), resulted in an increasing volume of advice and expert columns on beauty products, good manners, home economics, home design, medical advice, including psychological and gynaecological advice. In 1972, *Annabella* set up a hotline for readers to contact its experts for advice. Every week a time-schedule was published to direct readers to the desired counsellor. It is not surprising that sexological advice was also provided by a priest, Don Liggeri, who collaborated with the magazine for twenty years and

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<sup>11</sup> One of the most famous Italian feminist critiques of women's magazines of the time is the book *Naturale come sei* by media scholar Milly Buonanno (1976), which was preceded by Gioacchino Forte's *I persuasori rosa* (t.t.: *The Pink Persuasors*, 1966) and Laura Lilli's essay *La stampa femminile* in Ajello *et al.*, 1976. However, women's magazines were also regularly targeted by *effe* and the other major feminist magazine during this time, *Noi Donne*.

penned many articles on topics like frigidity and childbirth, in close consultation with a gynecologist<sup>12</sup>. The role of Liggeri was to reassure readers about the moral issues inherent in the search for sexual pleasure: this was something to be saved for the benefit of marriage and to bring back the attention of a distanced husband. This approach to sexual matters coexisted with the gradual appearance of soft-core stars in the magazine as models in fashion and beauty articles, as well as gym tutorials. This choice was explained by the editorial staff with the following words: «[the majority of] our female readers are interested in these figures because they want to know what the girls are like [...] who drive men from all over the world crazy» (Mosca 1973). It would seem *Annabella* was aware that its readership was as interested in being sexy and driving men wild as it was in getting married. The impact of soft-core pornography on the models of heterosexuality in the magazine is further confirmed by a fashion article that appeared in *Annabella* portraying two male models working in the newsroom of Italian *Playboy* (Sartorio and Vigo 1973). As part of the editorial staff, they were preparing a photo shoot for the model and actress Aurore Clement, who was at the very beginning of her career. In a similar setting, the soft-core magazine appears to *Annabella*'s readers as a glamorous and desirable site for the construction of the female beauty.

This re-configuration of the heterosexual woman was further fueled by the Italian edition of *Cosmopolitan*, which appeared in April 1973. As Barbara Ehrenrich notes, «Women would not get public license to have fun [until] Helen Gurley Brown took over *Cosmopolitan* and began promoting a tamer, feminine version of sexual and material consumerism» (Ehrenrich 1983, 45). The most innovative aspect of Gurley Brown's editorial line was the offer of practical solutions to the everyday problems of a target readership with tremendous potential: the unmarried working girls, who were also the designated readers of her best-selling books *Sex and the Single Girl* and *Sex in the Office*<sup>13</sup>. In Gurley Brown's terms, the main concerns of single young women were sex and money: «sexuality is the route to female empowerment and sex appeal should be

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<sup>12</sup> In 1948, Don Liggeri opened the first marriage counselling institution in Milan, which was inspired by the similar experiments conducted by American Catholic associations like the Christian Family Movement.

<sup>13</sup> The books were translated in Italian respectively in 1965 and 1967.

used in the workplace, in social settings, and in the bedroom to gain all the glittering prizes, whether they be promotion, friendship, status, or marriage» (Whelehan 2005, 27). But most importantly:

in Brown's regimen explodes the myth of natural, effortless sex appeal, replacing it with the notion that femininity is [...] an asset hard won and bolstered by being aware of one's strong points and knowing how to apply cosmetics and wear the appropriately styled clothing. The ideal single girl is an artist whose most treasured creation is herself (Whelehan 2005, 27).

