The Best That You Can Be: Conflicting Messages of Liberation and Oppression in Indian Cosmopolitan Magazine

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The Best That You Can Be:  
Conflicting Messages of Liberation and Oppression in Indian Cosmopolitan Magazine  

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Women’s Studies from The College of William and Mary  

by  
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Accepted for ____________________________  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)  

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Nancy Gray  

Williamsburg, VA  
April 20, 2010
When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants, and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it—always - Mahatma Gandhi

What I am advocating is that the media come work for us again. That they remove themselves from the symbiotic relationship that they have developed with the power structures of corporations and the politic. -Jon Stewart

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The Best That You Can Be:
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in Indian Cosmopolitan Magazine
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**Introduction**

In 2006, *Indian Cosmopolitan* celebrated its ten-year anniversary with 1,016 pages of advice and advertisements instructing the middle-class, urban Indian woman how to be “The Best That You Can Be,” the magazine’s tagline.¹ The ten-year anniversary edition of *Indian Cosmo*, as it is popularly referred to, was divided into five issues (packaged and sold together in plastic wrapping) that covered topics characteristic of the *Indian Cosmo* brand. The five issues were respectively titled “Celebrity and Style,” “Cosmo and Living,” “Beauty and Fitness,” “Man and Sex,” and “Bride and Shopping.” This huge anniversary issue compiled 4.95 pounds of tips, tricks and products that promised to improve the lives of Indian women. Of the 1,016 pages, over five hundred pages were advertisements. A majority of these ads use the female body, absent of personality, to promote western brands, particularly beauty products. According to the discourses presented in every issue of *Indian Cosmopolitan*, for the middle-class, urban, Indian women, to be “the best” requires participation in the global capitalist system through the consumption of lifestyle advice, as well as fashion and beauty products.

Consumer magazines, like *Indian Cosmopolitan*, deploy patriarchal and capitalist discourses in order to expand markets in countries that, until recently, did not award social capital to practices of sexualization and consumerism. In an interview with *TIME* magazine, Mala Sekhri, the publishing director of *Indian Cosmopolitan*, marked the tenth anniversary edition of *Cosmo* as “a sunrise moment for Indian publishing.” As Sekhri

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¹ The Indian middle-class is defined as “households with disposable incomes from 200,000 to 1,000,000 rupees a year ($4,380 to $21,890).” This definition is adopted from India’s National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER). This also refers to young women who are earning separate incomes, but are living with their parents. Eric D. Beinhocker, Diana Farrell and Adil S. Zainulbhai, “Tracking the growth of India’s middle-class,” from *The Bird of Gold: The Rise of India’s Consumer Market*, The McKinsey Quarterly 3 (2007): 56, http://mckinsey.webscience.it/storage/first/uploadfile/attach/139854/file/trin07.pdf.
explains,

There's a real boom in terms of newer products coming into India...Beauty companies like L'Oreal or Revlon used to sell into two segments; now it's ten or more, and they're launching new products all the time. An Indian woman used to use a moisturizer; now she's using a moisturizer, toner and sun bleach. We're riding this wave of consumption.²

As the women of India continue to enter the workforce in large numbers, Cosmopolitan executives depict themselves and their publications as harbingers of the modern, liberated woman who is sexy, independent, and most importantly, a consumer. For the Indian Cosmo Girl, the promise of happiness, success and liberation comes with body modification and consumption.

Indian Cosmopolitan is an example of a discourse-disseminating product developed by professionals in both India and America to extract resources from middle-class women, and ensure the preservation of patriarchy and capitalism so that future generations will also have gender-specific problems that can be exploited for profit. For the purposes of this study, I use a definition of discourse developed by popular culture theorist John Fiske. In Television Culture, he writes:

Discourse is a language or system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area. These meanings serve the interests of that section of society within which the discourse originates and which works ideologically to naturalize those meanings into common sense.³

The section of society that creates and monitors the discourses framing international editions of Cosmopolitan are the multi-millionaire publishing executives at Hearst such as George Green, president and CEO of Hearst Magazines International, and Helen

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Gurley Brown, creator of the Cosmo Girl brand and current editor-in-chief of all international editions. It is in their best interests to invoke discourses that will create a dependence on their magazine as well as the manufacturers that support the Hearst Corporation, and their personal lives, financially. It is important to understand that the image of the Indian Cosmo Girl is a popular model for navigating the impact of capitalism on women in Indian society. It is a popular model, because the people of India also play a role in developing the discourse found in *Cosmopolitan*.

Proliferated on a mass scale, discourses intended to generate particular normative standards can reinforce oppressive structures as well as present new possibilities for resistance. Women all over the world can, and do, use the information found in *Cosmopolitan* for their own purposes. Although, such use is limited by the capitalist and patriarchal discourses that frame *Cosmopolitan*'s message. *Cosmopolitan* cannot offer any complete solutions to women’s oppression, hardships, and insecurities, because doing so would eliminate women’s need to turn to consumer magazines for advice and product recommendations.

*Indian Cosmopolitan*’s American-based publisher, Hearst Magazines International, launches a new edition of *Cosmopolitan* in countries with recent economic growth in order to disseminate the empty promises of consumer culture. “There is a definite *Cosmo* Formula,” comments Kim St Clair Bodden the copyright owner of Hearst’s international editions,

> What is it? I don’t know what exactly, but it works. I mean, sure I can spot a Cosmo Girl wherever I go: it’s her sense of security, her dress sense, the gleam in her eye, but what the formula is, well…it’s a cultural thing. I suppose. Like Coke or McDonalds.4

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The Cosmo Girl, no matter her nationality, has power because she has money and sex appeal. This study deconstructs the Cosmo Girl image and places the discourse of Indian modern womanhood in a framework that acknowledges the intersection of issues of women’s liberation, tradition, health, and consumer culture in globalized women’s magazines like *Cosmopolitan*.

**Globalized Corporate Media**

Hearst frequently launches *Cosmopolitan* first in a new international market, because it is a lifestyle magazine that has proven to successfully introduce consumerism into a culture. After a successful launch of *Cosmopolitan*, Hearst floods the market with its other titles, such as *Esquire, Harper’s Bazaar*, and *Good Housekeeping*.\(^5\) The *Cosmopolitan* brand is not only a success story, but also a model among corporations who wish to expand their markets to include international consumers. In an essay entitled, “Globalization, Media Hegemony and Social Class”, communications scholar Lee Artz writes, “To continue to please the consumer palette, global media and their advertisers continually seek out new products and new markets, continually recruiting, appropriating, and stimulating – but always within a commodified frame.”\(^6\) *Cosmopolitan*’s “commodified frame” ultimately restricts women’s ability to challenge both ancient and modern forms of patriarchy by damaging their health and distracting them from important societal issues of poverty, disease, and continued gender inequality.

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Cosmopolitan uses rhetoric from women’s liberation movements around the world to mask and excuse the exploitation of desires and fears of people in developing countries. In this politicized context, women’s magazines become more than mindless entertainment or corporate success stories. Yes, they serve as important social tools in the lives of urban middle-class women in India. International Cosmopolitan editors are making improvements in the lives of some women, but these improvements, made within the constraints of patriarchy and capitalism, do not come without consequences. My research demonstrates that the Cosmopolitan philosophy, despite the best intentions of its international editors, will not lead women to liberation and in fact, threatens sustainable and equitable development.

Cosmopolitan magazine, aimed at women 18-34, is the number one women’s magazine in the world, ranking first in circulation figures and advertisement pages. When asked why Cosmopolitan is so successful President of Hearst Magazines International, George Green, responded “it’s about empowerment.” Helen Gurley Brown believes that Cosmopolitan is facilitating a feminist consciousness among women worldwide. However, Cosmo’s feminism is tied to western-centric ideas of modernization and progress. In an interview Brown stated, “I glean in every country that I go to that they’re coming along as we did 30 or 50 years ago….Women are basically the same everywhere. Sure, some hide behind black gloves and a shmatteh, but if they could get out, they would.” Brown’s assumption that all women want to achieve wealth, western beauty standards, and sexual attention is evidence of her capitalist and western-centered feminist

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8 Susan H. Greenburg, “Your Very Own Cosmo,” Helen Gurley Brown Papers – Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Archives (38, 16).
thinking. Although many of the *Cosmo* brand’s messages, such as the acknowledgement of female desire, are positive and even feminist, *Cosmopolitan*’s definition of womanhood framed by capitalist and patriarchal motives means that even seemingly “empowering” messages are stripped of their progressive potential.

Brown believes that her magazine provides a service by distributing a positive image to which women can aspire: “The Cosmo Girl.” As one 2001 news article observed, Brown trusts that “extending the Cosmo brand is extending a helping hand to women everywhere.” She comments, “We are helping readers seek a better life. *Cosmo* is very successful where they don’t have anything like us. I know the world is getting smaller and smaller…I like to think we help in making it one world.”

I agree that *Cosmo* encourages transnational bonds among upper-class women. My research suggests, however, that *Cosmopolitan*’s drive for profit inherently makes it counter-productive to the goal of women’s equality and liberation from patriarchal structures.

Multi-national media corporations, such as Hearst Magazines International, have taken notice of a growing Indian elite, and launched consumer magazines with profitable results. In a 2008 interview, George Green, president and CEO of Hearst Magazines International, told the *New York Times*, “If you want to consider yourself a truly international publisher, India is the place you have to be.”

Multinational corporations like Hearst Magazines:

Control economic activities in two or more countries, maximize the comparative advantage between countries (profiting from market conditions and political and fiscal regimes), have geographical flexibility (that is, the ability to shift resources and operations between

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different locations on a global scale) and have significant economic and social effects at a global level.\textsuperscript{11}

The capitalist drive to continue corporate growth despite a global downturn of magazine and newspaper sales domestically has led Hearst Magazines International to expand its market to India.

In 2008, only two of the top ten magazines in the United States, \textit{People} and \textit{In Style}, posted gains. Most titles in the top ten, including the best-selling \textit{Cosmopolitan}, saw a dramatic decline in sales, averaging a 6.3\% drop for the magazine industry overall.\textsuperscript{12} The industry has deemed this shift a “Global Crisis” of magazines, because in most nations world readership is declining due to difficult economic times and increasing Internet speeds and access. Asia, however, is an exception. In many Asian countries including India, China, Taiwan, and Malyasia the magazine publishing industry is booming. Multinational corporations will not admit that they are exploiting conditions in developing nations to overcome a drop in sales in the west. Instead, they argue, that their product is delivering a service to the people. Green insists that the American values espoused in his magazine are “modernizing” the people of developing nations, and that the people “are living those lives, and accepting that direction.”\textsuperscript{13}

Modernization theory presumes that less developed social orders are “in a state prior to their ‘take-off’ into modernity that the obstacles to such development or modernization are merely internal, and that development is a relatively linear process.”\textsuperscript{14}

Marxist theorists have critiqued modernization theory for being “ahistorical” because it

\textsuperscript{11} Chamesy el-Ojeili and Patrick Hayden, \textit{Critical Theories of Globalization} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 64.
\textsuperscript{13} Aronson, “Women’s Magazines Go Global.”
\textsuperscript{14} el-Ojeili and Hayden, 42.
refuses to acknowledge the negative impact of Western imperialism and colonialism on developing countries. In fact, Karl Marx singled out the colonization of India as an example of how development of western capitalist nations “is related to their ability to exploit the less advanced countries.”\textsuperscript{15} The impact of colonization has much to do with India’s current status as a “third world” nation. In general, the term developing or ”third world” encompasses “societies exhibiting low growth rates, high incidences of poverty, poor sanitation and health, comparatively high population growth rates…inadequate housing, extensive internal inequality, high levels of gender inequality, and adult illiteracy.” Globalization theorists Chamsey el-Ojeili and Patrick Hayden continue, “many of these countries are often said to suffer from a colonial legacy that spurred ‘plantation’ or ‘quarry’ economies, which rely on exporting a handful of commodities to rich countries.”\textsuperscript{16} Considering India established itself as an independent nation only 62 years ago in 1947, this thesis employs theories of globalization that highlight the continuing effects of colonization on modern India, including the hegemonic practices of western and Indian corporations, and the nation’s drive towards rapid economic growth and a culture of consumerism.

A critical view towards modernization theory is significant to both India’s relationship to the west as a “post-colonial” society and discussions concerning corporate media hegemony of previously colonized nations. Curran and Park describe the effects of modernization theory in relation to the American media today:

The ‘free flow of information’ policies promoted by the American state, assist the American media industry in its drive to achieve international dominion. Far from promoting self-sufficiency, the ‘modernization’ of developing countries merely fosters dependency

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 40
within an exploitative system of global economic relations. It promotes American capitalist values and interests, and erodes local culture in a process of global homogenization.\textsuperscript{17}

“Cultural Imperialism” theory provides a dynamic framework for analyzing the harmful practices of The Hearst Corporation as well as engaging with the tensions between liberation and oppression in \textit{Indian Cosmopolitan}. However my study will diverge from theories of homogenization, and instead focus on the creation of a separate Indian modernity. Thomas McPhail characterizes cultural imperialism as proposing:

\begin{quote}
  a dominant sociopolitical group influences and shapes the culture of weaker groups, or nations, through mass media and other practices and institutions…cultural imperialism of one group by another frequently carries the assumption of capitalistic intent where mass media is used as a propaganda tool in the effort to control and influence the target population for the economic and political benefit of the dominant powers.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

My use of cultural imperialism in this study focuses on a culture of consumerism, which may have been first introduced by the US, but is now present (in various forms) in countries all over the world. I use the framework of cultural imperialism to make a larger critique of US-based multi-national media corporations that perpetuate patriarchal and capitalist discourses in order to stimulate market growth, impose unsustainable lifestyles, and consequently harm citizens in developing nations, as well as the developed nations and the US. This historical phenomenon must be explored within a theoretical framework that acknowledges both the oppression and the agency of individuals.


Hybridization in Indian Cosmopolitan

One of the leaders of India’s independence movement, Mohandas K. Gandhi, called for Indians to reject British goods and ways of life in order to escape British rule. In his famous 1938 work, *Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home Rule*, Gandhi writes,

The English have not taken India. We have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength...Who assisted the [East Indian] Company’s officers? Who was tempted at the sight of their silver? Who bought their goods? History testifies that we did all this. In order to become rich all at once we welcomed the Company’s officers with open arms.¹⁹

It is important to consider Indians as agents in the process of globalization, because in this way, as Ghandi also describes, the people of a nation are empowered to cease their encouragement of oppression and force out their oppressors through passive, non-violent resistance.

Globalization in India is a multi-directional process that not only involves the exploitation of historical and economic circumstances by foreign corporations, but also the presence of Indian elites who exploit upper, middle, working-class people in order to accumulate personal wealth and power.²⁰ Political economist Andre Gunder Frank describes poverty in nations like India as a result of a relationship of dependence between formerly colonized nations and wealthy nations fostered by local elites. Frank suggests,

That underdevelopment and development are two sides of the same coin. The economic and political fabric of the now underdeveloped countries was distorted by expanding capitalism, and these countries became linked to the capitalist metropolis through narrow economic specialization. The elites in the third world act as intermediaries who benefit from this situation, while the mass of people in the satellites have the wealth or economic surplus they produce transferred back to

²⁰ Currans and Park, 6.
the metropolis.\textsuperscript{21}

For this reason, I view Indian politicians, editors, publishers, professionals, and readers as important actors in the process of launching and maintaining \textit{Cosmopolitan} in India.

When they are able to, Hearst Magazines International launches editions of \textit{Cosmopolitan} in countries through joint ventures, a halfway point between licensing titles to publishers in other countries and owning 100 percent of the international editions.\textsuperscript{22} This practice ensures that locals are also involved in the publishing and distribution process. A 2008 article entitled, “George Green’s 156 Tips for Long-Lasting Success,” describes this process. “Green focused on an intermediate alternative, a joint venture, where in addition to negotiating a license, Hearst partnered with a local publisher to create a new publishing entity, collaborating on business and editorial matters with partners immersed in the local milieu.”\textsuperscript{23}

The process of forming joint-ventures and altering content to appeal to different cultures is an example of hybridization and is present in every issue of \textit{Indian Cosmopolitan}. With respect to cultural forms, “hybridization is defined as the ‘ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms and practices.’”\textsuperscript{24} In \textit{Indian Cosmopolitan}, this process translates into the blending of American culture and Indian culture. Focusing on hybridization demonstrates local women’s agency in the production and maintenance of the messages distributed by Hearst.

