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# **From Barbie to the Oligarch's Wife: Reading Fantasy Femininity and Globalisation in Post-Soviet Russian Women's Magazines**

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## **Abstract**

This article shows how an analysis of fantasy femininity sheds light on how norms of gender, class and national identity reflect global and local cross-cultural currents in post-Soviet Russia. Drawing on a discourse analysis of women's magazines and in-depth interviews with readers, it shows how, in the globalized post-Soviet cultural landscape, fantasy femininity represents both change and continuity. Feminine archetypes in women's magazines, from fairytale princesses to Barbie dolls, reflect a wider post-Soviet cultural hybridisation, and show how Western women's magazines have adapted to the Russian context. Furthermore, the article highlights readers' ambiguous attitudes towards post-Soviet cultural trends linked to perceived Westernisation or globalisation, such as individualism, conspicuous consumption, and glamour.

## **Key Words**

Gender; Post-Soviet Russia; Women's Magazines; Globalisation; Westernisation; Class; National Identity; Fantasy; Fairy Tales

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## Introduction

The increasing globalisation of media and culture in post-Soviet Russia has had a significant impact on women's lifestyle magazines, as well as on the ways readers interpret their content in relation to gender, class and national identity. Many international brands started Russian versions in the early 1990s, and magazines from the Soviet period such as *Krest'ianka* have been forced to adapt to a similar glossy format as publications such as *Elle* or *Glamour*. Formerly popular titles which have resisted a more Western-style format, such as *Rabotnitsa*, have suffered a massive drop in circulation. However, recent political and economic developments suggest that the boom in Western-origin titles may be difficult to sustain. Politically, there is growing state control of the media and hostility towards the West in the wake of increasing anti-Western propaganda (*Deutsche Welle*, 09/02/2015), and an increase in a conservative brand of cultural nationalism in the state-run media (March, 2012). Furthermore, a 2014 law banning foreign ownership of more than twenty per cent of any Russian media company has put the multinational publishers of popular titles such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* in a difficult position (Abnet, 2014). More prosaically, a recent drop in advertising revenue and in the value of the ruble is making the magazines' glossy paper ever more unaffordable for publishers (d'Amora, 2015).

In this unsettled context, this article addresses the interplay of the global and the local in Russian society and culture via an analysis of fantasy femininity discourses, which are shown to be potently symbolic. It also addresses a wider gap in the literature in relation to combining magazine analysis with reader interpretation, particularly in the post-Soviet Russian context. Drawing on a discourse analysis of women's magazines and on interviews with magazine readers, I explore how fantasy relates to wider discourses of gender, class and national identity, and highlight how binary notions of East/West – which can be traced back to the Cold War era – still play a significant role in these discourses.

The article also looks at why fantasy is significant to an analysis of the role of women's magazines in Russian society. Semi-fantasy figures taken from real life, such as oligarch's wives, play a part in constructing a simultaneously hyperbolic and recognisable world for readers. The role of fantasy femininity in combining the real world and a sense of unreality thus emphasizes the ambiguous cultural status of women's magazines, from purveyors of a particular brand of escapist femininity (Stevens & Maclaren, 2005; Stephenson, 2007), to a highly gendered cultural format not to be taken particularly seriously (Hermes, 1995; Ang, 1985). As such, this paper contributes to wider debates around the role of women's magazines in popular culture.

After providing an overview of significant literature and methods used, the first part of the article features an analysis of fairytale gender relations in women's magazines. The second part discusses doll-like femininity, including how the Barbie doll in particular has moved from a symbol of Western culture during the late Soviet and early post-Soviet eras, to a symbol of hyper-femininity in the present day.

The final sections show how this hyper-femininity, which is sometimes perceived as a Westernisation of Russian culture, can also be identified with the public semi-fantasy figure of the wealthy “oligarch’s wife” in Russian society.

### **Fantasy and Women’s Magazines**

The appearance of fantasy as a theme of women’s magazines is addressed in existing feminist literature, whether in the fairytale form of the Cinderella narrative (Stevens, 2002) or the idealisation of real-life royalty such as Princess Diana (Winship, 1987: 57-59; 82). Previous scholarship has also emphasized women’s magazines’ distance from reality, and their status as popular culture rather than ‘serious reading’, as key to their appeal, which is significant for an analysis of fantasy in this type of media. For example, Stevens & Maclaren (2005: 283) show how magazines employ conspicuous consumption in providing readers with a world somewhere between fantasy and reality. Janice Winship discusses how women’s magazines are used as a way to escape and enjoy visual pleasure. Magazines position themselves as giving women permission to take “me time” (Stevens, Maclaren & Brown, 2003): indeed, Joke Hermes argues that the magazines are often perceived as “putdownable”, “the ultimate ‘in-between’ activity” (1995: 32) and a source of relaxation (Ibid: 36). In addition, Ien Ang’s (1985) work on the ways women read culture has highlighted, in common with Ballaster et al (1991) and Hermes (1995), the critical approach that women may have as readers in the field of popular culture.