With this spirit, in April 1972, Gurley Brown managed to publish the first centrefold of a naked man, actor Burt Reynolds. Needless to say, the magazine immediately sold out, selling 1,55 ml copies. Gurley Brown pitched the centerfold as a milestone of the sexual revolution («nobody talked about it, but women liked to look at men naked. I did»), and as a quasi-feminist response to men's magazines like *Playboy* and *Penthouse* («We had the feeling that the reason why [...] there is such a dearth of nude men, is that, until recently, those in control of publications have been men»)<sup>14</sup> After publishing the centerfold, the American version of *Cosmopolitan* crossed the threshold from mainstream magazine to sex magazine in the public mind, so much so that «some stores in the rural areas [...] removed the magazine from racks and placed copies behind the checkout counter» (Landers 2010, 228). The centrefold's success also inspired the birth of a new market of soft-porn magazines for women, including *Playgirl* and *Viva Magazine*. Going back to Italy, the local version of *Cosmopolitan* was not able to push the life-stylization of female sexuality that far. Like *Playboy*, *Cosmopolitan* not only needed to partially adapt to the customs of local readers, but also to the habits of the domestic press industry: the director, like in every other Italian women's magazine, was a man, Franco Nencini; and despite the success of the centerfold, Reynolds' pictures appeared, cut and reduced, only in the second issue, in May 1973 (Greene 1973). In a series of letters published in the following issue, some readers complained about this solu-

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<sup>14</sup> Both quotes are from Landers (2010, 227-8).

tion, and also claimed that they did not understand the reason why the magazine published naked photographs of women instead. Indeed, pictures of naked women were consistently present in the articles about sex and relationships, which included guides for masturbation with images of semi-naked women. More advice on sex and relationships was provided by excerpts from self-help books like *How to make your wife your mistress* and *How to make your husband your lover*, and the personality tests and how-to articles, which guided women into their physical and psychological journey to sexual pleasure. Female pleasure was presented here as a fundamental aspect of any heterosexual relationship, with an innovative approach: *Cosmopolitan* offered, for the first time, practical solutions which did not require the intervention of experts. As such, rather than nurturing anxieties and mystery around the female sexuality, *Cosmopolitan* supported women's right to take control of their own bodies. Self-policing and self-training corresponded with knowledge and results, and this approach also encouraged readers to follow the visual instructions provided by the many sexualized pictures present in the magazine. These pictures provided detailed information about how the female body should move and look, while the male body remained visually and verbally taboo. Soft-core images with naked women consistently appeared in fashion and beauty articles, as well as in the most obvious sex advice pieces, whereas the heterosexual couple is only verbally described. Also, gym tutorials displayed *sex-ercises*, and touted sex as a good way to stay fit (Friedman 1973; *Cosmopolitan* 1977a). As an example of feminist self-help, *Cosmopolitan* puts in women's hands the fate of their bodies, eroding the importance of the experts' advice as presented in the traditional women's magazines like *Annabella*. *Cosmopolitan's* ideology of pleasure and self-help was entirely depoliticized; therefore, the publicity of intimate problems was framed in an implicit ideology of heterosexuality and monogamy in which men and Italian women's limited access to labour remained substantially unquestioned. In this picture, the Italian version of the single-girl results in a less independent woman who is not really concerned with a career and budget, but rather her sex appeal. Discussions about sexuality and relationships prevailed across a number of how-to articles on the working environment, and waged labour was discussed in the traditional form of the "suitable job for women". In regards to politics, the article *Managing the body? Yes, but with self-awareness* summarizes

well the individualistic and self-reflexive philosophy of the Italian *Cosmopolitan*: «Too many girls don't know, or either face the problem of sexuality. Their emancipation is a cultural question, not political; it is a question of knowledge, not demagogy; of awareness, not superficiality. This is how a woman really establishes herself!» (Oriana 1977).

A few months after the arrival of *Cosmopolitan* on Italian newsstands, Adelina Tattilo, the aforementioned founder of *Playman* and *Men*, launched *Libera*, the first soft-porn magazine for women distributed in Italy. *Libera*, which literally means “She Free”, was a glossy, monthly magazine that cost twice as much as *Cosmopolitan* and attempted what Bob Guccione, founder of *Penthouse*, had tried in the United States with *Viva*, the up-market porn magazine for women (Bronstein 2016). Tattilo penned the editorials every month, in which she presented herself as an Italian aristocratic version of Gurley Brown, someone who was tailoring the audience of the magazine to a group of independent, upper-class businesswomen like her. *Libera*'s naked pictures portrayed film stars like Alain Delon, but also more accessible Italian singers like Califano, and yet most of the erotic articles represented unknown (heterosexual) couples, where the naked female body played a primary role. These photographs have the same visual style of those published in *Playmen*, and the narrative patterns were also very similar to those commonly found in men's magazines. *Libera* lasted only two years, and closed in February 1976, while the male nudes disappeared at the beginning of 1975 without a clear explanation. Rather, following the trend of other Italian women's magazines, *Libera* increased the volume of fashion and beauty articles, and the female soft-core stardom eventually appeared also here in the guise of beauty and fashion models. This case further signals what the Italian fate of the Burt Reynolds's centerfold suggested: Italian women could not overturn soft-core iconography as the Americans did. A possible explanation for this is their different relationship to consumerism and waged labour. Indeed, despite *Libera*'s attempt to reach an audience of upper-class businesswomen, the modest results suggest the inconsistency of the project with the reality of the Italian editorial market.