It is the New York office, however, not \textit{Indian Cosmopolitan’s} office in Delhi that oversees content, message and strategy. In a 2001 online news

\textsuperscript{21} el-Ojeili and Hayden, 45.
\textsuperscript{22} Rosenthal, Elias, Dhar, 2.
\textsuperscript{23} Rosenthal, Elias, Dhar 2.
\textsuperscript{24} Pieterse, 64.
story, Green remarked “We have the right to see every foreign edition in advance, and if we don’t, or if it’s not acceptable, we get on a plane.” In the case of *Indian Cosmopolitan*, cultural hybridization ultimately creates a modern form of cultural hegemony. To quote theorist Raymond Williams’s explanation of hegemony,

A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex…Moreover (and this is crucial, reminding us of the necessary thrusts of the concept), it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own.

Hearst executives in the New York office attempt to only allow the expression of local demands that fit within the preexisting patriarchal/capitalist order that is necessary for their success. There are often times when the demands of local people and discretion of the Indian based staff can slip resistance under the radar of *Cosmo* executives and onto the pages of *Cosmopolitan*.

Hybridization allows for the preservation of local Indian values and customs in the pages of *Cosmopolitan*. Most notably, this includes fuller figured cover models, strong family values and traditional Indian fashion. However, resistance and cultural preservation is limited by Hearst’s capitalist motivations. Even though the Indian Cosmo Girl is in fact Indian and not American, she is still a corporate construction and a model for the modernization of women and as a result, she must be sexualized and a consumer.

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The Indian Context

The country of an intended *Cosmo* launch must already have a growing number of women in the workforce, as well as a developing capitalist economy. When asked if *Cosmo* intended to launch in Romania or Poland in 1985, George Green responded, “*Cosmo* is about consuming: we make money from the advertising and there’s nothing to yet to advertise…But when they’re ready for us, well we’ll be there.” Cosmopolitan chases the spread of capitalism and encourages its growth by advertising consumerist lifestyles and values to the women of developing countries, like India. Hearst launched *Indian Cosmopolitan* in 1996 in an attempt to sell its message of liberation through American capitalism to Indian women with disposable incomes.

Because *Indian Cosmopolitan* is aimed at the middle-class or aspiring middle-class, these women will be the focus of my study. This being said, the lives of women living in urban slums and rural villages cannot be left out of a discussion of *Indian Cosmo*. These women make up the majority of the female population in India and provide a counter to the image of the Cosmo Girl. While issues such as rape, child marriage and domestic violence are still most prevalent among Indians of lower economic brackets, it is important to understand that this is not a complete picture. There are many women who do not have the economic or cultural capital to ascribe to the Cosmo Girl image, and yet manage to have loving spouses and families, provide valued labor, are strikingly beautiful and confident and are content with their lives. Yes, of course money would make these women’s lives easier. But as I hope to present in this paper, greater wealth does not necessarily equate to greater happiness. While my study primarily focuses on the growing health issues of negative body-image and low self-

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esteem among urban middle-class women, more research needs to be done on depression rates among different classes in Indian urban spaces. While no person should be subjected to live in extreme poverty, the villages, slums and poorer areas I visited were not lifeless spaces of depression, envy and patriarchal control. They were dynamic and productive spaces filled with diverse people and an integral part of the Indian context. Yet, these realities are blatantly ignored on the pages of *Indian Cosmopolitan*.

Many critics of *Cosmopolitan* within India argue that the magazine is too sexual or too western, creating a discourse that has no place in Indian culture. Theorists James Curran and Myung-Jin Park discuss the ways in which western products like *Cosmo* are being used as excuses for resisting democracy and feminism. “Indeed, the defense of ‘Asian values’ and Eastern essentialism against Western Imperialism is even now a standard pretext use by conservatives and communists alike to legitimate illiberal controls against their own people.” My study critiques *Indian Cosmo* without legitimizing the accusations of promiscuity and lack of patriotism often made by traditional conservatives or nationalists towards *Indian Cosmopolitan* readers. Rather than condemning all western influence or banning *Cosmopolitan* for its sexual openness, I argue that *Cosmopolitan*’s entanglement in the globalized for-profit system restricts the capabilities and healthy development of all citizens. The sexualization of women in Indian media not only causes eating disorders and mental problems among middle-class women, but also amplifies and validates the objectification of women as sexual objects that contributes to violence against women in all classes. *Cosmo* also distracts the middle-classes from their role in the impoverishment of fellow citizens and encourages the unregulated expansion of consumer culture.

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28 Curran and Park, 5.
Discourses of Sexualization and Consumption

Patriarchal and capitalist discourses are embedded in the core philosophy of *Cosmopolitan*. *Indian Cosmo* promotes the dominant global culture’s value system, including an obsession with appearance and wealth, in order to create markets for beauty and luxury products. During the 1950s in America, publishers and advertisers were “confronted with the problem of permitting the average American to feel moral…even when he is spending, even when he is not saving…One of the basic problems of prosperity, then, is to demonstrate that the hedonistic approach to his life is a moral, not an immoral one.” Although *Indian Cosmopolitan* is a distinct magazine from the US edition of *Cosmo*, practices of female sexualization and consumerism are encouraged in both editions in order to ensure profit. In this study, “sexualization” will be based on the American Psychological Association’s (APA) definition of the term. In this 2007 APA report, the authors differentiate between healthy sexuality and sexualization. Sexualization occurs when a “person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making.” Sexualization of girls and women takes place in such moments as when we imbue a child with adult sexuality or we set unattainable definitions of sexiness. By sexualizing women, *Cosmopolitan* is not only using attractive people to sell its magazine, but also promoting feelings of insecurity and envy among its readers so that advertisers can claim to address these insecurities with consumer goods.

This study is a feminist analysis of the contradictions and implications of the

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discourses deployed and disseminated by *Cosmopolitan*. As feminist theorist Maggie Humm explains, “Feminist analysis highlights how dominant social discourses or practices, misshape women’s identities and become ‘the truth’; for example discourses of femininity in magazines.”\(^{31}\) For 45 years *Cosmopolitan* has contributed to a reshaping of femininity that naturalizes capitalism and conflates sex, womanhood, and consumption. *Cosmopolitan* ensures reader loyalty because it promises women that the continued consumption of *Cosmo* and the products advertised in its pages leads to a better life unburdened from suffering and inequality, and instead barrages readers with idealized images of feminine beauty that cause insecurities and dependency on consumer products, especially among young girls.

In their study entitled “Media as a Context for the Development of Disordered Eating,” M.P Levine and L. Smolak found that “exposure to magazine articles and advertisements on body shape and the thin ideal has been found to predict the perceptions of teenage girls of body shape ideal, weight management behaviors, disordered eating and a drive for thinness.”\(^{32}\) To this, sociologists Maggie Wyke and Barrie Gunter add, “the ability of magazine copy or pictures to influence readers’ self-perceptions of their own shape and attractiveness is mediated by the degree to which they have absorbed the surrounding culture’s ideals about body shape and whatever the cultural ideal may be.”\(^{33}\) In India, magazines like *Cosmopolitan* are contributing to shifting ideals of female beauty towards thinness as well as whiteness, and to problems of mental and physical health among Indian women. Images of sexualized women, and the increasing amount of


\(^{33}\) Ibid., 159.
sexualized images of men in consumer magazines also affects male readers, but more research needs to be done before an in-depth analysis of the potential effects of sexualized imagery in Indian consumer culture can be undertaken.

The consumerist ideology disseminated by Cosmopolitan magazine promotes shallow definitions of gender and beauty that disrupt a person’s ability to develop a healthy understanding of sexuality, intimate relationships, and the body. Although Indian Cosmopolitan is celebrated for “being the first Indian magazine with the words ‘sex’ and ‘orgasm’ on it’s cover,” the magazine’s entrenchment in the for-profit publishing system mandates that romance, sex, sexuality, and the female body are transformed into commodities that can be both bought and sold. On the majority of pages of Indian Cosmopolitan the female body is discussed as a product that can be improved through consumption, and exchanged for emotional and economic gain. As feminist author and contributing editor at New York magazine Ariel Levy writes,

Making sexiness into something simple, quantifiable makes it easier to explain and to market. If you remove the human factor from sex and make it about stuff…then you can sell it. Suddenly, sex requires shopping; you need plastic surgery, peroxide, a manicure, a mall.

Sex and feeling sexy, of course, does not require shopping. However within the for-profit women’s magazine industry, it is necessary to convince readers that it does. Consumer culture encourages the desire to purchase items in greater quantities.

The consumerist ideology propagated Cosmopolitan encourages a reader to see herself in competition with other women for men as well as resources at the expense of

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34 Author interview with Payal Puri.
36 In this thesis, I use the term mass consumption to refer to the ideology of consumer culture and the act of individuals participating in consumerism.
the lower class people as well as the environment. The discourses present in both 
American and Indian versions of Cosmopolitan promote conceptions of normalcy and success that naturalize capitalist competition between citizens. Economic stratification is “the result of an international free market system.” The discourse of consumption, when acted out in the real world, does not benefit national growth, but rather furthers economic stratification within and between nations. Artz also states, “politically speaking, the hegemony of consumerism advances the capitalist system. In ideological discourse, consumerism delegitimizes collective concerns and working-class values.”

I examine how the past and present of the women’s magazine industry and the production of Indian Cosmopolitan in particular are related to the potential spread of eating disorders and consumerism.

US-based multi-national media corporations perpetuate patriarchal and capitalist discourses that stimulate market growth, impose lifestyles and harm citizens in developing nations as well as the US. However, in order to maintain readership as well as encourage the inclusion of more groups into a class of consumers, Cosmopolitan also encourages progressive change. In his chapter, “Globalization and It’s Future Shock,” Samir Dasgupta states “globalization affects different groups of women in different ways…In situations where women have been historically repressed or discriminated under a patriarchal division of labor, some features of globalization may have liberating consequences.”

In the case of Indian Cosmopolitan, the liberating consequences are a result of various factors including the agency of women readers, employees and individuals and the motivations of companies to encourage women to participate in

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37 Artz, 24.
global capitalism and increase trust and magazine loyalty (i.e. sales) among women.

**Reader Agency**

It is important to recognize Indian consumers as agents in their decisions to buy, read and practice the advice within the pages of *Cosmopolitan*. Of course, women and men can choose to avoid *Indian Cosmo*’s messages by not paying 100 Rs. for a copy or by making fun of the parts of the magazine they find useless. In fact, in many of my interviews, readers dismissed *Cosmo* as harmless and silly. In this thesis, however, I use global theorist Amyrata Sen’s definition of agency. Sen defines agency as “the ability to set and pursue one’s own goals and interests, of which the pursuit of one’s own well-being may be only one. Other ends may include furthering the well-being of others, respecting social and moral norms, or acting upon personal commitments and the pursuit of a variety of values.”39 Sen theorizes that within patriarchal and capitalist societies, women’s agency is restricted because their actual choices are made based on their current circumstance and may not be an actual measure of their desires.

Fiske uses a study by Janice Radway as an example of the ways in which “the politics of popular culture is that of everyday life.”40 Of her study, he writes of the “evasive pleasure” experienced by women who read romance novels:

In [Radway’s] reading the housewife finds and validates feminine values in opposition to patriarchal ones. These values are shown to be morally and socially superior to the more politically powerful patriarchal ones...As a result of this mix of empowerment and self-interested, self-produced meanings of gender relations, the reader is motivated to challenge the patriarchal power exerted through everyday

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relations with her husband, and to increase her own space within it, to redistribute it, however slightly, toward herself.\textsuperscript{41}

This same reasoning can be applied to the ways in which women have used \textit{Cosmopolitan} since its reemergence as a “women’s magazine” in 1965. From the popular culture stance, women are empowered through \textit{Cosmopolitan}, because the magazine’s association with pleasure and escape allows women to use popular culture in their “everyday tactics of coping with patriarchy.”\textsuperscript{42}

Indian women use \textit{Cosmopolitan} to negotiate both Indian and American patriarchal structures, as well as understand how to thrive in a consumerist society while preserving aspects of Indian culture. In a New York Times article from 2006, Amelia Gentleman discusses the ways in which \textit{Cosmopolitan} Magazine has helped women around the world increase their confidence in their homes, works, and jobs. Gentleman contends,

In most ways, India remains deeply conservative, and part of this new climate of openness is a media phantasm, created to fire interest in the fashion industry and sell imported Western cosmetics...And yet the changes over the years in India's version of \textit{Cosmopolitan} reveal more than just a shedding of inhibitions about sex. They also reflect a growing independence - or aspiration to independence - among urban, middle-class Indian women.\textsuperscript{43}

It is understandable why urban middle-class Indian women would be drawn to magazines that focus on daily life and female independence. While the capitalist drive of American and Indian elites may have accelerated inclusion of women in the workforce and increasing acceptance of female sexual activity outside of marriage, the negative effects

\textsuperscript{41} Ibd., 55-56.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibd.
of sexualization and mass consumption on Indian society are counterproductive to equitable development and feminist reform movements.

For women struggling to negotiate the fast pace of urban life, sexual liberalism, possibly a career as well as religious and societal moral codes, it is crucial to understand what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. According to the discourses most prevalent in Indian mass media, it may seem to women that their choice is limited to capitalism and sexualization or domesticity and ancient forms of patriarchy. As Shilpa Phadke writes, middle-class Indian women,

> Are being asked to walk the thin invisible line that demands that they appear sexually desirable without earning the label ‘slut’…women who wish to engage in sexual activity have to carefully strategize to ensure that they do not acquire a bad reputation.44

Women’s magazines and their staff serve as “cultural intermediaries” that help women negotiate tradition and modernization and ultimately choose what lifestyles are compatible with their values and ideas of “happiness.”45

I agree with theorist Bina Agarwal’s argument that “women’s overt compliance with social norms does not necessarily mean they have accepted the legitimacy of inequality; it may merely reflect their lack of options.”46 *Indian Cosmopolitan* “undermines people’s will to understand their own social conditions and individual potential, as hegemonic middle-class lifestyles are emulated and even internalized.” Artz continues, “a media focus on daily life undercut access to history and the future, while a focus on individual consumption and desire denies access to collective, democratic,

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44 Shilpa Phadke, “Some Notes towards Understanding the Construction of Middle-class Urban Women’s Sexuality in India,” Gender Studies & Development Program: Compendium of Readings, 76.
46 Agarwal, Humphries and Robeyns, 21.
In order for women to have more options in their personal lives, more options must be presented in mass media.

**Methods**

Methodologically, this thesis uses a combination of history, personal experience, textual analysis and interviews as well as an investigation of modern media practices. This study places *Indian Cosmopolitan* magazine at the center of the recent history of globalization in order to understand current trends towards international business occurring within many American corporations, especially the magazine industry, and how this relates to dominant discourses and the everyday lives of women and men. I have chosen *Indian Cosmopolitan* as a case study, because, among other reasons, the rapid proliferation of sexualized images of women and capitalist discourses of mass consumption in urban India poses an immediate health risk to Indian citizens and requires serious attention. Also, India’s history of resistance to capitalism in conjunction with current grassroots feminist and labor movements provide the necessary backdrop for a large-scale resistance to corporate media.  

In my research, I used primary and secondary sources, including the works of women’s historians and interviews with *Cosmopolitan* executives to narrate a global history of the magazine. Appropriately, this history of Hearst Magazines International and *Indian Cosmopolitan* emphasizes the Indian historical, cultural, religious context, as well as India’s transition from an agricultural economy to a brand-driven industrialized economy.

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47 Artz, 22.
48 Here I am referring to Ghandi’s Hind Swaraj or “Home Rule” Movement which advocated the boycott of all British goods and the use of Indian made products.
economy. I examine how the liberalized economy has influenced the publishing industry as well as the gendered discourse of “modern” Indian womanhood. I use letters and documents from Helen Gurley Brown’s personal collection, the works of Indian feminists and social historians as well as personal interviews with Cosmopolitan employees and readers to locate a global process, the launch and continuation of Indian Cosmopolitan, in the real lives of women and men.

I complement my study of the production of the Indian edition of Cosmo with a textual analysis of past issues of Indian Cosmo. The theories of Roland Barthes, John Fiske and Michel Foucault inform my reading of these texts as I deconstruct the “myth” of the Indian Cosmo Girl. The repetition of contradictory messages of liberation and oppression fuel my analysis. As Barthes writes, “repetition of the concept through different forms is precious to the mythologist, it allows him to decipher the myth: it is the insistence of a kind of behavior which reveals its intention.”