### **Fantasy and Women’s Magazines in Russia**

This paper’s analysis of gender, class and national identity draws out many of the themes which have come to the fore in recent scholarship on Russian society and culture. Although women’s magazines have by no means been neglected in the wider literature, there is little research which takes an explicitly gendered perspective, or which looks in depth at how magazines are ‘decoded’ (Hall, 1980). Existing work on women’s magazines in Russia has tended to analyse the magazines as a phenomenon in themselves (Kalacheva, 2002; Stephenson, 2007; Gudova & Rakipova, 2010), though they also feature to a greater or lesser extent in work on post-Soviet Russian gender relations (Kay, 1997); conspicuous consumption (Patiko, 2008; Ratilainen, 2013); mass media and journalism (Omel’chenko & Bliudina, 2002; Mironenko, 2007; Pietiläinen, 2008); and glamour culture (Menzel, 2008; Rudova, 2008; Goscilo & Strukov, 2011).

Fantasy is no less a prominent a theme in this field. It arises in analyses of popular culture in reference to beauty, femininity or media in both Soviet and post-Soviet Russia: see for example Azhgikhina &

Goscilo (1996), Goscilo (2000), Omel'chenko & Bliudina (2002), Engel (2004), Stephenson (2007), and Gudova & Rakipova (2010). Fantasy also plays a key role in debates around glamour and celebrity in post-Soviet Russia (Gusarova 2008; Rudova, 2008; 2011; Menzel, 2008; Klingseis, 2011; Goscilo & Strukov (eds.), 2011; Ratilainen, 2012). In this article, I hope to bring together some of these threads and put a particular emphasis on gender discourses as key to understanding the significance of fantasy femininity in the post-Soviet context.

### **Cultural Globalisation and Westernisation**

As I take a largely cultural, area studies perspective, in this section I focus in on the literature around globalisation and Westernisation specifically as they relate to socio-cultural change in post-Soviet Russia. On one level I look at the globalisation of the Russian media via an analysis of Western-origin women's magazines – *Liza*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* – founded in Germany, the United States and France respectively. Magazine content, initially translated from foreign editions, is now produced by Russian staff, a trend in media transformation which had taken place largely by the end of the 1990s in Russia (Omel'chenko & Bliudina, 2002: 41).

In this article I draw upon John Tomlinson's definition of cultural globalisation as "the particular effects which [...] general social processes of time-space compression and distanciation have on that realm of practices and experience in which people symbolically construct meaning" (1996: 23). Wider debates reflect particular controversies around globalisation as economic or multinational, what it actually entails and even whether it really exists, recent versus long-term trends that affect it, its manageability, and whether it may be essentially defined as neoliberal capitalism or something more nuanced (Pieterse, 2009).

From a socio-cultural studies perspective on contemporary Russia, it is most important to consider the positive and negative values and effects associated with globalisation as a phenomenon. For example, James Lull (2000: 230) celebrates the spread of internationally recognisable forms of culture in "hybrid forms". However, some scholars critique globalisation as entailing a loss of geographically identifiable variability in cultures, and the transmission of certain cultural values as universal. For example, 'McDonaldization' (Ritzer, 1983) is one term which may seem especially relevant in the late Soviet to early post-Soviet period.<sup>i</sup> Tomlinson (1996) refers to dystopian views of cultural globalisation which stress cultural uniformity, at the expense of existing cultural variation. Furthermore, he notes that more negative views of cultural globalisation have also equated globalisation with Westernisation – a view which emphasises the "cultural imperialism" of tides of globalisation (Ibid: 26). Although some commentators such as Jan Schulze (2005: 59) dispute the equation of 'Westernisation' and

‘globalisation’ as terms, in the Russian context it can be useful to use the two somewhat interchangeably, especially given the recently more politically sensitive nature of the topic. In any discussion of Russian media globalisation, it is important to note the existence of particular post-Cold War discourses, and the suggestion of power relations which may lay behind these. For example, globalisation and the influence of so-called ‘Western’ ideas in Russian society have long provoked cultural tensions, aptly described by Pilkington et al:

Whereas in the West cultural globalisation has been studied as a set of empirical cultural flows and social processes moving outward from “core” to “periphery”, in Russia globalisation has been interpreted as a political, or “ideological”, project led by the West. The “global community” has been considered to be a Western idea, world culture equated with the Americanisation of “peripheral” national cultures and economic and political globalisation interpreted as a means of subordinating Russia (and the East) to the interests of the West. (2002: xiv)

Cultural developments are to some extent linked to the long-term development of political discourse on Russia’s place in the world: for example, in Putin’s 2013 Presidential Address, the desire to retain a particularly Russian global outlook and internal culture was very evident (Putin, 2013).<sup>iii</sup> Furthermore, an emphasis on national identity is now more evident than ever regarding recent events in Ukraine: both Russian and ‘Western’ (i.e. European Union, NATO or American) rhetoric consistently invokes a struggle between two perceived opponents to maintain their own cultural values in this former Soviet country. This has led to renewed stress on the idea of Russia as a special case, in which particularly ‘Western’ liberal democratic ideas have either failed, or will never be appropriate.<sup>iv</sup>