## 5. Conclusions

As the *Cosmopolitan* sex articles show, mainstream self-help culture was immediately influenced by the feminist agenda. However, I argue that soft-core represented the strongest counter-discourse to feminism out of all the magazines analyzed. The complex meanings attached to soft-core in Italian media culture, from cinema to magazines, suggest that the mainstreaming of this content responded to multiple concerns around (hetero)sexuality, which was portrayed through a set of discourses about pleasure and mass consumption. But also, and this is probably the most important aspect of this process, it demonstrates how women's bodies represented the main sites for the negotiation of these concerns. Indeed, by looking at the women's magazines of the 1970s, it is possible to see the first steps for the dissemination of a sexualized-female agency, which is typical of the post-feminist media culture. As such, it represents an anachronistic form of «post-feminist sensibility» in terms of a shift from objectification to subjectification, in which femininity represents a bodily property; and the focus on individualism, choice and empowerment corresponds with the emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline (Gill 2007). As most of these aspects are typical of neoliberalism and postmodernity, I would also argue that some of them were already germinating in the 1970s as a response to the increased agency of women in the public and private sphere. I believe that the influence of soft-core in gendered mainstream media was an important aspect of this project, which benefitted from the disinterest of the Italian second-wave movement to interrogate the advent of mass pornography as a fully-fledged cultural phenomenon.

In her analysis of contemporary Italian media culture, Maristella Cantini notes that it focuses «on a representation of women and beauty through male hegemonic culture, and very little space is left to enable women's full professional growth, with huge economic repercussions and the consequent stagnation of social and cultural issues» (Cantini 2013, 212). This reflects a socio-cultural reality in which «the occupational situation and the widespread male chauvinism in the workplace contribute to a discouraging environment for women» (Cantini 2013, 217). Looking back at the 1970s, and specifically at soft porn magazines, the relationship between sexuality and career achievements existed



as part of a male fantasy, in which younger women are willing to use their bodies for a career in the film industry. By contrast, any correlation between sexual freedom and economic independence is suppressed in *Annabella* and *Cosmopolitan*, which instead assimilated both feminist sex-help and soft-porn imagery to introduce a new model of the sexually available young woman, one who is entirely devoted to the well-being of the heterosexual, monogamous couple. Only *Libera* established a clear link between women's economic status and the consumption of pornography, but it did not succeed in the attempt to create a market for erotica entirely aimed at women because of the limited social mobility that characterized Italian women's condition.

This situation in the media system, coupled with the lack of a structured feminist debate on the sexualization of culture and mass pornography, left the popular representations of sexuality entirely in control of a chauvinist film and editorial industry. Despite the collaborative attitude and the active engagement with most of the cultural industries, the Italian feminist movement underestimated the impact of sexualized representations circulating in media, and therefore did not perceive their powerful influence in women's everyday experiences of sexuality. However, it is too easy to blame the second-wave movement for not taking pornography seriously enough, since «which story one tells about the past is always motivated by the position one occupies or wishes to occupy in the present» (Hemmings 2011, 13). The unsolved question between Italian feminism and pornography still haunts the contemporary debates about the sexualisation of women in media, as well as those about post-feminism, which are still characterized by «moral panics» and the «phantom of the real woman» (Hipkins 2012, 158). It is in the direction of overtaking this impasse that a feminist empirical historiography of global pornography should be undertaken in an effort to address our position in the present and reveal the many complex patterns of negotiation of both feminism and porn in local sexual cultures.

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