I have read over fifty issues Cosmopolitan from October 1997 to March 2010. This sampling represents the total number of issues made available to me by Cosmopolitan executives in New Delhi and New York. My samples are chosen from this pool and are representative of typical advertisements, articles and covers of Indian Cosmopolitan. My textual analysis focuses on women’s liberation, sexualization, consumption and the process of hybridization in order to highlight spaces of both agency and exploitation in the text. In my conclusion, I examine local resistance to Indian Cosmopolitan, and highlight the efforts of Indian feminists and media activists to create a sustainable, healthy, and egalitarian society.

Positionality

Payal Puri and other Cosmo employees were more than kind to help me research their magazine. Employees informed me that their magazine is providing a service, but in my research I found that the magazine’s connection to the capitalist system inhibits its ability to help women. The Indian Cosmopolitan employees I met are honest, hardworking people who wish to help women. My critique of Cosmopolitan is not meant to attack, but rather, to help. I hope that after completing this thesis, I will be allowed to discuss my findings with Puri.

I am American, middle-class, white and college educated and I understand that this thesis is written with western bias, despite my best efforts to eliminate it. I live in a privileged, sheltered and safe environment. I have a warm bed at night and more food and clothes than I need. I live this way, knowing that my way of life is connected to the impoverished lifestyle of others. It is this double-consciousness that motivates me to change my life and my world.

I have found that resisting consumer culture as well as American standards of beauty is not always easy, fun or beneficial. As I wrote this thesis, I worked to eliminate self-sexualization and unsustainable consumption from my life, but as of yet, I have been unable to completely resist and happily remain a part of American culture. Some of this is my own fault, but also, my culture and society make it difficult to live a healthy, happy and sustainable life. For example, beautification is a natural and important part of life for many men and women, but the products required for achieving a commercial standard of beauty are packaged in plastic and made using harmful chemicals. If women’s magazines like Cosmopolitan are discredited, it will help alleviate the impossible beauty standards
that all women are expected to meet. I offer this critique to readers for their consideration and possible use in their own readings of consumer magazines and other media forms.

The topic of corporate women’s magazines has intrigued and challenged me for years. I am an editor of a women’s sexual health magazine on my campus, *Lips: Expressions of Female Sexuality*. *Lips* started during my freshman year as an alternative to corporate spaces of female sexual expression, like *Cosmopolitan*. The goal of the magazine was to initiate open, honest and female-led expressions of female sexuality. The magazine was successful and made many women and men on the William and Mary campus question the validity of commercialized depictions of female sexuality found in mass media. When I learned that I was accepted at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences to study Gender & Development, I decided to explore my interest in women’s magazines in India.

While in India I felt that I was somewhat relieved of many of the pressures of my culture. I felt more comfortable with my body, more identified with fellow women and more able to speak freely in everyday conversation about the hardships and wonders of life. In India today, it is possible to eat locally grown food, buy handmade and inexpensive garments, and live comfortably with few possessions, even in large cities. I especially appreciated the self-confidence of Indian women, which contrasted with the large numbers of women suffering from lack of self-esteem and depression in my own country. This confidence comes from many factors, one of which is Indian society’s acceptance of different body-types and cultural traditions of community, female strength and education. However, when in cities such as Mumbai or Delhi, my romanticized notions of India were interrupted by, for example, billboards with a light-skinned
Bollywood star reaching for a Pepsi, or a malnourished trying to sell me the latest issue of *Indian Vogue*. I write this thesis with the fear that, if current corporate media forms continue to dominate the Indian urban landscape many of the qualities of India that, in my view, make it a unique, spiritual and open-minded nation, may be corrupted. This thesis contributes to Indian development by emphasizing the importance of popular culture and media. An end to sexualization in the media and to consumer culture will not solve India’s problems, but it would benefit the people and the environment greatly. Additionally, if India were to challenge *Cosmopolitan*’s discourse as unhealthy and unwanted in India, perhaps this would cause my culture to question deeply engrained notions of ideal female beauty and consumerism that continue to flourish despite evidence of harmful effects.

A critique of the current state of the global communications system serves to point-out the inherent problems found in capitalist and patriarchal discourses of womanhood, consumerism and economic progress. By highlighting the role of *Cosmopolitan* in the development of unhealthy cultural shifts I hope to encourage citizens to create better versions of the present-day communications system that serve the needs of the people, rather than the pocketbooks of the elite. The *Cosmopolitan* brand provides a rich history of the commercialization of sex by corporate media, and demonstrates patterns of predictable effects on unsuspecting populations.
Section I.
Sex, Money and Women’s Liberation: The Cosmopolitan Philosophy

“Don't use men to get what you want in life - get it for yourself.” – Helen Gurley Brown

During our interview, I was moved by Indian Cosmopolitan editor, Payal Puri’s, honesty, national pride, and concern for the well being of her readers. Puri kindly let me interview her in the Indian Cosmo’s office in New Delhi, a privilege I was not allowed by Cosmo employees in New York. During our interview, Puri showed much enthusiasm for the progressive characteristics of Cosmopolitan magazine. With regards to the role of Cosmopolitan in the lives of Indian women, she explained,

One of the core things about Cosmo that people tend not to realize…is that it is a very, very service oriented magazine. It’s meant to give you information, and it’s meant to resolve, but without being designed to look like a service magazine.\(^{50}\)

The men and women working in the crowded, but welcoming New Delhi office, similarly understand their position as providing a service to the Indian community. In many ways, they are. The “modern” woman found on the pages of Indian Cosmopolitan is a respected member of the nation’s workforce, dictates her own sex life, and is comfortable discussing matters of sexual health. All of these ideas are important to share with women living in a world of patriarchal societies and are typical of Cosmopolitan internationally.

Sitting in the New Delhi Cosmopolitan office, I was torn. Talking with Puri complicated my previous impression Cosmopolitan magazine. Is Cosmopolitan in fact, providing a service?

A material feminist history of Cosmopolitan and the consumer magazine industry suggests that Cosmopolitan’s ability to liberate women is ultimately counterproductive

\(^{50}\) Author interview with Payal Puri.
due to the capitalist interests of the Hearst Corporation. Marxist feminist Heidi Hartmann writes, “Both Marxist analysis, particularly its historical and materialist method, and feminist analysis, especially the identification of patriarchy as a social and historical structure, must be drawn upon if we are to understand the development of western capitalist societies and the predicament of women within them.”\(^5\) A materialist perspective is useful in understanding why Hearst would promote both women’s liberation and women’s continued oppression in its magazine’s text and images. This study is not meant to criticize Cosmopolitan employees or readers, but rather, challenge the Cosmopolitan philosophy that claims women can achieve liberation while tolerating and even promoting oppressive systems.

The following section explores the historical development of the Cosmo Girl brand that has made its way into Indian society by way of Indian Cosmopolitan. A history of the Cosmopolitan philosophy demonstrates a disconnect between the spoken liberatory promises of Cosmopolitan employees and the oppressive practices of Hearst Magazines. It is important to trace the commercialization of female sexuality in American Cosmopolitan, in order to create a historical context for the modern patriarchal/capitalist discourses of sexualization and mass consumption in Indian Cosmopolitan. American consumer culture is also discussed in this section in order to identify patterns of consumerism, cultural change and capitalist exploitation in 1950s and 60s, similar to patterns occurring in India during the 1990s and today. In section two, The Sun Never Sets on Cosmo, I continue this discussion on a global scale and explain how and why the brand was brought to India in 1996. The origins of Cosmopolitan’s failure to

appropriately address patriarchal oppression in both America and India can be found in
the ties of the magazine’s production to the lucrative techniques of capitalist publishing
and advertising industries.

*Industrialization, Consumerism and Sexuality*

The *Cosmopolitan* philosophy was created in the context of the American
Industrial Revolution and its legacies. At the end of the 19th century through the First
World War, an American Victorian morality prescriptively limited sexual expression to
the private, or domestic sphere, and deemed procreation the only moral purpose of
intercourse. Rapid industrialization and the presence of women in the public sphere as
both consumers and workers accelerated a shift of Euro-American middle-class values
from a normative Victorian discourse. Historians John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Friedman
write,

> As growing numbers of working class women left the home to work in
> factories, offices and retail establishments, and as middle-class women
> entered college and pursued professional careers, the separate spheres that
> underlay nineteenth century sexual codes disintegrated. Simultaneously,
> the economy moved beyond the stage of early industrialization, in which
> habits of thrift, sobriety, and personal asceticism had won plaudits.
> Instead, the emphasis in American life was shifting towards consumption,
> gratification and pleasure.\(^52\)

Tensions between old and new continued to complicate American’s views on sex and
women in the workplace throughout the early twentieth century, but by the 1960s “the
nation had traveled a long way from the sexual values and practices of its nineteenth-
century ancestors.”\(^53\) Trends towards sexual liberalism had been evident in the 1920s, but

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\(^{53}\) Ibid., 300.
by the mid 1960s they had become conventional values of mainstream, white, middle-class culture.

Sexual liberalism framed the lives of most Americans during the mid-twentieth century. D’Emilio and Freedman describe sexual liberalism as “an overlapping set of beliefs that detached sexual activity from the instrumental goal of procreation.” This new sexual system was defined by the increasing acceptance of discourses that spoke of sexual fulfillment as an important factor of a happy middle-class marriage and therefore, fair game for public discussion by advertisers. During the 1950s and 60s entrepreneurs began to openly use sex to sell their products. D’Emilio and Freedman argue, “the first major challenge to the marriage-oriented ethic of sexual liberalism came from entrepreneurs who extended the logic of consumer capitalism to the realm of sex.”

Publishing executives and advertisers drew upon the erotic impulses of unmarried working Americans who were not spoken for in mainstream ideologies of early sexual liberalism. For men, *Playboy* became the voice of sex without marriage or monogamy, for women, it was *Cosmo*. However, *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy* shared more than just a message of sexual exploration outside of relationships. Both magazines were “premised on an ethic of success, prosperity and consumption.”

*Women and Advertising in Post-WWII America*

Advertising companies fueled the discursive power of consumerist ideologies espoused in lifestyle magazines, and created tensions between the messages in print and in the lived experiences of young, working class and middle-class women in the post-war

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54 Ibid., 241.
55 Ibid., 302.
56 Ibid., 304.
era. In her study of *Ladies Home Journal* (the best-selling women’s magazine in the United States during the 1950s) Jennifer Scanlon writes, “advertisers relied on magazines to tap into a growing national audience. Advertisements competed with and, in fact, often surpassed the editorial matter in making a connection with the reading audience.” For advertisers, the years following the Second World War was a period of ideal market conditions in the United States. In his study of print advertising in the United States, Richard W. Pollay writes, “the economic prosperity of the postwar years, when the war-honed productive capacity of consumer demand deferred by both depression and war, was additionally propelled by the rapidly rising numbers of births and the associated nesting consumption by citizens.”

The appearance of consumer magazines provided a space to practice newly developed advertising strategies and encourage mass consumption among Americans. While the propagandistic styles popular among American advertisers during World War Two were still present in the 50s and 60s, “the focus of the vast majority of the 1950s’ ads (77%) was on the positive benefits to be realized from consumption.” Pollay’s study also found that the ads of the 1960s tended to shift towards “rhetorical styles that are seductive in tone or testimonial.” Often these messages defined a woman as sexual, liberated, but imperfect.

As a result of the link between advertisements and content, feminist discourses of self-confidence and independence found in women’s magazines were limited, and often undermined by the fears and insecurities promoted in advertisements aimed at women readers. “Advertisers projected a sexual definition of the female, informing her that

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59 Ibid.
‘blondes have more fun’…advising her to ‘wear a Playtex bra if you have an average figure but don’t want to look average.’” D’Emilio and Freedman continue, “Bombarded by such messages, one feminist essay of the period proclaimed, ‘ninety percent of the women in this country have an inferiority complex because they do not have turned-up noses…have good legs or flat stomachs, and fall within a certain age bracket.’ The reduction of women’s bodies to erotic objects had debilitating effects.”

Cosmopolitan “celebrated an exaggerated femininity” that was “dependent on the ongoing purchase of consumer products advertised.”

The original Cosmo Girl, Helen Gurley Brown, was a major player in the advertising strategy shifts that occurred during the 1950s and 60s not only in her support of the advertising industry during her time as editor of Cosmo, but also as an advertising executive herself. Before reinventing Cosmopolitan and taking on the role of editor-in-chief, Helen Gurley (not yet married to David Brown) was employed at Foote, Cone & Belding advertising agency. First, as a secretary to Don Belding, and then as a advertising copywriter. “At Foote, Cone & Belding,” Jennifer Scalon writes, “as in the advertising industry generally, women were most often considered too emotional to write advertising copy.” However, Brown proved her lived experience as a working-class woman to be an asset to her company and was known for her ability to write copy for advertisements aimed at women, especially beauty products. In an advertisement for Pan-Cake cosmetic brand Brown wrote,

60 D’Emilio and Freedman, 312.
Tonight you must be more beautiful than you really are…you must be beautiful, period, when your mirror has been telling you for years that the most extravagant adjective that you can ever apply to yourself is…attractive. Poof to that! Tonight you will be beautiful.63

In her copy writing, Brown developed a method of commercializing sex and helped make female sexuality, most often conveyed as the desire to arouse men, a part of American print culture in the 1950s.

Brown was a strong supporter of “Stauffer System” advertising in magazines, named after the Stauffer Home Reducing weight-loss plan. The Stauffer System is a method of subversive advertising in which advertisements are disguised as general news or important information to the consumer. Bill Tyler, writing in Advertising Agency Magazine in 1958 noted, “We continue full admiration for the job that Helen Gurley of Foote Cone & Beliding (LA) is doing for the Stauffer System with its magazine-editorial approach.”64 Today, Stauffer System advertisements are required to have the word “advertisement” or “promotion” marked somewhere on the ad to inform the consumer of the unreliability of the information presented. The Stauffer System is successful, especially in women’s magazines, because although an advertisement, the information presented is portrayed as dependable and identifies consumption as a solution to some problem. In the same letter, Tyler commends Brown for her advertisement headline for the same Stauffer home reducing weight-loss plan. The copy read “Live in a Beautiful Body.” Of this headline, Tyler writes, “This is probably as agreeable a promise as a reducing plan can make to a diet-weary woman. It was Helen Gurley’s.”65 Brown’s ads were recognized for successfully convincing women that they needed the products she

63 Ibid., 33.
64 Stauffer System Memo, Helen Gurley Brown Papers – Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Archives, (4,9).
65 Ibid.
described. Scanlon writes, “in a short time, Helen Gurley Brown became the most highly paid female copywriter on the West Coast.”66 Brown, who often spoke of her own insecurities with her looks as a young woman, used her knowledge of women’s increasing preoccupation with looks, weight and attracting husbands to create a successful advertising and publishing career.

Brown founded the Cosmo Girl philosophy on her lived experiences as a working-class woman, and saw herself as a feminine exemplar of the American Dream. In 1962, encouraged by her husband, successful movie executive David Brown, Helen Gurley Brown decided to write a book that reflected her journey from a poor, struggling childhood in Little Rock Arkansas, to a life as a high-powered advertising executive and columnist married to a wealthy man. She titled her book, *Sex and the Single Girl*. The book reached the number six spot on the New York Times best-seller list in 1962.67 Brown’s book, “advocated working the system rather than changing it, manipulating the rules men wrote rather than attempting to rewrite them.”68 Brown’s advice suggested that “all relationships, including sexual ones, come down to exchanges of one sort or another.”69 The book also invited readers (italics for emphasis) “without apology, to indulge in some of the narcissism that capitalism allows.”70 Because the reinvention of *Cosmopolitan* magazine was based on Brown’s lived experiences and her best-selling 1962 biography/self-help book *Sex and The Single Girl*, it is appropriate to engage Brown’s views alongside the philosophy of *Cosmopolitan* that she helped create.

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67 Ibid., 176.
68 Ibid., 30.
69 Ibid., 76.
70 Ibid., 101.
When Helen Gurley Brown first pitched the idea of a magazine for young, single-working women to US publishers, she was already an established advertising copywriter and a best selling author. The magazine she proposed was titled *Femme*. Brown proposed that *Femme* would be a lifestyle magazine for women who “wanted to live independently but not dwell on the politics of their decisions or their lives.” The path to women’s liberation promoted in the *Femme* proposal, and eventually *Cosmopolitan*, argues that within the capitalist system, women had power if they had a job, money, and sex appeal. As historian Laurie Ouellette explains, “According to Brown’s girl-style American Dream, anyone – even the Cosmo Girl – could appropriate the surface markers of cultural capital. Once acquired, these surface markers of class position could be traded for economic capital (or access to it) on the dating and marriage market.” Women could demonstrate their consumption power on their bodies through the purchase of makeup, fashion and other products that demonstrated middle/upper-class status and in doing so, avoid the inequalities of capitalist and patriarchal discrimination.