Perspectives on globalisation have also been influenced by the economic growth of nations in the ‘global south’ and of the so-called BRIC countries (Pieterse, 2009: 22), which include Russia. A diversification of media sources has undoubtedly taken place as part of post-Soviet media globalisation, from the Soviet norm of officially state-sanctioned media to the appearance of many popular media franchises from outside Russia, such as television programmes and magazines (Omel’chenko & Bliudina, 2002). Additionally, a recent boom in internet usage and the popularity of websites such as LiveJournal (Kuzmina, 2011) and YouTube in Russia means that the broadened media landscape now allows Russian citizens to have distinct cultural experiences that are shared by many more people, more instantaneously than ever before in human history. Arjun Appadurai (in During, 1999: 223) has described such developments as providing “large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and ‘ethnoscapes’ to viewers throughout the world”.

The impact of such developments in the first decade after the collapse of state socialism has been discussed in a co-authored monograph by Hilary Pilkington et al (2002) which tackles notions of globalisation, Westernisation and Russian cultural values in relation to Russian youth culture, and demonstrates the contested and non-linear nature of the process.<sup>v</sup> Omel’chenko & Bliudina assert that

a hybridisation of global cultures<sup>vi</sup> and “horizontalization” of relations between Russian and non-Russian cultures has taken place in the post-Soviet era, suggesting a certain amount of ‘give and take’ in cultural terms and “a more mosaic-like character of contemporary youth tastes and cultures” (2002: 41). Below, I explore how this horizontalisation of the global and the local may be seen in contemporary Russian media and media interpretations. I try to avoid presenting currents of globalisation or Westernisation in a particularly negative or positive light, rather seeking to explore how they are helpful in an analysis of gender in contemporary Russian society and culture.

## **Methods**

In drawing on analysis of magazine discourses and of reader interpretations, this article addresses a methodological gap in the literature on women’s magazines in Russia, following on from important work on this topic which has been carried out in other contexts. For example, Hermes’ (1995) and Ytre-Arne’s (2011) work on Western European women’s magazines clearly highlight the importance of taking into account how women’s magazines are read. I address this issue via exploring how women’s ambiguous readings might be contextualized in a post-socialist context. I draw upon a definition of discourse as associated with a Foucauldian approach which positions gender norms and subjectivities as “constituted within” discourses (Bacchi, 2005: 200) which determine how power is enacted in society (Foucault, 1971).

This paper represents one aspect of my PhD research, which analysed magazine portrayals and reader perspectives on femininity, consumption, beauty and globalisation/Westernisation. This paper chiefly draws upon in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 39 Russian women aged 18-35, who were current or previous regular readers of women’s lifestyle and fashion magazines.<sup>vii</sup> Of these 23 were carried out from 2010-2011 in St Petersburg, a metropolitan city, and the remaining 16 in 2011 in Nizhny Novgorod, a provincial city.<sup>viii</sup> It also uses material from a larger discourse analysis of three different foreign-origin Russian titles – *Liza*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* – utilising twelve issues of each magazine from the period November 2009 to April 2011. The magazines were chosen taking into account both popularity and the different types of women’s magazines on sale in the Russian Federation.<sup>ix</sup> Although this is not a comparative study, I do note that magazine content (e.g. regular features) and visual identity in the magazines appear similar to their counterparts in other countries, which suggests that globalisation and Westernisation are relevant issues for this analysis.

## **Fairy Tales and Idealized Gender Roles**

Fairy tales, as myths about society, tell us something about how we have previously chosen to portray gender and relate to the social and material conditions of the past (Warner, 1995: xviii). In Russian

women's magazines, fairytale attributes morph into qualities presented as applicable to women who might otherwise have long outgrown the stories themselves. As in other European countries, the Russian cultural heritage portrays royal fairytale archetypes as possessing desirable feminine qualities such as kindness, patience and beauty. Although personality traits such as resourcefulness and moral fortitude feature in Russian fairy tales<sup>x</sup> as well as in those from Northern Europe (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003: 719), in both traditions there is often a link between feminine beauty and other positive traits or outcomes (just as unattractiveness has negative associations).