Drawing on her experience in advertising, Brown argued that *Femme* would be a successful space for advertisers to reach the growing number of single female consumers, and even “listed in her proposal the products she believed they could solicit advertisements for.” To many publishing companies, this image of the sexually liberated Cosmo Girl must have seemed too radical to sell to mid-1960s America. However, Brown realized the potential profitability of a magazine tailored specifically to an untapped market and used this argument to finally sell her idea to Hearst Magazines.

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72 Ibid. 146.
Upon Hearst’s request, Brown proposed a new version of *Cosmopolitan* to address the dwindling sales of the original version of the magazine, established in 1886. This version, aimed at single, working women aged 18 to 34, would be “the first consumer magazine to target single women with ‘jobs.’” According to Brown, the self-proclaimed “messiah of the single girl”, women could do without the world news, and instead of romanticizing the past, would revel their coming liberation. Scanlon argues that Brown’s reinvention of *Cosmopolitan* was meant to “communicate an optimism designed to encourage, even enable, readers to feel better about themselves and world around them.” However, due to her intimate ties to the advertising industry and long held beliefs in the promises of consumer culture for women, Brown’s approach to this goal ultimately benefited elites rather than the working-women she hoped to speak for.

As Laurie Ouellette writes,

> Brown’s reworking of the American Dream mythology involved the construction and reconstruction of a desirable self, the presentation of identity as self-made, the valorization of femininity as a creative production, the partial subversion of natural class distinctions, the refusal of Victorian sexual norms and the expression of multiple hardships and frustrations – all within a framework that legitimized capitalism, consumerism, and patriarchal privilege.

When the new *Cosmopolitan* was released, Brown promised advertisers that her readers would be encouraged by the editorial content to buy beauty products, clothes and other products that promised to provide women access to middle-class identity.

*Cosmopolitan* emphasized the important role of men in women’s lives, which benefited the sale of advertisers beauty products. In her magazine proposal,

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73 Ouellette, 362.
76 Ouellette, 361.
Cosmopolitan is a magazine that would not only speak to the issue of sex explicitly and unapologetically (the first time in US women’s magazines history), but also tell heterosexual American single women how to achieve power over men. Brown writes,

Cosmopolitan is for women who like themselves…They want to be the very best they can be – in their jobs, in their clothes, in their social relationships. They want to be interesting because only through building a superb self can a woman build a mantrap.  

Brown’s description of the magazine content is very telling on the important role men were seen to play in even the single girl’s life, Brown writes (italics for emphasis),

It will specifically deal with men, money, divorce, men, fashion, food, beauty, sex, men, jobs, travel, self-improvement, the fight against aging, men, widowhood, alimony, analysis, men, apartments, travel, parents – and men.

While Cosmo did not encourage marriage, the magazine did constantly affirm a woman's need for men in order to form a complete self. In fact, over and over again in her description of the magazine, Brown states, “Cosmopolitan is for women who like men.”

Brown’s experience as a working class woman herself and as an advertising executive, gave her the authority to inform other women of the luxuries derived from achieving middle-class, capitalist status. Cosmopolitan’s target audience comprised office workers, housewives, secretaries, or in Brown’s rare case, successful business-women, who had worked outside of the factories in pink-collar, or “feminine” professional labor. She advised these women that through consumption, women could “master the art of being single in superlative style.” In her proposal, Brown writes,

Our magazine will be designed first to make money on circulation but

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77 Brown, “A Proposal for A New Magazine.”
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid. (Interestingly, when asked if Indian Cosmopolitan is a feminist publication, editor Payal Puri replied, “No, because our magazine is for women who like men.”)
80 Ibid.
quickly to become a valuable advertising property. That it can achieve advertising acceptance seems obvious. The women to whom *Cosmopolitan* appeals to have money to spend and the willingness to spend it, and a cornerstone of our editorial policy will be that they must go out in the world and earn and spend it.81

Brown’s vision of liberation aligned with the goals of beauty product manufacturers and advertising agencies. Scanlon writes, “Advertisers, who had long relied on toned down but nevertheless fairly suggestive images of women and descriptions of female sexuality, felt liberated by Helen Gurley Brown and *Cosmopolitan* to explore the appeal of the sexual with greater deliberation.”82

*Cosmopolitan*’s role as a voice for the middle-class identified woman, explicit discussions about sex and acquiring men, and the celebration of capitalism was proudly marketed to obtain financial support from advertisers. In 1971 *Cosmopolitan* had 1390 advertising pages, and announced that this fact “made it the greatest year in our history.”83 A 1973 brochure for advertisers and product manufacturing companies asked in bold letters, “WHO IS THAT COSMOPOLITAN GIRL?” It answers, “She’s Young (In the 18-34) age group, She’s well educated (Attended or graduated college), She Works (Employed) She’s in High Income ($10,000 & Over), She’s Big City (Metro areas).” The statistics on this page show that the majority of *Cosmopolitan* readers were not all members of bourgeois society, but even those women aspiring to be middle-class. The same ad announces,

**SHE IS A GREAT CUSTOMER! SHE MAKES MONEY! SHE SPENDS MONEY!** Here are only a few of the product classifications that show THAT COSMOPOLITAN GIRL to be your best customer…Cosmetics, Fashion, Food, Alcoholic Beverages, Travel,

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81 Ibid.
82 Scanlon, 165.
Miscellaneous.\textsuperscript{84} 

*Cosmopolitan* could maintain high priced advertising spaces, because it consistently convinced its readers that if they focused on themselves and spent money to improve their appearance, attract men, and further their careers, they would be happy and fulfilled.

*Cosmopolitan’s* cover lines, content and images conveyed an ideal construction of womanhood: the capitalist, sexualized, Cosmo Girl. As journalist John Hallow wrote in 1969, “Power. Money. And Sex. All three as crucial to America today as they were to ancient Rome.” Hallow continues, “Mrs. Brown not only has all three, she personifies them...As for sex...no one has more to say or says it more often on the subject of sex than Helen Gurley Brown.”\textsuperscript{85} Brown created a new consumer market that could be targeted by advertisers. As one Hearst promotion publicized, “Hearst’s Helen Gurley Brown had the creative idea that gave birth to 10,711,000 Cosmo Girls.”\textsuperscript{86} Brown knew all to well the hardships of the single working-girl’s life, and proposed her own solution rooted in dominant discourses. However, Brown’s proposed path towards liberation resulted in negative consequences for her personal life, as well as the lives of her millions of admirers around the world.

After *Cosmopolitan’s* first publication in 1965, feminists in the United States critiqued *Cosmopolitan* for declaring sexual liberation for women on its pages while failing to address the roots of patriarchal culture or the continuing realities of women’s oppression. In her famous feminist critique of 1950’s suburban culture, *The Feminine

\textsuperscript{84} "WHO IS THAT COSMOPOLITAN GIRL?", Helen Gurley Brown Papers – Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Archives, (38, 4).
\textsuperscript{86} Hearst Promotion, Helen Gurley Brown Papers – Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Archives, (38, 16).
Mystique, Betty Friedan claimed that “hardly a source of liberation, sexual practices in the post war period reduced women to ‘sex creatures, sex seekers’ who participated not in erotic and autonomous adventures but rather in a ‘strangely joyless national consumption.’” Similarly, in her declaration of independence from the sexual revolution, Dana Densmore wrote, “Sex is everywhere. It’s forced down our throats…It makes us look as if we’re free and active…and people seem to believe that sexual freedom is freedom.” Both Friedan and Densmore also wrote of women’s sexual objectification as advertisers profited from the increasing acceptance of sexualized discourses in the public sphere.

However, despite feminists like Friedan who viewed Cosmopolitan’s messages and advertisements as “obscene and horrible,” Helen Gurley Brown’s message resonated with many Americans, especially single professional and aspiring professional women. As Scanlon observes, through Cosmopolitan magazine Brown “invited in to feminism another important but often invisible group, working-class women, largely but by no means exclusively white, whose goals included financial independence, the freedom to engage in sexual activity outside of marriage, and the enjoyment of, rather than a rejection of, the fruits of capitalism.” However, Brown’s life was not as cheery as the text on her pages. She herself suffered from obsession with money, power and men, as well as food.

Helen Gurley Brown felt that it was a woman’s responsibility to solve the problems in her own life through work, consumption and the adherence to mainstream

87 Jennifer Scanlon, Bad Girls Go Everywhere, 108.
88 D’Emilio and Freedman, 312.
89 Ouellette, 361.
90 Scanlon, Bad Girls Go Everywhere, 101.
standards of sexiness. Brown and working-class women like her “rallied against the victimization model,” put forth by feminists such as Friedan. “Resourceful and self-reliant working-class women,” Scanlon writes, “could hardly sit back and weep while the world passed them by.” Indeed, women must make the most of their devalued position in society. However, the Cosmo Girl path to women’s liberation is flawed because it does not acknowledge the limits of operating within capitalist and patriarchal structures or the systematic nature of gender and sex discrimination.

Labeling Cosmo or Brown feminist or not feminist here might be appropriate, but not productive. Brown proudly claimed a feminist identity based in the realities of the lives of working-women. Brown fought for women’s equality and reproductive rights. However, in her magazine, Hearst often asked her to rework them to promote consumerism. “The Cosmo Girl was often addressed as a have not, and was offered instructions to remedy the situation,” Oulette argues, “Instead of critiquing the capitalist distribution of resources or the policies of wage labor, reworking one’s identity was presented as an individual route to mobility.” The Cosmo Girl brand is counterproductive to feminist efforts because it suggests that only through participation in consumerism, a woman can build her self-esteem in order to catch a career, independent wealth, and most importantly, a man.

Today, Brown globally inspires this brand of female empowerment that is problematic as well as popular. In 1997 Brown, was asked to step down as editor of the US edition of Cosmopolitan, a title she held since 1965. Her dismissal came as a shock to many considering it was Brown who drafted the proposal that made Cosmopolitan the

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91 Ibid., 107.
92 Ouellette, 367.
profitable women’s magazine it is today. Brown promptly chose to take Hearst’s offered position of editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan’s* 60 international editions. Brown, now 88 years old, reads over each international issue to ensure that the *Cosmopolitan* philosophy is present in each issue. “I can’t read Japanese,” she admits, “but I can tell if they’re doing the basic *Cosmopolitan*.“ Brown’s appointment to the International branch of *Cosmopolitan’s* operations was not simply out of gratitude for her time at Hearst.

Brown’s experience in the advertising and publishing business, as well as her passionate endorsement of self-sexualization and consumption made her the perfect person to educate international editors how best to sell *Cosmo* and its products.

Helen Gurley Brown’s experiences as a working-class white woman during the 1950s and 1960s informed her vision of women’s liberation through women’s toleration of oppressive structures such as capitalism; a vision that continues to be circulated on a mass scale. During the 1980s, these images of modern womanhood began to appear around the globe as communications systems became more advanced, and governments, such as India, embraced the possibilities of capitalist enterprise and foreign investors. Reporting from an international conference of *Cosmo* editors in 1985, John Diamond observed, international editors “are lifestyle evangelists and Gurley Brown is the inspiration and the fount of their faith. Like all good evangelists, their work will not be done until the Cosmo Girl confidently struts the boardrooms and the bedrooms of the whole civilized world.” Due to the rapid spread of globalized capitalist media forms, such as *Cosmopolitan*, an Indian “modernity” includes a complicated mix of American and Indian versions of oppressive and liberating discourses.

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93 Amy Aronson, “Women’s Magazines Go Global.”
Section II.
The Sun Never Sets on Cosmo: Indian Cosmopolitan Magazine and Indian Consumer Culture

They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them. – Mahatma Gandhi

During a 1998 Cosmopolitan International Conference in Sydney Australia, President of Hearst Magazines International, George Green announced to the editors of Cosmopolitan’s then 36 international editions, “The sun truly doesn’t set on Cosmo anymore.”95 George Green has held the title of President since the creation of Hearst Magazine International (HMI) in 1989, and is credited with the globalization of the Cosmopolitan brand. In the early years of HMI, Hearst was among the first American multinational corporations to find success in countries where western media was just beginning to make profits. In a recent interview, Green stated that he expects that Hearst’s international efforts will soon provide Hearst with “over half of its corporate earnings”.96 The ongoing development of a consumer society in India, as well as India’s colonial past, makes Indian Cosmopolitan an appropriate nation for a case study of the marketing practices of Hearst Magazines International.

Cosmopolitan is only one example of recent trends in corporate media globalization, but an important example considering Hearst Magazines publishes in over 100 countries around the world and, as Green stated in 1992, “Cosmo is the engine of this business, absolutely.”97 George Green has helped the Cosmopolitan brand to successfully

96 Rosenthal, Elias, Dhar, 1.
launch in 60 nations and procure 34 million readers. As The New York Times reported in 2009,

With a formula almost as closely guarded as Coca-Cola’s – there is a secret 50-page instruction manual – *Cosmopolitan*, Hearst’s naughty girlfriend of a magazine, has increased its circulation to 8.2 million worldwide, even extending its brand to places were readers have to hide the magazine from their husbands.⁹⁸

The Cosmo Girl brand is not only an engine of corporate enterprise, but also cultural shifts that are impacting the lives of citizens of countries in which it is published. *Cosmopolitan* chases the spread of capitalism and encourages its growth by advertising consumerist lifestyles and values to the women of developing countries, like India.

In India, there are now over seven women’s magazines. Two, *Femina* and *Women’s Era* are domestic, and tend to target older, married women with more conservative views on working outside the home, relationships and sex. However, these magazines have been pushed to incorporate more expensive tastes, more discussions of sex and advertisements for foreign brands due to the success of international titles like *Cosmopolitan* as well as *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and *L’Officiel*. International brands of consumer magazines can compete with locally based media because foreign advertisers and US-based executives work closely with Indian publishing companies to navigate and push cultural limits.

In order to guarantee financial success, multi-national media companies, like Hearst Magazines International, must not only monopolize as much of the market as possible, but also strategically promote certain social behaviors among target populations. Media forms like *Cosmopolitan* play a crucial role in encouraging the spread of consumer

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culture in India. *Vogue* features editor Nyasha Daswani comments,

> In a lot of ways, these magazines started to create that which maybe didn’t exist as much before. I do believe they have done a good job of creating a culture of consumerism. If you look at India today, the growth of the magazines happened simultaneously with the growth of the luxury market...[consumer magazines] have done a lot as far as creating awareness.

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This is not to say that magazines are responsible for the culture of consumerism in India. Television and the Internet are examples of other major factors contributing to these shifts. Consumer magazines do, however, idealize the middle-class cultures in India and the United States and teach consumers which behaviors are necessary to be successful in a modern/capitalist Indian society.

This section locates *Cosmopolitan* in the history of the development of a consumer culture in India and examines how Indian women are convinced to exchange rupees for *Indian Cosmopolitan*’s advice and advertised products. My thesis is concerned with the ways in which *Cosmopolitan* moralizes consumer culture among Indian citizens through constructions of “modern” Indian womanhood. This section also emphasizes the important role of Indian publishing elites in the success of *Indian Cosmo*, and reveals the consequences of cooperation with American capitalist publishers in hopes of creating an international movement for media reform. *Indian Cosmopolitan* is one example of a larger trend of reinventing colonial hegemonic practices to sell products to Indian citizens. I argue that *Indian Cosmopolitan* is not immoral because it speaks to sex or is too western, as some Indian conservatives would, but rather it is unproductive because of its connection to the global capitalist advertising and publishing industries which, through hegemonic, neo-colonial business practices, limit the agency of Indian men and women.

99 Author Interview with Nyasha Daswani, the Daswani residence, Breach Candy, Mumbai, June 2009.
to resist negative consequences of the global expansion of capitalism.

**Hybridization, Hegemony and Cultural Perseverance**

The success of *Cosmopolitan* rests in its ability to understand that international audiences will not buy a magazine that does not speak to needs relevant to their everyday lives, which for Indian women, has everything to do with Indian culture and values. In their study of several international editions of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Linguistic Professors David Machin and Theo van Leeuwen write, “*Cosmopolitan* allows women across the world to signify their allegiance to the *Cosmopolitan* ideal of the `fun, fearless female' through the way they dress and groom themselves, and through their expressions, postures, and actions, and to recognize this allegiance across geographical and linguistic boundaries.” Green, credited with the globalization of the magazine, admits that the success of *Cosmopolitan’s* international editions lies “in the ability to stay faithful to the *Cosmopolitan* brand identity within the context of cultural differences.” This careful blend of American and local continues throughout the pages of *Indian Cosmopolitan* and ensures that the magazine speaks to Indian sensibilities, while also encouraging new (and profitable) patterns of objectification and consumerism.