For example, the princess, in the magazines as in folklore, is not merely a character employed to tell a story, but is used to signify idealised femininity, even from a very young age. One article recommends suitable family clothes for New Year celebrations. Whereas readers are told their son can wear just his favourite pullover and jeans, for their daughter (under the heading *Like a little princess*) readers are told that “[i]t's essential that a little girl is dressed in a long skirt or a dress, even if they're made of jersey or cotton. A real little princess!” (Liza, 28 December 2009: 8-9). Another piece recommends a brand of children's shampoo with the instruction-like statement: “[y]ou really want your favourite princess, your darling daughter, to be a beautiful girl!” (Liza, 2 November 2009: 61). The princess embodies desirable femininity; via her behaviour and appearance, she acts as a signifier of essentialized feminine qualities:

Not long ago I read this revealing discussion on one of the women's forums. The theme was, 'should men open the car door for women?' One woman ingenuously wrote, 'yes, they should. It's nice to feel like a princess again.' The aggressive and many-voiced reaction to this innocent reply resembled a party meeting. (*Cosmopolitan*, November 2010: 129)

With a simple act of opening the car door, the man takes the role of a prince, making a woman feel special by showing her a level of respect and attention she considers suitable for a princess. It is uncertain what period in her life the contributor is referring to, when she last felt like a princess: it could be the beginning of a relationship that has since lost its spark, or to a kind of idealized imaginary scenario that never really existed in reality. Either way, the word 'princess' is used to represent the positive associations of having attention bestowed on oneself as a woman by men.

The writer also evokes the Soviet era, juxtaposing the very contemporary activity of commenting on an internet forum with behaviour associated with Communist Party gatherings. The reader is left in no doubt of the journalist's stance on this kind of behaviour: the “ingenuous” woman employing the fantasy language in an “innocent” contribution to the conversation is drowned out by a flurry of responses from the opposite camp. Here, the Soviet era signifies a time in opposition to the one signified by the princess, though both are considerably mythologized. The figures of the masculinized working women and the feminized man, deprived of his rightful role at the head of the family, was a trope of the Gorbachev era,



when emancipation for women changed from being linked to economic and political work to being linked to a return to the home (Bridger, Kay & Pinnick, 1996: 24-25) and their “purely womanly mission” (Mikhail Gorbachev, quoted in Ibid: 25). Chivalrous behaviour that may be seen as “old-fashioned” in Western European countries can be viewed as “simply a model of good male behaviour” in Russia (Kay, 2006: 41).

The handsome prince, come to rescue his ‘princess’, could understandably have held some appeal for women in the first decades after communism when a decent salary was hard to find, and even more so for women, as many job advertisements in the early 1990s carried ‘men only’ specifications (Bridger, Kay & Pinnick, 1996: 80). However, the perennial perception that there is a deficit of “real men” in the Russian Federation, an idea that has been discussed in the literature relating to both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods (Kay, 2006: 156-158), is also at play here. It was also discussed by readers: Valentina (24, Manager) explained the growth of the beauty industry as “possibly linked with the fact that we don’t have many men, and so young women have very serious competition – it’s a fight for a place in the sun.” Another participant spoke of a similar issue:

HP: I’ve seen a lot of articles in women’s magazines which say that young women can’t find a man. Do you think this is a problem in Russia, or is it just portrayed that way in magazines?

Sofiya: Yes, there is that problem.

HP: Is it a significant problem?

Sofiya: Yes, there aren’t enough men in Russia, especially in St Petersburg. The number of women overrides the number of men a few times. It’s obvious. And the quality of the young women we have in Russia - in St Petersburg - of childbearing age, with good figures, who dress well and are well educated... The amount of men to match up with them is very much lower or practically none. Either they drink, or they’re gay, or something else. It’s true.

(Sofiya, 26, Outdoor Activity Instructor, SP)

Sofiya speaks not only of problems around the quantity but around the quality of men; women are left in the position of competing for the few (desirable) men that are around. Because this is based on enduring perceptions resulting from the real demographic imbalance which persisted amongst the World War Two generation,<sup>xi</sup> this narrative can also be seen to be referencing conventional gendered love narratives, where women are pursued by men rather than the other way around. It may also represent a semi-romanticized time when women could supposedly rely on men as breadwinners and heads of household, linking contemporary narratives to an idealized nuclear family and a fairytale ‘happy ever after’ ending. Magazines also play on this notion of the prince and princess as idealised masculine and feminine archetypes. One article, *Take a look at yourself*, tells the reader that “whatever you say, a girl’s attractiveness has close links to her love life”, and features advice on how to look more beautiful whilst “awaiting your prince” (*Cosmopolitan*, December 2010: 420-421).

## Doll-Like Femininity and National Identity

Fantasy can represent ambiguous discourses around femininity, class and the Westernisation/globalisation of Russia. In both magazines and interviews, fantasy figures such as the doll embody a juxtaposition of childhood fantasy, as well as a contemporary form of hyper-femininity. The doll can be said to symbolize three different types of femininity: the Western woman and her supposed freedoms (in relation to the Soviet woman); infantilized female sexuality; and a 'Barbie doll', glamorous woman of a post-Soviet Russian economic elite.

Across three 'waves' of feminist thought from Germaine Greer (Wolf, 1991: 12) to Naomi Wolf (1991: 12) to Natasha Walter (2010: 2), it has been argued that the doll, traditionally associated with childhood toys, is in fact not out of place in a more adult milieu. She is argued to be an important symbol of female beauty and sexuality, most notably in the Barbie doll, a toy with an adult woman's body that began to be widely available in Russia from the early 1990s (Zelensky, 1999: 153), and which was both fetishized and condemned for its Westernness (Goralik, 2005: 46; 48). It seems unlikely that adult woman magazine readers would actually have a great interest in dolls, and so on one level their prevalence suggests that women's magazines encourage an infantilized view of womanhood. Walter argues that young girls are now encouraged to see dolls as an aesthetic ideal to emulate:

Living a doll's life seems to have become an aspiration for many young women, as they leave childhood behind only to embark on a project of grooming, dieting and shopping that aims to achieve the bleached, waxed, tinted look of a Bratz or Barbie doll. (2011: 14)

As an item to be played with, a doll also symbolizes passivity. She can be asexual like the rag doll, or sexualized like Barbie, and in the post-Soviet context she also hints at redefining Russia via perceptions of post-Soviet women as having somehow *over*-adopted Western beauty and glamour norms or otherwise having misunderstood them. Olga Vainshtein (1996: 71) refers to this as "the style of excess", describing women's efforts to buy into new fashion norms as having a certain "forcedness and tension" in their overemphasis on a flashy kind of glamour. One excerpt from a special 1990s-themed issue of *Elle* captures these initially uncertain attitudes towards Western fashions and femininity:

To be honest, we [the magazine staff] began our 1990s project a little frightened; [I recalled] my awkward childhood and unfashionable youth, brightly and colourfully failing to fit with the Western 'dream'. (Elle, December 2009: 50)

Now the editor of an international glossy magazine brand, the author is embarrassed by the 'backwardness' of her youthful fashion choices in 1990s Russia. Although this example relies on an assumption that this kind of attitude is now safely buried in the past, this was not necessarily the case in my discussions with contemporary magazine readers:

HP: How important do you think it is for women to look good in Russia?

Elvira: It's very important. Really, sometimes women prefer to sleep less but to spend more time getting ready to go somewhere. Sometimes it starts getting absurd, like strong make up in the early morning or something like that. Or wearing [miniskirts] with high heels in the first part of the day. I even read once an article on the internet about London, and Russian girls in London. It said that if you see a blonde with bright make up, wearing a mini and high heels at noon in a central London street, you can be sure that she's Russian. [laughs] Sometimes it makes us think that our national identity as Russians is not appreciated as well by other nations. (Elvira, 22, Retail Manager, SP)

Elvira also described going on holiday and trying to look as 'non-Russian' as possible (i.e. not dressing glamorously) and trying to challenge stereotypes of Russianness abroad, highlighting the significance of women's bodies in terms of national identity (Kaneva & Ibroscheva, 2014). Furthermore, increased access to travel and foreign cultures for Russians in an era of globalisation has brought about a desire to redefine what it means to be Russian, especially in relation to other cultures.

### **Dolls, Childhood Nostalgia and the Infantilisation of Women's Sexuality**

On her most basic level the doll also represents childhood. In post-socialist contexts she has symbolized the coveted objects of a childhood lived under communist rule: for example, a Barbie doll features as an object of great desire for the young protagonist of *Marzi*, a graphic novel memoir of one woman's childhood in communist Poland. The eponymous protagonist represents her childhood self in a Barbie-style box in one of the first illustrations of the book and, in the final pages, she gives her long-awaited Barbie doll to her cousin as a comfort, describing it as "the most precious thing I own that I can give you" (Sowa, 2011: 230). Slavenka Drakulić (1993: 62-64) also discusses the significance of the Barbie as an exotic and rare commodity in her highly successful memoir of socialist womanhood, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*. Thus Barbie became a symbol of 'the West' – enigmatic and often glamorous in cultural terms – for young women living under communist party rule.<sup>xii</sup> Kathy Burrell (2010) has described this wider fetishisation of previously unavailable goods as "the enchantment of western things", a phrase that evokes the fantasy associations of material goods under state socialism.<sup>xiii</sup>

This juxtaposition of the doll as a symbol of both childhood and female sexuality is reflected in women's magazine articles. *Cosmopolitan* (March 2010: 384) magazine proclaims that "[i]n every one of us lives a little girl who loves to play with dolls!", and another one about beauty products points out that "[e]ven grown-up girls have a soft spot for dolls." (*Cosmopolitan*, November 2010: 85). Sometimes this juxtaposition is used in a less subtle way: an article about how to achieve a (to put it kindly) 'gamine' style entitled *How cute* states that "[r]eal Lolitas aren't afraid to go out in ankle socks, which they wear with sandals this season" (*Elle*, April 2011: 263). Although references to childhood may act as a

nostalgic reference to a possibly happier, simpler time in life, women's magazines also encourage an infantilized view of womanhood and female sexuality.