The process of hybridization, or in this study the blend of cultural discourses to form a new “modern” understanding of Indian womanhood, undermines previous interpretations of globalization as a linear and recent path towards uniform modernity and homogenization. In former studies of international editions of *Cosmopolitan*, cultural

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scholars have pointed to Indian involvement in the production of local editions of *Cosmopolitan* to challenge previous notions that globalization is equivalent to westernization. In her study of *Cosmo* in 1990s Taiwan, Jui-Shang Chan focuses “on how the local editions of ‘global’ magazines as ‘cultural hybrids’ have helped to provide new role models and advice, directed especially at the anxieties and appetites of young women experiencing rapid social change under globalization.”

These studies demonstrate the ways in which international editions of *Cosmopolitan Magazine* are not simply American imports, but rather a harmonious blend of cultures. Chan writes,

> *Cosmopolitan* is a popular woman’s magazine with a worldwide circulation. Its production is both centralized and localized: The various editions can borrow materials from the “central bank” – that is, the New York Headquarters – or from “sister” issues in other countries, as well as producing their own articles. Consequently, each issue of *Cosmopolitan*, in Taiwan and sister countries, contains a unique blend of global and local cultural ingredients on topics concerning modern womanhood.

I agree with scholars like Chan who highlight the “glocalized” discourse, or the “tandem operation of local/global dynamics,” present in *Cosmopolitan*. Highlighting hybridization demonstrates local women’s agency, as well as the participation of local editors and staff as cultural intermediaries in the production and maintenance of the *Cosmo* brand. Chan argues that international versions of *Cosmopolitan* sell “not only because it symbolizes being fashionable, modern, and Western but also because it is a form of popular culture, grounded in local contemporary issues and problems.”

However, the process of hybridization found on the pages of *Indian Cosmopolitan* is complicated by Hearst’s and India Today’s monetary motivations to celebrate

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102 Chan, 363.
103 Ibid., 362
104 Pieterse, 64.
105 Chan, 363.
“modernity” as well as India’s past and continuing unequal relationship with the West.

Although a new term, globalization is an old and ongoing process. As Professor of Sociology Jan Nederveen Pieterse writes,

The westernization/modernity views on globalization only permit a global momentum with a short memory. Globalization taken widely however refers to the formation of a worldwide historical field and involves the development of global memory, arising from shared global experiences.

The spread of modern capitalism and consumer culture is a shared experience among Indian women that *Cosmopolitan* understands, because, as discussed in Section One, *Cosmopolitan*’s philosophy was developed to speak to women experiencing economic and cultural shifts in 1950s and 1960s America. Shared experiences, Pietrse explains, can also be intercivilizational contact, such as colonialism.

Colonialism, most often associated with the expansion of western culture and government during the 15th through 20th centuries, is a system that establishes unequal relationships between the colonists and the colonized indigenous populations. A comparative study of the East Indian Company and Hearst Magazines International illustrates the similarities between past and present business practices of multi-national companies. With its resources and large population, India was a source of vast wealth for the British Empire during the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Important to the British’s accumulation of wealth and power in India was the “joint-stock chartered company” such as The Honorable East India Company of the British Empire, established by an English Royal Charter by Elizabeth I in 1600, with the intention of favoring trade privileges in India. Joint-stock chartered companies like The East India Company were “a mix of government and business.” As stated in their history of modern India, Barbara and

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106 Pieterse, 20.
Thomas Metcalf explain, the trade companies established during the age of the British Empire “are now often viewed as a prototype multinational corporations (MNCs)”\(^\text{107}\).

The joint-stock model of the East Indian Company is similar to the joint-venture business model of Hearst Magazines International.

The East India Company understood the importance of developing understandings of Indian culture in order to gain the support of locals and gain access to India’s resources. In 1784 Governor-General of the East Indian Company, Warren-Hastings told the Company’s board of directors,

> Social communication with people over whom we exercise dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state…it attracts and conciliates distant affections; it lessens the weight of the chain by which the natives are held in the subjection; and it imprints on the hearts of our countrymen the sense of obligation and benevolence.\(^\text{108}\)

As Metcalf and Metcalf explain, “Local knowledge and local ways of understanding, from the outset shaped how the British made India their own.”\(^\text{109}\)

*Indian Cosmopolitan* was launched in 1996 through a licensing deal with The India Today Group, India’s largest publisher, which also currently publishes other well-known American magazine brands such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Women’s Health*. As Rand Hendrix, Director of Marketing at Hearst Magazines International explains,

> Hearst does not own its international editions, we are partners with prestigious local publishers in each market…This partnership model can limit financial risks or greatly enhance profits depending on relationship and market. We also chose to use an established publisher in each market as they know the market and business practices in their market.\(^\text{110}\)

A licensing agreement between Hearst and India Today means that India Today bought

\(^{107}\) Ibid., 20.


\(^{109}\) Ibid.

\(^{110}\) Author Interview with Rand Hendrix, e-mail correspondence, 28 January 2010.
the license to *Cosmopolitan* and pays Hearst Magazines International, the parent brand, a royalty every month.

Because each edition of *Cosmopolitan* is designed to suit the needs and desires of local people, Hearst Magazines International also understands that the ability of *Cosmopolitan* to market itself in India relies heavily on the cooperation of Indian officials and publishing elites. In an article entitled, “Behind the *Cosmo* Empire” Green tells a *Magazine World* interviewer,

I don’t care how big you are. I don’t care how many places you publish. I don’t care how many successful titles you have. The one thing you’ll never have is the visceral attachment that can only come from growing up there…each [edition of *Cosmopolitan*] is written and edited in the voice and ways of a particular country.\footnote{“Behind the Cosmo Empire: An Interview with George Green”, International Federation of The Periodical Press, www.fipp.com/News.aspx?Pagelndex=2002&Itemld=12354, 2003 (accessed 20 October 2009).}

Through joint-ventures with local publishers *Cosmopolitan* adjusts the “Fun, Fearless, Female” format in order to sell its message of modern womanhood and the benefits of consumerism in to countries where women are entering the professional working world in large numbers. In his analysis of William Mazzarella’s book *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India*, Arivand Rajagopal explains,

The necessity of navigating the Indian consumers’ social landscape with all of its peculiarities allowed Indian advertising and marketing professionals to render themselves indispensable as consultants, interpreters and local experts vis-à-vis their multinational clients. This of course required Indian professionals to speak on behalf of India to multinationals.\footnote{Arvind Rajagopal, “Comparative Studies in South Asian Culture and Society,” Anthropological Quarterly, Vol. 77, 1 (2004): 133, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4149871 (accessed October 20, 2009).}

Scholars like Mazzarella and Chan emphasize the participation of Indians throughout the entire process of launching and marketing a consumer culture among Indians. Mazzarella
even suggests that Indian publishers may exaggerate the “number and peculiarity” of Indian consumers and manipulate the US-based executives of multinational parent brands in order to ensure their continued importance in the industry. The agency of Indians in the globalization of corporate media provides a space for possibilities of resistance to cultural homogenization and American media imperialism. However, agency within a multinational company can only produce limited forms of resistance, and should not be viewed as an effective counter to American consumer cultural imperialism.

With the help of Indian elites the *Cosmopolitan* philosophy of success through sex, money and power is adjusted to the Indian environment. Sociolinguistic scholars Machin and Leeuwen argue, the *Cosmopolitan* ideal “is translated into many languages and adapted to the local circumstances of many different markets, but never to the degree that the essential global economic-ideological interest behind it is lost from sight.” They continue,

Local editorial teams carefully tailor their editions of the magazine to reflect the values, narratives and culture of their territories. But this does not entirely negate the Western imperialism thesis, since many of these differences are surface differences, beneath which, at a deeper level, similarities can be found.\(^\text{113}\)

In order to ensure that editors never stray far from *Cosmopolitan*’s formula of success New York based executives like Green keep in close touch with editors through visits, correspondence and conferences.

Twice every year *Cosmopolitan* editors from around the world gather for the Cosmic Conference to continue to increase profits, expand markets and ensure that *Cosmopolitan* remains the number-one selling women’s magazine in the world. This

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year, the Cosmic Conference took place in New Delhi. At these conferences, editors share “problems, feature ideas and promotional tips” as well as get a heavy dose of *Cosmopolitan* rhetoric from leading Hearst Magazines International Magazine figures such as Green and editor-in-chief of all international editions, Helen Gurley Brown.\(^{114}\) In a 1994 memo to 20 international editors, Brown writes,

> It was wonderful to be with all of you at our Paris Conference… Will you let me put something in writing I’m not sure I said very well at our meeting? … We want our magazine to be profitable. We have other goals, of course, but making money is the general goal of any business and ours is the business of putting out a magazine.

Towards the end of this memo Brown adds (italics for emphasis), “Each editor is in charge of his/her product and may do whatever she or he wishes *within the parameters of what this magazine is about*, allowing for cultural differences, of course.”\(^{115}\) Hearst, even in a partnership, maintains the superior status of the New York Office and keeps close tabs on editors to ensure that consumer culture and sexualization is present on the pages of *Indian Cosmopolitan*.

**Indian Consumer Culture**

The Cosmo Girl is an idealized modern woman, and a sign of national progress. “If you walk down the street here on Eighth Avenue, or in Beijing or in Singapore, women look the same,” comments George Green, “They don’t want to be American, but they want to be more like their American sister than ever before.”\(^{116}\) Executives at

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\(^{115}\) Memo from Helen Gurley Brown to international editors, October 1994, Helen Gurley Brown Papers – Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Archives (40, 8).

Cosmopolitan magazine are supporters of modernization theory that assumes the developing world should imitate western development. Said Brown at an International Publishers conference in 2004, “Cosmopolitan is about work and love. Honey, we’ll help you get a better life, but you have to make the effort yourself.” Indian Cosmopolitan provides the guidelines for a “better life,” or rather, a modern life rooted in consumerism. For Karl Marx, capitalism is “the economic power that dominates everything in modern society.” In his sociological study on the theories of Marx and Weber, Derek Sayer explains,

Capitalism is modernity, and modernity capitalism. ‘It is only capital which creates bourgeois society,’ says the Grundrisse, and it is bourgeois society which makes ‘all previous stages [of society] seem merely local developments of humanity and idolatry of nature.'

Marx viewed traditional Asian societies as a “mysterious other which exists to be possessed…an object of conquest and desire,” while modernity was “thrusting, masculine, erect.” Multi-national corporations like Hearst view the proliferation of idealized images of modern societies and access to status marking products, such as expensive clothes, accessories and cosmetics as a service to traditional Asian cultures.

The recent boom in economic growth in India caused a sudden accumulation of wealth among many Indian people as well as shifts in attitudes towards economics and sexuality among the middle and upper classes. In interviews George Green highlights the increasing appetites for luxury items in Asia and concludes “the international business is

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117 “International Luncheon”
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid, 15.
better than ever.” As a result of India’s colonial past, the country attempted to maintain strict regulations on foreign imports and multinational companies. However, in the 1980’s “the individual consumer began to be seen as sovereign” and consumption was aligned with national identity. Similar to the hybridization found in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, consumerism was not accepted as imposed by the west, but rather was rationalized by Indian elites and government as something uniquely Indian and necessary for the progression of India. In 1985 Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi inaugurated his new economic policy, “designed to promote middle-class consumption as the key to national development.” This move towards a focus on the individual and the growth of the middle-class meant that there was a potential readership for *Cosmopolitan* in India.

Green and Hearst Magazines International’s decision to launch an edition was part of a larger wave of foreign enterprise in India that began in 1991. In 1991 then Minister of Finance Manhoman Singh pushed successfully for a policy of economic liberalization of the Indian market. Here, liberalization refers to the removal or reduction of government restrictions on foreign companies who wish to sell their products to Indian citizens. Especially important to Hearst Magazines International, “cumbersome procedures of licensing, etc. were abolished.” The Indian government celebrated liberalization as a progressive step towards a unique Indian modernity, meant to bring prosperity and happiness to all Indians. When *Indian Cosmopolitan* launched in 1996,

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121 Joshua Chaffin, “Why Hearst has Reason to Thank the Global *Cosmopolitan* Woman.”
122 Rajagopal, 133.
123 Ibid, 134.
executives built upon this preexisting conflation of consumption and happiness to establish the *Cosmo* brand in India.

**Indian Women, Capitalism and Cosmo**

*Cosmopolitan* claims to be successful because they are providing an entertaining and fact-filled magazine that speaks to the shared qualities of women around the world.

As Payal Puri states,

> I think the one big thing that Cosmo has achieved worldwide is to show that women of a certain age are more similar across the world, than they are different...How far they can go from there will depend on cultural positions, but at heart they can become a like-minded community irrespective of location. Over 200 million readers, and the format of the magazine by and large is the same in all countries. Women of a certain age across the world relate to the same things.

Puri’s allusion to a “like-minded” community of women is important. While the success of *Cosmopolitan* does rely on the shared interests of women, in India it is a specific niche of women who turn to *Cosmopolitan* to understand how to best navigate societal changes that are occurring due, in part, because of urbanization and spread consumer culture in India. When *Cosmopolitan* claims to be liberating Indian women, they are only considering a small percentage of Indians who seem to be systematically gaining access to employment, education, and sexual expression. Hearst Magazines International can distribute their magazines and sell advertisement space for cosmetics and beauty products because the middle-classes in India are experiencing predictable cultural changes that accompany a shift from an agricultural society to an industrialized, or capitalist society with a growing consumer culture.

*Indian Cosmopolitan* and most other consumer magazines sold in India are niche
items, meaning the magazine itself and the products sold on its pages target the small, but growing percentage of India’s 1.1 billion population that identify as middle/upper class. A middle-class identity refers to a state in which the person holding this identity may or may not actually possess the wealth their outer appearances would suggest. Derek Sayer describes Max Weber’s distinction between “class” and “status.” Sayer writes,

> It is not the possession (or lack of possession) of goods or skills as such which defines class, but the possibility of utilizing these in a market context…If class, for Weber, is exclusively an economic matter, ‘status’ is ‘determined by a specific, positive, or negative, social estimation of honour’ and status honor is normally expressed by the fact that above all else a specific style of life can be expected from all those who wish to belong to the circle.\(^{125}\)

The construction of modern middle-class womanhood in *Cosmopolitan* relies on Indian women’s desire to recreate or imitate middle-class ideals. Perhaps a woman does not earn enough to be categorized within the middle or upper class income bracket, however, she can still pursue modern middle-class femininity by aspiring to a certain values, behaviors and tastes.

The younger generations of India’s urban middle-class tend to distance themselves in many ways from Indian traditional culture, especially when it comes to views on gender and consumption. As Daswani observed during our interview,

> [India is] not a magazine culture at all. That is a very new thing, but because it’s targeting so few people and because more and more people in the country are becoming more urban and more and more places in the country are now developing a culture where women are more interested in reading and in fashion or taking more control of their finances or taking more control of their sex lives, there is this trend where women are now picking up magazines more.\(^{126}\)

The expanding influence of consumer culture on India has created shifts towards

\(^{125}\) Sayer, 102-103.

\(^{126}\) Author Interview with Nyasha Daswani.
increased sexual freedom for women and the inclusion of more women in the professional sector. Rita Banerji, author of *Sex and Power*, writes, sex in urban, middle-class circles “is fast acquiring acceptability as a normal facet of relationships….though these sexually unconventional pockets do not amount to more than 8 to 10 percent of Indian citizens, they still add up to a hefty eighty million people or so.”  

The capitalist goals of consumer magazines in India profit from women in the workforce and increasing female concern with attracting sexual partners and has helped push women’s liberation into the mainstream. However, for all Indian women, there are two sides to the transformative power of capitalist growth.

Consumer culture has redefined women, in the form of the sexually liberated and working modern Indian woman, to suit the needs of capitalists while patriarchal structures remain. In India, the improved economic and social status of a relatively small group of Indian citizens has not benefited the country as a whole. “As optimistic as these social changes may seem,” writes Banerji, “they are not indicative of any significant change in India’s conventional thinking on issues of sex and sexuality.”  