### **The Barbie Doll as Hyper-Femininity**

Similarly, in interviews with readers the doll proved to be a rather divisive symbol of womanhood. For example, a Barbie-type signifier of femininity that they found worthy of (sometimes critical) comment:

HP: Are [cosmetic procedures] common in Russia?

Tamara: Recently there's been more demand for it. Barbie doll-like girls are very popular here – with the teeth, the hair extensions, really big busts.  
(Tamara, 21, Manager, NN)

[In Russia] We have a certain standard of beauty which is set by rich men. They want to have a Barbie doll beside them that they can show off to everyone else. It's a certain standard. A tall blonde with a big bust and pouty lips. (Lara, 30, Brand Manager, SP)

The 'Barbie doll look' echoes Vainshtein's (1996: 71) "style of excess", and represents a very narrow version of femininity based on a high level of beauty labour, which is portrayed in Russian women's magazines as essential to normative femininity (Porteous, 2013). This kind of Barbie is characterized by Lara as a kind of trophy girlfriend for wealthy men. One participant described this image as a typical form of femininity found in women's magazines, and was more explicit in her condemnation of it:

HP: What do you think about how women are represented in magazines?

Lyubov: They're shown in a certain image – a girl who always looks after herself, who is obliged to look after her outer appearance, her clothes, to have an ideal personal life, to follow all the advice. Something like a Barbie doll type, an ideal woman who doesn't appeal to me.  
(Lyubov, 22, Trader, SP)

Lyubov clearly disidentifies with women's magazines' emphasis on looks in their representations of idealized, almost mass-produced, Barbie-doll femininity. Sometimes participants linked this image to Western influences on Russian society:

Raisa: There are young girls who generally dress very smartly. And they start to do it fairly early – that is, they start to wear makeup at an early age.

Polina: It's not femininity so much – it's not real.

Raisa: Like dolls.

Polina: Yes.

Raisa: Like some kind of doll. They're just doing it because of the Western influence, [from] looking at videos and magazines.

Polina: Yes, they want to look like celebrities. (Raisa, 23 & Polina, 21, both unemployed, NN)

The perceived Western culture of wearing makeup and dressing a certain way is seen as encroaching onto the territory of childhood: girls wearing makeup are trying to emulate a certain type of femininity, but are instead compared to dolls. The doll becomes linked to a culture of conspicuous consumption which these readers perceive as originating from Western (or Western-style) media. Thus the doll can be seen to symbolize the encroachment of a new symbolic order in which children, rather than using dolls as toys, consume beauty products with the aim of resembling dolls.

### **Dolls and Oligarch's Wives**

Clearly, the doll can be quite a complex figure of fantasy femininity: though in media portrayals she can be seen in a positive light as a return to childhood, she is also linked by some readers to a kind of (possibly foreign-influenced) hyper-sexualized woman who focuses on looks to the detriment of developing her personality. Greater individualism – an idea previously linked to the incursion of ‘Western’ values into Soviet society – now becomes something to be valued, as can be seen in Lyubov’s condemnation of the Barbie “type”. Looking glamorous or sexy is seen as a shortcut to having a ‘nice’ life because it attracts male attention, a widespread view in the early post-Soviet period (Bridger, Kay & Pinnick, 1996: 30). This hyper-feminine look was similarly associated with class, money and power by participants, in that it enabled less wealthy women to gain access to a consumer lifestyle:

In general, what glossy magazines are dictating – or so it seems to me – is that this girl is sexy, she is strong, with a big bust; she is tall and wears high heels all the time, and perhaps has a deep cleavage. Just that kind of sexy-sexy, everything. Unrealistically well-groomed hair. Some kind of hairstyle, and always a chic manicure. With expensive perfume, a good car, and with the kind of guy that has lots of money. That kind of sexy, expensive, luxury woman. In the majority of magazines, it’s like that. (Dasha, 28, Academic Librarian, SP)

I think that some glamorous women’s magazines give plenty of advice [suitable] for women with silicone lips. Be stupid, pretend you don’t know something, be helpless, and so on. So sometimes you read it and you think ‘what stupidity!’ (Irina, 27, Wine Company Worker, SP)

Fantasy femininity linked to a Barbie-like body (‘silicone lips’) is thus linked to some other figures which hint at a fantasy world, at least in the popular Russian imagination: the rich (male) oligarch and his female companion. Azhgikhina (1997; originally cited in Partan, 2010) draws the links between hyper-feminine beauty and the ‘New Russian’ style businessman of the 1990s: winning beauty contests gave women in the early post-Soviet era the opportunity to date or even marry this type of man. However the conceptual link of ‘beauty = wealthy partner’ seen in the Barbie stereotype now comes full circle, becoming ‘wealthy partner = beauty’. In other words, using a desirable feminine body as a means to get into a relationship with a wealthy man is now relying on a wealthy man for one’s looks:

Of course, [magazines] talk about different categories of people. If you're talking to us, neither Nina, Oksana nor I can afford to spend this or that amount of money on a dress – two wages! But if girls are married to an oligarch, who doesn't do anything, then he can help them buy a dress. There are such people; we have plenty of them in Russia. (Tamara, 22, Manager, NN)

So it's difficult to conform to the glossy magazine ideal... If I were an oligarch's wife and was in those surroundings, I would probably have to be like that. But here, at [work], it would be somewhat 'unreal'. (Dasha, 28, Academic Librarian, SP)

The discussion above is in contrast to the valorisation of wealthier sectors of Russian society often seen in Russian culture (Rivkin-Fish, 2009) and in women's magazines (Bartlett, 2006). Both Tamara and Dasha at least partly reject an upper class version of femininity; in Tamara's case, with a hint of cultural disapproval of the lifestyle.

The wider significance of a wealthy lifestyle as a cultural reference point for gender norms is evident in its appearance in recent popular culture aimed at women. Ratilainen (2012: 62) writes that in contemporary Russian culture “the nouveau riche wife is shown to have surpassed the conditions of Soviet standardized femininity” partly via social presentation of her body. She also positions the 2006 Russian feature film, *Glanets* ('Gloss') as a critique of certain aspects of contemporary Russian culture linked to women's magazines and Westernisation/globalisation. The film follows a naive young girl from the provinces on a journey of Cinderella-like (though not necessarily positive) transformation, both in terms of her appearance and her lifestyle, in that she becomes the partner of a rich oligarch (Ratiainen, 2013: 92-96). There is clearly a sense of moral transgression to the discussion of oligarch's wives and girlfriends above. This is possibly because, in the post-Soviet era, Russian society has also seen growing concern about such figures of femininity as representative of “conspicuous, frivolous consumption” (Patino, 2008: 141), where glamour culture is seen to represent a new era which is simultaneously exclusive (in terms of representing a Western, hedonistic lifestyle aimed at the *nouveau riche*) and democratic (in that consumer culture is – in theory – open to everybody) (Rudova, 2008: 2). In Russia, then, as in Western Europe (Skeggs, 1997; McRobbie, 2005), upper- and middle-class femininity norms hold significant power as cultural reference points.

In addition, a discourse of Westernisation/globalisation as threatening can again be seen as linked to women's magazines. They are perceived to contribute to a level of aspiration that is unrealistic for most women:

Kristina: Media advice in our society is not so good – maybe because earlier in our country we didn't see expensive things and advertising.

Nadezhda: It was more equal.

Larisa: Yes, it was so equal and we aren't used to it. To my mind a big problem has appeared here, because people, girls, they started to dream about a better life, they want to live like other

people, to have a lot of money and cars, and they don't live their [own] lives. That's why there is such a feeling that it's not *your* life. You are just sitting and watching but you are waiting for something. This is a problem, just not to live every moment but [to] wait for something better. And this something better, it may not appear.

HP: So do you think that magazines contribute to that because they're presenting... do they reflect reality?

Larisa: When you're dreaming about a better life, you always hope for some interesting events in your [own] life, for some travel, a lot of money. And you try to earn it, and you try to follow the life of... I don't know who, but not your [own] life!

HP: Do these ideas for you come from the media or do they come from yourself?

Larisa: I guess it's a stereotype and it's come from the media, from magazines, from everywhere in our lives. (Kristina, 25, Junior Legal Expert, Nadezhda, 25, IT Worker, & Larisa, 29, Marketing Manager, SP)

The aspirational lifestyles normalized in women's magazines are seen to yield false expectations or a homogenous view of life. Accordingly, for readers certain representations of femininity linked to wealthier sectors of Russian society may be negatively perceived, rather than aspirational. There is also an ongoing concern around the young and/or naive woman who would be vulnerable to fantasy femininity discourses in women's magazines. As seen in the above example, the valorisation of an aspirational lifestyle can represent a threat to nationalistic Russian values amidst the cultural globalisation of the post-Soviet era.

## **Conclusion**

I have shown how fantasy femininity discourses in Russian women's magazines are representative of a hybridised culture (Lull, 2000; Omel'chenko & Bliudina, 2002) in which both perceived Western/globalised and Soviet/Russian discourses about gender, class and national identity are reflected in discussions of princesses, dolls and oligarchs' wives. Clearly, it has not been a case of the West having a direct and straightforward influence on Russian understandings of gender, class and national identity in the post-Soviet period, but rather that Western influences, as Pilkington & Bliudina (2002: 3) have previously argued, are "filtered through [...] the experiences, memories, imaginations, and fantasies that accumulate collectively and individually." In addition to this, readers' references to "Western" influences suggest that perceptions of Western culture as inferior/superior (either way, as inherently different) to Russian culture, as observed by Pilkington & Omel'chenko (2002: 206) in the late 1990s, are still present in the 2010s.