Cosmopolitan fails to promote a revolution of gender roles in any of its domestic and international issues due to the magazine’s ties to the advertising, publishing and beauty industries. Karl Marx assumed that capitalism would “spread inexorably around the world, creating in the process a global capitalist order, which he believed was a progressive step insofar as it would pave the way for communism. Marx, like Cosmopolitan executives believed that capitalism is progressive and its spread would bring international social revolutions. “Capitalism, that is, would generate the necessary productive forces and skills and create

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127 Banerji, 288-289.  
128 Ibid.
a human force – the working class – that would bring a higher stage of human organization.” A world without poverty or female oppression has yet to be recognized, and is unattainable as long as negative consequences of capitalism, such as the exploitation of consumers and the hegemonic distraction of the middle-classes, are tolerated.

*Cosmopolitan* executives claim that their focus on the positive aspects of modernity stem from the fact that this is what their readers want. Payal Puri states, “It’s not a heavy magazine. It’s not meant to make you feel ponderous… *Cosmo* is not really an activist magazine. We are trying to deal with things that are far more common to your everyday life, than going out and trying to change the world so to speak.” Similarly when American feminists in the mid-nineteenth century stated that *Cosmopolitan* “existed only on a personal level and failed to advocate for structural changes that would benefit all women,” Brown refused to apologize for her magazine’s focus on consumption and leisure.129 Although himself a modernist in many ways, unlike *Cosmopolitan*, Karl Marx spoke openly about the negative consequences of capitalism. In his Manifesto, Marx writes of the darker side of modernity:

> The ephemerality and insecurity of modern life, the disintegration of community and susceptibility of society to its ideological substitutes, the anomic isolation of the rootless individual, the ‘disenchantment’ of the world, the iron cage of an enveloping rationality in which means usurp ends.130

*Cosmopolitan* executives would have a harder time selling advertisement pages if the magazine spoke negatively about capitalist or patriarchal systems on which consumer industries, like the beauty industry, rely. In this way, *Cosmopolitan’s* reliance on the

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129 Jennifer Scanlon, Bad Girls Go Everywhere, 132.
130 Sayer, 12.
creation of a consumer culture prohibits the magazine from revealing the negative aspects of modern society.

In the case of India, problems associated with the development of a consumer culture such as class isolation, economic stratification and eating disorders will manifest in uniquely Indian ways, alongside persistent traditional values and hierarchies. The positive aspects of capitalist development such as increasing economic and sexual power for middle-class women will also follow an Indian, not western, model. In a chapter entitled “Theorizing Globalization: Introducing the Challenge,” Chamesy el-Ojeili and Patrick Hayden explain this phenomenon. “Rather than a single type of modernity,” the authors argue, “it is necessary to speak of diverse modernities that emphasize a variety of distinct values, aims, ideals, practices, and institutions.” Because Indians hold on to values they cherish and refuse to be dominated by corporate propaganda, they are able to resist westernization.

Perhaps it is more appropriate to think of Indian history as cyclical rather than linear. By incorporating Indian elites into the exploitation process and painting a solely positive image of consumer culture, *Cosmopolitan* is following a colonial model of hegemonic control of people and resources. This study aligns itself with critiques of proponents of modernization theory that have developed since the late 1960s. In order to avoid resistance to modernization and conflict, capitalist nations celebrate the benefits of modern life and provide material goods and money to developing nations. Some theorists view “modernization” theory as a continuation of western imperialism in the modern world. As globalization theorists James Curran and Myung-Jin Park explains, “American aid programs to developing countries, and the ‘free flow of information’ policies

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131 el-Ojeili and Hayden, 47.
promoted by the American state, assist the American media industry in its drive to achieve international dominion...far from promoting self-sufficiency, the ‘modernization’ of developing countries merely fosters dependency within and exploitative system of global economic relations.”

Although capitalist media forms naturalize shifts towards a consumer culture in India, it is important to understand that the presence of a class of men and women with disposable incomes in India is a recent phenomenon in a long history of foreign interference in Indian society. The movement from an agricultural to a capitalist society in India has produced meaningful benefits for marginalized groups, including women. However, only a minority of Indian women experienced the beneficial results of modernization, and even these benefits come with consequences.

Section III. Indian Cosmopolitan: Modern Indian Womanhood, Sexualization and Consumption

“Girls are taught to view their bodies as ‘projects’ that need work before they can attract others, whereas boys are likely to learn to view their bodies as tools to use to master the environment.”

-Sarah Murnen, professor of psychology, Kenyon College

“The forces in a capitalist society, if left unchecked, tend to make the rich richer and the poor poorer.” - Jawaharlal Nehru, leading figure in India’s independence movement and India’s first prime minister

When asked how Cosmopolitan markets to young women in India, Rand Hendrix, Marketing Director of Hearst Magazines International stated, “The Cosmo brand is marketed the same way worldwide – empowering young women to be the best they can

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132 Curran and Park, 5.
be.” As with American editions of *Cosmopolitan*, every issue of *Indian Cosmopolitan* contains images and texts that depict the typical modern women as self-confident, sexually liberated, educated and professional. Against the backdrop of “traditional” forms of oppression that continue to define proper womanhood as submissive and confined to the domestic sphere, *Cosmopolitan’s* promise of female empowerment can be viewed as a radical message to women. *Indian Cosmopolitan* is an advice manual for the middle-class Indian woman, and instructs its readers how best to negotiate persisting Indian traditions and consequences of modernity. However, because Hearst executives place monetary interests over the interests of the communities, both liberation and tradition are commercialized and transformed into marketing strategies.

*Cosmopolitan* is one example of a larger system of capitalist media that strategically promotes insecurities and consumer culture among women in order to make profit and continue expansion. Representative of the ability of individuals to resist global capitalism, even in their commercialized form, messages of tradition and liberation found in *Indian Cosmopolitan* remain spaces of resistance and positive change. Nevertheless, as communications scholar Lee Artz writes, “As local media become commercialized, they are subjected to the laws of the market more than the needs of the community. Privatized media subvert the local even if local, because they emulate the commercial global media and model its values.” *Cosmopolitan’s* messages are created with profit as the primary goal, so it is in their best interests to promote self-doubt and guiltless consumption alongside the message of empowerment.

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133 Author Interview with Rand Hendrix, e-mail correspondence, 28 January 2010.
134 Artz, 23.
During our interview, *Indian Cosmopolitan* editor Payal Puri explained, “[*Cosmopolitan*] packages in a lot of information without looking like it’s information.”¹³⁵ This comment was made with regard to *Cosmo’s* service to Indian women (i.e. advice on sexual health, relationships, and a career), but I argue much of the text and images in *Indian Cosmo* is information meant to encourage women to contribute to the growth of the middle-class and consumer culture and consequently the national influence of consumer magazines. As India continues to develop, citizens should be aware of the influence capitalist, patriarchal and hierarchal structures have on the effectiveness of solutions proposed by elites, politicians and corporations. Although Hearst plays a large role in the social, economic and environmental problems created by modernity and consumer culture, executives refuse to acknowledge that discourses of consumerism and sexualization found in *Indian Cosmo* are sources of systemic oppression for the modern Indian women.

The Cosmo Girl is a mythical character created first in the United States by Helen Gurley Brown and then marketed around the world. The Indian Cosmo Girl is adapted to accommodate Indian culture and value systems in order to sell products to Indians. *Cosmopolitan* builds upon existing Indian understandings of the modern middle-class women as global, urban, wealthy, and usually high-caste. In its text and imagery I found that *Cosmopolitan* celebrates young women who are middle-class, working, heterosexual, thin and light skinned for being liberated, sexy and successful as well as progressive and Indian. It is useful to turn to cultural theorist Roland Barthes to explain the myth of the Cosmo Girl and how this myth has been deployed by Hearst Magazines International to increase profits for its employees, product manufacturers, as well as Indian publishing

¹³⁵ Author Interview with Payal Puri.
elites. Barthes writes, “myth is a system of communication...[a myth] is a message.” He continues, “myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things.” Even though the working, progressive, global, “modern” Indian woman is a relatively new construction of womanhood in India, it is already imbedded in normative understandings of urban Indian life, largely due to the influence of capitalist media forms.

Themes of liberation and oppression are present throughout each issue of Indian Cosmopolitan. In the textual analysis portion of this study I utilize Barthes’ theory of semiotics, or the study of sign processes and symbols, to explain the harmonious coexistence of conflicting discourses of liberation and oppression in relation to the aims of capitalists. My analysis also discusses the complicated nature of myth creation, in which the needs and desires of readers and local editors play a large part in the creation of an ultimately oppressive discourse. I focus my analysis on the contradicting, but connected, constructions of the sexually liberated woman/the sexualized woman and the working woman/consuming woman. In my analysis I incorporate the understanding that the exact replication of discourses of liberation and oppression found in the United States is impossible due to India’s traditional context and continued resistance to cultural erasure.

Modern Indian Womanhood

During our interview, Indian Cosmopolitan editor Payal Puri explained the progress Indian women have made in the past decades as India has modernized. She states, “There are a lot of duties associated with women in India and a lot of roles and a

136 Barthes, Mythologies, 109.
lot of imagery, but fun is not one of them. I would have to say that within the urban context, that’s changed a lot.”¹³⁷ I witnessed the progress made by individual women and the Indian women’s movement while studying and living in India during the Spring and Summer of 2009. Every year, more Indian women are seen out in public spaces not only working side-by-side with men in academic, professional and government positions, but also going out to bars, nightclubs, restaurants as well as just spending time around the city with friends, boyfriends and even girlfriends. However, female pursuits of equality do not come without consequences. Women are still harassed at home and in the streets, and even assaulted by culturally conservative Indians for working as well as having “fun” and abandoning their traditional womanly duties. In addition to challenging patriarchy by entering the public sphere, Indian women are also resisting colonial ideas that “Indianness” is less desirable than a western identity. Puri explains, “We don’t want to be like anyone else, we want to take the best of what’s out there in the world with the best of what’s here. We take the best of both. We have fun doing it. Modern is Indian.”¹³⁸

Modern Indian womanhood is a concept inscribed with cultural meanings produced by Indians and then idealized and commercialized by Hearst Magazines International.

Although technically all Indian women are “modern” in that they are living in a modernized India, it is typically the middle-class, urban, global, and professional woman who is associated with the term “modern.” With industrialization, came the emergence of a middle-class and a consumer culture as well as the idea of the “modern” Indian woman. In India, the achievement of a “modern” identity for young women is associated with the appearance of certain cultural markers such as a certain level of education, a disposable

¹³⁷ Author Interview with Payal Puri.
¹³⁸ Ibid.
income, liberal attitudes towards sex, the purchase of luxury items like designer clothes and makeup, an understanding of western cultural norms, and very often, fair skin. These markers were developed in combination with exposure to globalized ideologies, but are Indian constructions influenced by pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial constructs of gender and class.

A deconstruction of the Indian Cosmo Girl reveals negative consequences of naturalized modernity, such as eating disorders and economic inequality as well as the preservation of Indian systems of female oppression. All Indian women are exposed to an Indian patriarchy that limits the ability of women to gain equal access to human rights. In 1949, India’s constitution outlawed all forms of discrimination, including that against scheduled castes (or the lowest castes), religious minorities and women. Dharma Daughters author and journalist Sara S. Mitter writes, “The principle of universal equality before the law ran counter to some deeply held beliefs.” Mitter continues, “Thus, on paper, female citizens were subject to the law of the land, not by religious conclaves or patriarchal councils. In practice, of course, many old inequalities persist quite undisturbed.” In 1975 the Government of India’s Department of Social Welfare released a report on the status of Indian women which “was harshly critical of the general treatment of Indian women and contemptuous of their social standing as ‘expendable assets.’” Author of Sex and Power: Defining History, Shaping Societies Rita Banerji explains, “Factors that were identified as contributors to the breakdown in women’s health were child marriages, multiple pregnancies and lack of medical aid and facilities…More than thirty years since, there has been negligible change in that

140 Mitter, 5.
Indian Cosmopolitan views patriarchy as the reality of “traditional” Indian life, even though it cannot be separated from “modern” life.

The dominant religion of modern India, Hinduism, is both accommodating of and resistant to western influences. Mitter explains, “Capitalist expansion proceeds hand in hand with existing feudal values. The highly elaborated organization of Hinduism provides an effective break.” The dominant form of Hindu models its views towards female sexuality as rooted in the patriarchal traditions of the Vedic (3000 BC to 500 BC) and colonial periods (AD 1200 to 1947). However, during the “Golden Period” of Indian society (AD 100 to 1500) sex was seen as a principle vehicle to salvation by the dominant Tantric traditions, which worshipped the perfect union of Shiva and Shakti or male and female powers, represented by the lingam-yoni. Although lingam-yoni worship continues today, the celebration of equality and intercourse is often removed from dominant discussions of Indian traditional culture. According to Banerji,

Still entrenched in Vedic dogmas that regard women as non-human sexual objects for the use of men, and clinging to colonial prudery that debased sex as profane, the Indian patriarchy has chooses to disregard the wisdom of the Tantric ages.

While not free of patriarchal domination, India’s Tantric religious period, also known as India’s Golden Period, was one of increased female power and freedom in comparison to previous and later periods.

It is significant to a discussion of female oppression that these traditions are downplayed in dominant discussions of “traditional” India, especially when the phrase “traditional Indian culture” is often used when combating western media images of

141 Banerji, 300.
142 Mitter, 5.
143 Banerji, 19-21.
144 Ibid., 319.
women as well as increasing tendencies of sex before marriage among the middle and upper-classes in urban India. Also, in line with the dominant discourse of India, Muslim traditions are also left out of constructions of both traditional and modern womanhood in India. This erasure of Muslim women is replicated in Indian media forms like *Cosmo*. The invisibility of Muslim women in the mass media contributes to the marginalization of their communities as well as their demands for representation and protection from the Indian Government.

The image of the Hindu, domestic, virginal, and selfless Indian wife is still the dominant definition of a good Indian woman for both urban and rural women. Banerji continues, “Women are not only expected to be impassive about sex, but they must also be restrained in their appearance – as in dress, manners and demeanor – take care to rein in all independent expressions of sexuality.” Cosmopolitan may present a liberated woman, but by systematically ignoring the continued oppression of Indian women of all backgrounds, the magazine is stalling efforts to develop an equal and sustainable society.

While *Cosmopolitan* executives acknowledge the existence of a “traditional” Indian patriarchy and the role it plays in women’s continued oppression, they celebrate the coming of consumer culture as the erasure of oppression instead of acknowledging the continued suffering of women as a systemic problem aggravated by capitalist interests. Indian systems of capitalism and patriarchy exist side-by-side with discussions of women’s liberation on the pages of *Indian Cosmopolitan* magazine. For Hearst Magazines International and their publishing partner, The India Today Group, financial success requires that their magazines create and maintain patterns of insecurity and mass consumption among the middle-classes.

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145 Banerji, 297.
It is important for both women and men to understand women’s magazines within the framework of the systemic construction of gender and class in mass media for the benefit of capitalists. In her study of the production of women’s magazines in the United Kingdom, Anna Gough-Yates writes,

It is clear that in order to maintain their profitability, magazine publishers sought more flexible, responsive and innovative forms of production and business organization. There was also an important cultural dimension to these economic transformations…to be meaningful for the people involved, economic practices must be translated into ‘cultural’ discourse.¹⁴⁶

Gough-Yates argues that capitalist production “draws its power and profits from the profits from the production of goods, and from the production of needs and consumers. This new economic formation has demanded a new social formation to enable it to function smoothly.”¹⁴⁷ Theorist Pierre Bourdieu describes this new social formation as one which “judges people by their capacity for consumption, their ‘standard of living,’ their life-style as much as their capacity for their production.”¹⁴⁸ In a liberalized India, the desire to achieve the title of a “modern” Indian woman is encouraged by corporations and mediated by elites in order to acquire new customers and increase profit. By conflating modern womanhood with feminist ideas of liberation, success and sex appeal, Cosmopolitan is able to sell their magazine and products as well as encourage other women to strive for middle-class appearance and status.

The commercialization of liberation for the purpose of selling products is complicated when Indians, like Indian Cosmopolitan editor Payal Puri, are providing a service to women. Puri had a progressive and pragmatic view of the benefits of the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.
¹⁴⁸ Ibid.
Cosmopolitan brand. For example, when discussing Cosmo’s sexual health information section, Puri states,

The average, urban, fairly independent mid-twenties girl is not going to get up one day and go and make an appointment with her gynecologist and ask her questions. They just don’t do it. It doesn’t happen in our culture. They’re also not going to ask their parents. They will get their information from their friends, or from the Internet. And there’s absolutely no way to tell how authentic, or how accurate that information is. A magazine like Cosmo is where you are going to get that information without it sounding like a medical journal and without it sounding judgmental in any way.149

In countries like India where discussing sexual health is still taboo and sex education is unavailable to the majority of citizens, Cosmo can exploit this fact to fill a void created by patriarchal society and justify the subjugation of its readers to consumer culture.