On one level, fantasy femininity operates on the level of emotional responses to the relatively stable and culturally familiar gender discourses found in fairy tales: women's magazines use fantasy to tap into readers' desires for the security, beauty or lifestyle associated with becoming a princess or a rich

man's wife (both of which are fantasies, to a greater or lesser degree). Thus although magazines to some extent reflect women's everyday lived experiences, they also portray a fantasy world where the reader's imagination can be indulged. As such, this research supports some literature stressing the status of women's magazines as a non-serious medium or a place for relaxation.

However, this analysis of fantasy femininity makes an important point about gender inequality and socio-economic stratification in post-Soviet Russia. Fantasy femininity often seemed to hold negative associations for readers in this study, who talked about discourses such as the 'Barbie doll look' in terms of its distance from their own lifestyles or understandings of femininity. For example, the perceived passivity, dependence and doll-like appearance of an oligarch's wife was seen as a negative trait for a Russian woman to possess. This may be linked to the 1990s idea of the "new Russian" (Oushakine, 2000) or a feminine "style of excess" (Vainshtein, 1996: 71), suggesting disapproval of a mode of behaviour based around a hyper-feminine appearance.

To conclude, fantasy femininity discourses are representative of a twenty-first century context in which media discourses reflect collective memories of the communist era, as well as the contemporary global discourses around conspicuous consumption and normative femininity. Women's magazines may be seen as a 'hybrid' (Lull, 2000) or 'horizontalized' form of culture, and their current popularity suggests that women are familiar with this mix of cultural influences (if not always uncritical of them). However, reader criticisms of the perceived non-Russian nature of certain forms of femininity shown in women's magazines – such as the 'Barbie doll look' – support Pilkington's (2002: 226) earlier observation that the hybridisation of culture can also jar with wider Russian cultural narratives.

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<sup>i</sup> That era saw long queues at the opening of a McDonald's restaurant in Moscow, but also featured the use of the same fast food branches as a basis for anti-American protests in 1998 (Caldwell, 2004: 6).

<sup>ii</sup> Manifestations of nationalist feeling in post-Soviet Russia have included the conscious consumption of products which are considered Russian (or *nashi*) (Caldwell, 2002). This concept has also been used historically to discourage the black market consumption of non-Soviet beauty products (Gradszkova, 2007b), demonstrating how it links in to the themes of this article.

<sup>iii</sup> Although this article does not dwell on the political sphere, it is worth noting that women's bodies are often a site for the inscription of wider political issues (Kaneva & Ibroscheva, 2014).

<sup>v</sup> Melissa Caldwell (2002; 2004) also discusses this in relation to food and consumption in the post-Soviet context.

<sup>vi</sup> Hybridisation may also be said to be similar to 'glocalisation' (Robertson, 1995), a term which emphasises the changes forms of culture often go through to become accepted or even indigenised in new contexts.

<sup>vii</sup> As gender, rather than class, was the original focus of this research, I did not collect demographic information on income or attempt to classify participants in this way beyond asking about their jobs, which covered a spectrum of occupations as well as students and the unemployed. The majority of the women were studying for, or had completed, a higher education degree – though I note that the observations of the women I interviewed who had a lower level of education or lower status/paid occupation did not differ greatly from those with



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degrees. Similarly, although some participants mentioned their partners or children, I did not collect demographic data on their family status as this was not a key focus of our discussions.

<sup>viii</sup> As I did not attempt to procure a representative sample of Russia's ethnically diverse population, my research does not necessarily reflect its overall diverse ethnic makeup, especially as it was limited to two cities in Central Russia. Although I did not collect data on how the women classified themselves or ask them about these issues, I do acknowledge the fact that this is an issue meriting further research, and point to the significance of ethnicity and gender in Yulia Gradszkova's wider work on the Soviet era as a point of reference.

<sup>ix</sup> Although a visual analysis of Russian women's magazines would undoubtedly have added a further and interesting perspective on how fantasy is experienced by readers in a post-socialist context, regrettably the time constraints of my PhD research did not allow for this. However, it would be an interesting perspective for future work on the topic to use pictures and photographs in a further analysis of fantasy femininity and globalisation.

<sup>x</sup> See Balina et al (2005) for examples of this; particularly "the beautiful princess Elena" in the *Tale of Prince Ivan, the Firebird, and the Gray Wolf*, and the main female protagonist in *Baba Yaga*.

<sup>xi</sup> Despite common perceptions in the mass media that men outnumber women (e.g. Mironov, 2009), the 2010 census shows that this has little effect on those of childbearing age: at age 48, the proportion of women hits 53%, and then begins to rise more steadily, reaching a ratio of 6:4 women to men at age 60 and 7:1 at age 77 ([http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/croc/Documents/Vol2/pub-02-01.pdf](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/Documents/Vol2/pub-02-01.pdf), consulted 23/06/14).

<sup>xii</sup> For an in-depth discussion of Barbie's cultural significance in Russian society, see Goralik (2005).

<sup>xiii</sup> See Gurova (2009), Yurchak (2006), Oushakine (2000) and Pilkington (1996; 2002) for further discussion of consumption and its associations in the Soviet and early post-Soviet period.

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