Cosmopolitan employees claim to be an accurate source of information, but their information, despite their best intentions, is corrupted by Hearst’s pursuit of profit. Similarly Cosmopolitan also encourages women to enter the workforce, because this will ensure that their readers have disposable incomes. However, as a “service” providing text, Indian Cosmopolitan fails to challenge the systemic devaluation of women’s labor, as well as the continued oppression of women in both the urban and rural context. By making profit a general goal, the service aspect of both domestic and international editions of Cosmopolitan is undermined and deemphasized, if not purposefully erased. Note: The figures mentioned in the following sub-sections can be found in the appendix at the end of this thesis.

149 Author Interview with Payal Puri,
Sexual Liberation and Sexualization in Indian Cosmopolitan

When Cosmopolitan first launched in India, there was great debate centered around the amount of sex written about in the magazine, especially because this new, western, sexual magazine was aimed at Indian women.\textsuperscript{150} Indian Cosmopolitan was one of the first popular magazines in India to openly discuss women’s sexual health. In the December 1997 issue an article entitled “The X, Y and Z of sex,” (Figure 1) that describes, in explicit detail, the issue of women’s sexual health (which, typical of Cosmopolitan, includes pleasure).\textsuperscript{151} The article encourages women to educate themselves about their bodies: “One reason we know so little about our bodies is embarrassment or shame…But your knowledge will lead you to a more satisfying sex life because you’ll be in a position to tell your lover exactly what you need and really enjoy.”\textsuperscript{152} This is typical of the language that surrounds discussions of sexual health in Indian Cosmopolitan. The magazine encourages women to learn about their bodies, men’s bodies, and emotional needs in order to live a more fulfilling life.

However, alongside these healthy discussions of female sexuality, exist some damaging messages to women about their bodies. On the cover of the June 2001 issue of Indian Cosmopolitan Yana Gupta poses seductively (Figure 2).\textsuperscript{153} Yana Gupta, at the time, was a 22-year-old Indian-born model, and the newest face of the Lakme makeup brand. The magazine interviews Yana about her beauty and fitness regimens. The interviewer’s questions focus on her appearance and her methods of obtaining a Cosmo

\textsuperscript{150}Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{151}“The X,Y and Z of Sex,” Indian Cosmopolitan, December 1997, Cosmopolitan Archives, The India Today Group Offices, New Delhi, India, 136. 
\textsuperscript{152}Tanisha Sangha, “I Survived Anorexia,” Indian Cosmopolitan, December 1997, 156. 
\textsuperscript{153}Yana Gupta cover, Indian Cosmopolitan, December 1997, Cosmopolitan Archives, The India Today Group Offices, New Delhi, India.
cover-worthy body. Yana describes herself as “eating healthy,” but also tells the reader, “Sometimes even when I don’t feel secure about my body, I just have a fruit day. It peps me up.” Indian Cosmopolitan’s preoccupation with Yana’s body, as well as Yana’s printed responses, are examples of how the discourse in Indian Cosmopolitan normalizes women’s preoccupation with the appearance of their face and bodies. On the same page as Yana’s interview is a list of products required “to create Yana’s look.” As the cover girl of that month’s issue, Yana Gupta is an image to which young women are expected to aspire. Editor Payal Puri commented that Indian Cosmopolitan’s cover girls are more typically full figured. Yana is an example of a more average, rather than unusually thin, cover girl. However, although the average Indian cover girl might be more “curvy” to suit Indian tastes of beauty, the cover models are still images of beauty unattainable to the average working Indian woman. The maintenance of a healthier body image of women is an important example of Indian resistance to western standards of beauty, however, due to the massive amounts of sexualized images of women and repeated discussions of women’s body size in the media, these cultural norms are shifting.

In the same December 1997 issue, there are two articles that speak to the modern women’s problem of poor body image. In an article entitled “Do you freak out about being fat?” the author writes, “Women have become to hyper-aware of every little thing they put on their plates and have added so many items to their list of no-no foods that they’re seriously limiting what they can consume – and harming their health in the process.” The article goes onto discuss why women should get rid of the “diet” mentality,

154 Yana Gupta interview, Indian Cosmopolitan, December 1997, Cosmopolitan Archives, The India Today Group Offices, New Delhi, India, 8.
avoid “diet-crazed” friends and “work out for the right reasons.”\textsuperscript{155} The second article is entitled, “I Survived Anorexia.” The subheading reads, “This dangerous eating disorder is affecting more and more young urban women. \textit{Cosmo} investigates the deadly disease through the eyes of four anorexics who fought back.” The article is written by an Indian author, Tanisha Sangha, and is empowering because it educates women about a recent phenomenon common among urban Indian women: eating disorders.

These two articles are accompanied by images of very thin women surrounded by food, including a beautiful woman hiding behind a wall of bread, and one image of a headless thin, but still attractive, body (Figure 3). These images, along with the countless other images of flawless and thin women in advertisements and \textit{Indian Cosmopolitan}’s own photography contribute to a feeling of anxiety about one’s body, and eating becomes a struggle rather than an enjoyable, necessary and cultural experience. While these articles acknowledge that anorexia and bulimia and other eating disorders are on the rise, Hearst refuses to claim any responsibility for this problem or reference research that has pointed to the media as a source of rising rates of eating disorders and depression among young women.

The sexualization of women’s bodies and the celebration of the thin woman is no longer just a western phenomenon. Indian celebrities are often sexualized and celebrated for their “sexy” bodies. When a top Bollywood actress, Kareena Kapoor announced that she had dropped to size zero for a film, there was much controversy. Puri comments, “You would have thought it was [Kapoor’s size] was a national debate.”\textsuperscript{156} Kareena Kapoor is considered a role model for women in India, and has been a cover girl multiple times.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
times for *Indian Cosmopolitan* (Figure 4). Kapoor’s drop in body size alarmed many Indians to the way western media's standards of beauty were influencing Indian women. In a December 2009 issue of *Cosmopolitan*, Kareena is pictured holding a laptop for a Sony Vaio advertisement. The ad’s copy reads, “The slimmest in the biz – it’s a Sony,” (Figure 5).\(^{157}\) Sony created an entire campaign for the Vaio in India based on Kareena’s well-known size zero figure, celebrating both the computer and Kareena for being slim. Later in the same magazine Kareena Kapoor is also depicted as elegantly beautiful in an ad for an Indian clothing store (Figure 6).\(^{158}\) During our interview Payal Puri remarked, “As a magazine we are not putting forth imagery saying thin is beautiful. We like to reflect the best that you can be and that looks better, and it is an aspiration to look your best, just like its an aspiration to be your best, do your best and achieve your best.”\(^{159}\) *Cosmopolitan* acknowledges the reality of eating disorders, and claims to accept women just as they are, and yet consistently encourages women to change their bodies to match those of thin models and stars.

Often, the bodies celebrated in the magazine as sexy are altered using expensive products, a regimented diet and unhealthy eating patterns. The majority of models shown in *Indian Cosmopolitan* adhere to western ideals of a slim body type, even though the majority of *Cosmopolitan* staff members I spoke to were against the ideal of the “stick thin” woman. The UK model Kate Moss appears in an ad for a new line of perfume by Yves Saint Laurent in several recent issues of *Indian Cosmo* (Figure 7).\(^{160}\) Kate Moss is notorious in American culture for being extremely thin as well as abusing drugs. When

\(^{159}\) Author Interview with Payal Puri.
an interviewer from Women’s Wear Daily asked Kate Moss what sayings helped her gain success in modeling, she answered that the phrase “Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels,” was one she remembered.\footnote{Hillary Moss, “Kate Moss’s Motto? ‘Nothing Tastes As Good As Skinny Feels,’” Huffington Post, 13 November 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/11/13/kate-mosss-motto-nothing_n_356867.html.} Kate Moss was chastised in the British and American media for this comment. In Moss’ defense, she was merely revealing the reality of the unhealthy eating habits that models must practice in order to be successful in their career. In spite of knowledge about the unhealthy lifestyles of models, these women are still exalted as images of beauty and femininity in issues of Indian Cosmopolitan.

Women’s bodies are objectified in Indian Cosmopolitan, and as a result a thin and fair-skinned body is discussed as necessary for having good sex, dating, and even for finding love and a partner for marriage. While the acknowledgement of heterosexual female desire is a progressive message for Indian women, Indian Cosmopolitan’s construction of how to best attract a man often requires self-sexualization as well as consumption. The “Man and Sex” issue of the 2006 October ten-year special anniversary Indian Cosmopolitan featured an article on John Abraham, one of the most desired male Indian Bollywood stars. In the article Abraham is pictured seated surrounded by women’s torsos who are pressing their rear-ends near his face (Figure 8). The title of the article is a quote from Abraham that states, “I want women to get in my jeans.”\footnote{“John Abraham,” Indian Cosmopolitan, “Man and Sex” October 2006, 12.} Women are encouraged to be their best to be successful. To be successful, according to the discourse maintained by Cosmopolitan, a woman must be able to attract, arouse and marry men. Indian Cosmopolitan places much emphasis on a woman’s aspiration to find “Mr. Right” and be a beautiful Indian Bride. A November 2009 issue of Indian Cosmopolitan that focuses on how to create the perfect wedding look featured an ad for
Pond’s (an American manufacturer) Flawless Beauty fairness cream that stated, “Look Flawless on Your Wedding Day,” (Figure 9). In India, the ideal bride is fair-skinned and high-caste. *Indian Cosmopolitan* does not explicitly promote the caste system, which is understandable considering the modern Indian woman is usually associated with a rejection of notions of caste. In fact, in many ways *Cosmo* challenges this oppressive system by discussing a woman’s right to marry the man of her choice. However, the magazine does incorporate racist ideologies that are associated with, but not interchangeable with, caste discrimination. Discrimination based solely on race is a product of capitalist society rooted in the efforts of those currently in power (those who are high-caste, high-class and fair-skinned) to maintain monetary power. *Caste*, unlike *class*, does not imply a level of income or education, but “it means everything in the social context – with regard to how one dresses and eats, one’s acquaintance with progressive ideas and access to western goods, expectations regarding children’s education and eventual earning power, and appropriate marriage partners for daughters.” *Caste* is a form of discrimination based on definitions of purity and pollution associated with the type of labor one is employed in, as well as descent. While descent does not solely refer to race, it is often the case that darker skinned Indians make up the majority of the scheduled castes especially in Southern India, while Brahmins and high-caste members tend to be light skinned. On the pages of *Indian Cosmopolitan*, the racism seen is a form of *class* oppression that often accentuates and blends with India’s caste system.

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164 Mitter, 33.
According to Indian Cosmo, the type of woman who is attractive to men is sexually active and Indian, but also thin, fair-skinned, and concerned with appearance. In the December 2009 issue of Indian Cosmo, Deepika Padukone, another Bollywood actress, is pictured receiving the “Fun, Fearless, Female” Cosmopolitan award for “Sexiest Female.”\textsuperscript{166} A few months later, in a February 2010 issue, Deepika is featured in a Neutrogena (another American manufacturer) fairness cream advertisement for “Fair Forever” a complexion lightening cream that bleaches the skin (Figure 10).\textsuperscript{167} Also in the December 2009 issue, Kareena Kapoor is awarded the title of “Fun, Fearless, Female of All Time” which was awarded by popular choice. Although these women’s personalities are discussed in the text accompanying their award titles, their sex appeal and appearance are emphasized. By deeming these women successful role models and sexually attractive to men, Cosmopolitan is setting standards of beauty that cannot be obtained by the majority of Indian women without damaging their health or spending large amounts of money.

\textit{Consequences of Sexualization}

Despite research that has proven the damaging impact of sexualization on adolescent girls, advertising companies and corporations continue to objectify women in their campaigns and products. In 2005 the American Psychological Association (APA) established the Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. The APA Task Force was created due to a growing national concern regarding the increasingly common tactic of advertisers and mass media corporations to sexualize young girls and girlhood. The goal

\textsuperscript{166}“Fun, Fearless and Female Awards,” Indian Cosmopolitan, December 2009, personal copy, 302-304.
\textsuperscript{167}Neutrogena Fair Forever Advertisement, Indian Cosmopolitan, February 2010, personal copy, 5-6.
of the Task Force was to study how women and girls were portrayed in the media and consequently, what impact this had on girls. The report that came out of this Task Force was released in 2007 and gave scientific testimony explaining toxic media environment in which youths are forced to grow up.\textsuperscript{168}

This study concluded sexualized images of girls and women in the media prevent healthy sexual development among adolescents. Among girls, over exposure to sexualized images results in eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression and an inability to engage in meaningful relationships. Women’s magazines such as \textit{Cosmo} have been cited as a source of sexualized content, as well as a guide for self-sexualization.\textsuperscript{169} The possible effects of this imagery on \textit{Indian Cosmo} readers are especially frightening considering the young age of some of the magazine’s readers. Puri states, “We have readers as young as 12 and 13 who write in, or readers who say my daughters reads it and I read it.”\textsuperscript{170} While it can be argued that women can resist the influence of these images, the amount of sexualized imagery that women living in modernized countries must engage does have an impact on self-esteem and body image, and this is even more true of young girls.

\textit{Indian Cosmopolitan} is aimed at heterosexual Indian women who wish to have sexual relationships with men, outside and within marriage. Puri explains,

We define the universe as the widest possible, therefore because heterosexuality is more common we talk to a heterosexual audience. It is safe to assume that a twenty something Indian girl has men on her mind. It is safe to assume, that mostly she would like to be considered attractive to a man. We are talking about how you can make that possible. Now, it

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\item \textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 3.
\item \textsuperscript{170} Author Interview with Payal Puri.
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doesn’t mean that we are saying sell your soul to be with a man. If we are saying anything, it often involves adjustment and not compromise.171

Yes, *Indian Cosmopolitan* liberates women from requirements of purity and submissiveness, however it also encourages narcissism and unhealthy preoccupations with body image and attracting men. Instead of acknowledging the influence of patriarchal constructions of women as sexual objects, girlfriends and brides, *Indian Cosmopolitan* allows for narrow constructions of sexiness that promote insecurity and product consumption.

*Work and Consumption in Indian Cosmopolitan*

During our interview, Payal Puri explained: “We tend to limit our information to a) what’s core to *Cosmo* and b) what information you won’t find elsewhere. You’re always certain what *Cosmo* stands for.”172 While discussions of women’s liberation and Indian pride *are* core to *Cosmo*’s discourse the promotion of female insecurities and consumer culture are also present in every issue of *Indian Cosmo*. In order for a reader to mimic the looks and lifestyles of the women distinguished as successful in *Indian Cosmopolitan*, she must have money to spend, and be willing to spend it. The Indian Cosmo Girl is a working-woman, but in India, many women remain confined to the domestic sphere due to lack of education as well as religious, cultural and personal reasons. Payal Puri explains,

The thing about *Cosmo* in India is that it cannot be said to speak for women in non-urban settings. Because there are a lot of readers who fear the aspiration, their realities will be removed from this. They may use the magazine to try to make their aspiration come true, but it wouldn’t be accurate to say women across India have the same freedoms that women

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171 Ibid.
172 Ibid.
in the urban cities do.\textsuperscript{173} \textit{Cosmopolitan} does not speak for the majority of Indian women. It speaks for the Indian woman who can afford to spend money on her appearance and entertainment. This does not necessarily mean that all \textit{Indian Cosmo} readers work, but it is expected that readers do aspire to the image of the working-woman \textit{and} will consume. The image of the Indian Cosmo Girl is meant to encourage women to spend money on their appearance and leisure in order to be successful, have fun and attract men.

\textit{Cosmopolitan} encourages women to make money and then spend it to improve their relationships as well as their careers. On a February 2002 issue of \textit{Indian Cosmopolitan} one of the cover lines reads, “Body Talk Your Way to the Top: Play the Part and Walk the Walk to a Better Job.”\textsuperscript{174} Here the cover line discusses women in the workplace, and also instructs women how to adjust to hierarchal systems. In the \textit{Beauty and Fitness} issue of the tenth anniversary \textit{Indian Cosmo}, Bollywood superstar Priyanka Chopra is one of the issue’s five cover models. Surrounding Priyanka are typical cover lines such as “Cosmo’s Ultimate Diet Comparison,” “Pre-Party Figure Fixers” and “Red & Gold,” (Figure 11).\textsuperscript{175} The issue is primarily filled with ads and articles that discuss the usefulness of the newest cosmetic products in the life of an urban, modern woman. Wealth is idealized and a love of luxury is encouraged. America is also celebrated as a country of wealth and beauty in this issue. In one article entitled “Vegas Calling,” the author instructs the reader where to buy and how to use the newest products to recreate

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{173} Author Interview with Payal Puri. \\
\textsuperscript{174} Cover, February 2002, \textit{Indian Cosmopolitan}, Cosmopolitan Archives, The India Today Group Offices, New Delhi, India. \\
\textsuperscript{175} Priyanka Chopra cover, \textit{Indian Cosmopolitan}, “Beauty and Fitness,” October 2006.
\end{flushright}
Las Vegas inspired looks modeled by western women (Figure 12). It should be noted that the city of Vegas as well as the colors red and gold featured in the article were most likely chosen by the editor to appeal to Indian preferences of jewel tones and bold colors and heavy makeup styles.

In order to be persuaded to buy these products, consumption must be seen as both necessary and normal by the reader. In the issue’s Cosmo cover girl interview with Chopra, the Indian Cosmo staff chose to print the following question and answer series:

“Cosmo: Does being sexy come naturally to you?

Priyanka: No! I don’t feel sexy at all!

Cosmo: You’re being modest again…

Priyanka: No, I’m serious. I’ve always had a major inferiority complex about myself. Ask those around me and they’ll tell you that I am always cribbing on my appearance. My image as a confident girl is a myth…”

Here, Chopra’s quote is used to disrupt cultural understandings of natural beauty and confidence, and promote insecurities among readers so that obsession with appearance and dependence on cosmetics will be normalized among young Indian women.

For many culturally conservative Indians, public expressions of love, especially between people of different castes and religious groups, constitute one of the major indications of negative Western influence. These concerns with the invasive nature of western value systems seem to be justified by the fact that more Indian urban middle-class women are choosing “love-marriages” over more traditional arranged marriages.

Within the mass media of urban India, the idea of love and romance are often promoted

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alongside consumption. In the February 2010 edition of Indian Cosmopolitan, an advertisement for Marks and Spencer is a thin strip of paper that wraps across the front cover and is affixed to a full page promotional ad for Marks and Spencer lingerie, ensuring that the reader must turn to this page before looking through the front portion of the magazine. This ad models itself after Cosmopolitan in several ways. The ad-marker strip reads “Are you one of the 85% of women wearing the wrong bra size? M&S can help,” which like the typical Cosmo cover line, captures the consumer’s attention by making her question her current state, and suggests it could be improved by information inside the magazine (Figure 13). The two page advertisement inside the magazine has to be qualified by the term “Promotion” in small font in the upper left hand corner of the advertisement, because the advertisers purposefully made the ad look like a typical Cosmo quiz. It even explicitly associates itself with the Cosmo Girl, “If you’re a true Cosmo chica,” the copy reads, “then you’re definitely aware of how good lingerie can change the entire look of any outfit. Take this easy quiz to check the status of your under-the-surface-IQ.” The opposite page depicts a thin American woman in only underwear with the copy under it that reads, “It’s a love thing, dress to impress with our collection of bras & knickers.” This advertisement is specifically suited to Indian language (“knickers” instead of “panties”) and speaks to the theme of this February issue, love.

Cosmopolitan’s conflation of love and consumption negatively affects women and is a source of legitimized information on self-selected relationships. Thus Cosmopolitan’s message is an example of what theorist Michel Foucault calls a form of

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178 Marks and Spencer Advertisement, Indian Cosmopolitan, February 2010, personal copy, 11-12.
“knowledge-power.” As sociologist Eva Illouz argues in her study of the commodification of romantic love in women’s magazines, “the romantic ethic promoted by women’s magazines is analogous to that which was instrumental to the formation of the capitalist entrepreneur...[and] is fully consistent with the capitalist credo that persons and relationships are give to the same logic of evaluation of costs and profits of business transactions.” This commodification encourages women to buy the magazine to better evaluate these “transactions” as well as purchase products that promise success in obtaining an attractive partner. Mike Featherstone speaks of “the emotional pleasures of consumption, the dreams and desires which become celebrated in consumer culture imagery.” The dreams and desires of women to find happy, healthy relationships are celebrated and exploited for sales in each Cosmo issue to certain degrees. For example in an article entitled, “What Men Want…V-Day (Beauty) Moves to Master” the author describes which cosmetics and clothing styles men are attracted to and informs the reader that if she is to catch a man, she needs to buy products (Figure 14). High heels and lipstick are both mentioned in the article by men in interviews by the author. Both of these products are advertised in this issue.

**Consequences of a Consumer Culture**

Foreign-based magazines like *Cosmopolitan* have interests in promoting certain constructions of modern womanhood, in order to promote consumerism and the sale of

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181 Featherstone, 13.
transnational products advertised in the magazine. In 1991 Cosmetic Executive Women, an organization for cosmetic company employees and advertisers, honored Helen Gurley Brown with the title of “Cosmetic Executive Women’s Achiever”. In the magazine, Brown is celebrated for her contribution to the growth of the global cosmetics industry. Among those attending the speakers at the ceremony were Leonard Lauder, President and CEO of Estee Lauder Companies and Cosmetics Executive Women chairperson, Jeannette Chang, who is now the Senior Vice President of International Publishing.

Brown’s acceptance speech is revealing of the ways in which Cosmopolitan’s advice to women is tied to promoting the best interests of those in the international beauty industry, and more generally, modernity. Brown states,

Natural is dandruff, acne, headaches, tears, fungus…Natural is gravity, double chins, jowls…Unnatural is telephones, computers, the Concorde…unnatural is your products, all those wonderful things your scientists and chemists worked on for years to make our complexions, scalps, arms, hands, bosoms, lips more creamy, soft, fragrant, clean, beautiful and happy…What a terrific unnatural thing to be able to do!183

Because the magazine’s primary source of revenue comes from selling pages for advertisements it serves Hearst’s interests as a for-profit company to create a market of women who are dependent on superficial standards of beauty as well as consumer products in order to ensure that the products advertised are sold. Brown makes the connection between herself, a women’s magazine editor, and the women cosmetic executives:

I feel kindred with you because I think I have a product that helps people too. Every month I tell my reader no matter what natural stage she may start out in life – with average brain, and looks – wanting so much and seeming to have so little – if she will just do a lot of unnatural hard work

on her brain and body, she can probably have it all.\textsuperscript{184}

Brown claims that the ability to change one’s self and body is a source of liberation of women from “natural” problems of the female body. Brown has argued that feminist critiques of \textit{Cosmopolitan} and its promotion of the beauty industry are dismissible because these critiques deny a woman’s right to beautify herself. A feminist critique of mass beauty culture is not a call for women to be unattractive or abandon beautification. Rather they are a challenge for women and men to question dominant norms of beauty and sexiness as defined by corporations.

The Cosmo Girl is beautiful, confident and successful because she knows how to use products to address nature and achieve the unnatural standard of beauty that \textit{Cosmopolitan} suggests is what men, employers and modern society demand. \textit{Cosmopolitan} needs to encourage an ideal standard of womanhood that can be achieved only through consumption. In her sociological study of the sexualization of girls in American Culture, Patrice A. Oppliger writes, “Magazine photos insinuate that females are never attractive enough, thereby producing a market for the advertised beauty and diet products.”\textsuperscript{185} In \textit{Indian Cosmopolitan}, through the process of hybridization, the problems and products advertised are specifically adjusted to speak to the heterosexual modern Indian female consumer.

The discourses present in both American and Indian versions of \textit{Cosmopolitan} promote conceptions of normativity and success that naturalize capitalist competition among readers. The capitalist ideology propagated by \textit{Cosmopolitan} encourages women to see themselves in competition with other women for men as well as resources. The

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
economic stratification between modern individuals is “the result of an international free market system.” As Lee Artz writes, “with or without the globalization terminology, the world faces unprecedented decline in the quality of life of millions, while a handful (like the 400 U.S. trillionaires) increase their incredible wealth.”

Discourses that encourage consumption among the middle-classes, when acted out in the real world, do not benefit national growth, but rather further economic stratification within and between nations.

India is deeply divided, not only on views towards sex and sexuality, but also by wealth and access to education. Most of the Indian population still lives in rural settings, often below the poverty line. As Banerji explains,

> The country’s overwhelming majority, at least 80 percent, still regard sex as a taboo subject, to be veiled from the public sphere, and impounded in the institution of marriage. Though a section of this conservative majority is from the urban areas constituted primarily of the poor living in shanties and slums, as well as the reasonably educated but exceedingly parochial middle-class, the predominant bulk of India’s conservatism is sustained by the inhabitants of its rural hitherland…India’s rural community constitutes about 80 percent of the nation’s poor.

Economic growth, materialism, and consumer practices celebrated by *Indian Cosmopolitan* have not improved the lives of the majority of Indians. If anything, Banerji remarks, “the economic miracle of modern India has amplified the gap between the nation’s minority haves and the majority have-nots”. Nearly 70 percent of rural communities, and 50 percent of all Indians are illiterate, and even more cannot read the English text of *Cosmopolitan*. There is no doubt that many rural girls and women look to *Cosmopolitan’s* pages for advice, but the reality is that most of these women will only be able to view the images of western-dressed, fair-skinned, thin, rich, and sexually

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186 Artz, 23.
187 Banerji, 323.
188 Banerji, 324.
189 Ibid., 324.
suggestive women. Even rural and poor women who can read English do not have access to the money or education required to achieve the Indian Cosmo Girl’s lifestyle. *Cosmopolitan* ignores the needs of the majority of Indian women, simply because these women have no money to spend on magazines or beauty products. It is likely that a majority of women in India have little concern for *Cosmopolitan*, because it does not address the basic needs of life that many Indians are struggling to obtain today.

The Indian modern woman depicted on the pages of *Cosmopolitan* does not wish to be American. She is Indian and she is proud to be Indian. While in some cases extreme pride in India manifests as nationalist and conservative, the Indian identity of the Indian Cosmo Girl is progressive and provides a sense of unity among women living in urban India. However, *Indian Cosmopolitan*’s preoccupation with profit increases economic and moral divisions within Indian communities. Due to an increasing gap in lifestyles, some impoverished populations of India have turned to sexual conservatism as a form of self-esteem. “They may be poor, but the advantage – as they see it – that they have over the wealthy is that they know how to uphold their conventional value system.”

This being said, a conservative understanding of sex and sexuality is not limited to the rural and working classes.

The issue of diversity among middle-class Indian women came up multiple times during my interview with *Vogue* editor Nyasha Daswani. Daswani commented, “There are women who have the same socioeconomic bracket [as myself], but we think entirely differently because our upbringing is completely different. We do have a very conservative backbone in this country.”

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190 Ibid., 325.
191 Author Interview with Nyasha Daswani, the Daswani residence, Breach Candy, Mumbai, June 2010.
that claim to be based in ancient Hindu traditions, the majority of Indians continue to
deny women access to education and the public sphere, as well as information about safe
sex practices. In fact, the lack of sex education for all classes of Indians is an issue that is
still debated by the Indian Government on the national and state levels, and is certainly
not addressed in the pages of Cosmopolitan.

If Cosmopolitan’s harmful practices are not regulated, or if alternative non-
corporate discourses are not proliferated on a mass scale, the problems of health, self-
esteem and unsustainable consumption will soon become a worldwide phenomenon. It is
appropriate to place Cosmopolitan at the center of this critique of patriarchal and
capitalist discourses, considering it is the best-selling magazine brand in the world. In
fact, Cosmopolitan Magazine is the publication that brings in the most revenue for Hearst
both at home and abroad. That executives and staff of Indian Cosmopolitan deploy
discourses to introduce and impose cultures of consumerism in nations where they launch
is evident in Cosmopolitan and is obstructing social and economic progress.

**Conclusion.**

**Transnational Resistance to The International Patriarchal/Capitalist Media System**

*They wish to convert the whole world into a vast market for their goods. That they cannot
do so is true, but the blame will not be theirs. They will leave no stone unturned to reach the goal.* – Mahatma Gandhi

“*Wealth should not determine the volume of one’s voice.*” -Donna Allen, founder of
Women’s Institute for Freedom of the Press

The Cosmo Girl philosophy that is upheld on the pages of Indian Cosmopolitan
today is not a result of a careful examination of the best interests of women, as consumers
and employees are told. Indian Cosmopolitan’s focus on profit and market expansion is
at odds with the attempts of Indian activists to address the root causes of gender, class and caste inequality as well as poverty and environmental destruction. Although Indian modernity is celebrated on the pages of *Indian Cosmopolitan* as a national movement towards development, Indians realize that despite their best efforts, issues of health and happiness continue to build among not only the poor, but also the wealthy. Sarah Mitter writes,

> Today in India there is much talk about imminent modernity. Visions of the early twenty-first century – when the population will exceed one billion – foresee conquest of poverty, annihilation of illiteracy, last-ditch conservation of ravaged natural resources, effective family planning, uplift of backwards tribes. These miracles are to be achieved by existing political parties and their perennial chieftans, most of whom are invested in preserving the status quo and the stereotype of the selfless Indian wife and mother, goddess of the home.\(^{192}\)

Sustainable solutions that address root causes of inequality are necessary in order to solve public health issues such as HIV/AIDS, child marriages, female infanticide, pollution, anorexia, depression and hunger. In order to ensure insecurities among women and the growth of a consumer culture, *Indian Cosmopolitan* magazine either ignores these problems or blames the individual for failing to adjust to modernity. In this way, *Cosmopolitan* executives fail to discuss the ways in which the information presented in women’s consumer magazines is harmful to women’s health as well as efforts toward sustainable, national development.

While studying in India, I learned that there are existing alternatives to corporate media in India that serve women’s needs and remain uncorrupted by corporate interests. However, because they diverge from the dominant discourse, they suffer from a lack of resources. After studying in Mumbai for four months, I moved to New Delhi to be a

\(^{192}\) Mitter, 6.
intern for *Manushi* magazine, a human rights journal founded by Indian activist Madhu Kishwar in 1978. However, by the time I arrived at Madhu Kishwar’s office, *Manushi* had to stop production, because they were forced to choose between their advocacy work and their published work. *Manushi* Sangathan, *Manushi* magazine’s mother organization, continues to struggle against inequality in India through advocacy, legislation and the courts. Alternative media forms like Manushi are important for activists to communicate with each other. They are a space to not only critique, but to create. Jen Angel, founder of *Clamour* Magazine, a United States activist magazine, explains:

> By creating and maintaining media institutions that are accessible to everyone, that present readers with diverse ideas and concepts so they can make informed decisions, and allow us to connect with each other, we are building institutions that prefigure a better world, that show us what it could look like. By building viable alternative institutions and providing concrete examples on how society could run, we help challenge the dominant structure. 193

It would be ideal that all nations move beyond systems of global corporate media, and instead focus on local, independent forms of media that operate outside of the system of advertising and profit in order to produce statistics that reflect actual development, not just economic growth.

If the Indian government delivers to its people funding for alternative anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal independent magazines there will be much improvement in the prospect for Indian sustainable development. Lee Artz writes,

> A globalization of democracy, participation, unmediated cultural expression is desirable and possible. An international cultural of human solidarity led by the working-class majority in all of its diversity would build on by surpass the resistance and subversion present in hybrid cultural practices…However, to be liberating, a noncorporate global

culture must be a part of a larger political project. I suggest funding a noncorporate global culture and not censorship of corporate media, because I agree with scholars who argue that banning unhealthy images of women will not get rid of them. In 2008 France proposed a law that would ban web sites that promoted eating disorders with starvation tips. In a *New York Times* article discussing the law, Michael Levine, a Professor of Psychology at Kenyon College, found that “banning the sites could backfire and create more demand for them, was featured in a story about anorexia and the influence of Web sites.” Unfortunately, the current global capitalist system does not provide for diverging discourses, because by highlighting the problems of modernity the celebrated image of modern India is challenged and the future of capitalist expansion in the country is threatened.

Despite incorporation from the government and the media, Indian feminists and human justice activists are currently resisting systemic oppression encouraged by patriarchal and capitalist discourses. Resistance to capitalist media occurs both within and outside the process of media production. In my discussions with Payal Puri she often spoke of the *Indian Cosmo* reader as “lucky” in comparison to the average Indian. She, unlike Helen Gurley Brown, was unafraid to acknowledge the disparities that exist within modern societies. While the plight of impoverished Indians can be ignored on the magazine’s pages, *Indian Cosmo’s* staff and other middle-class urban women literally cannot ignore this reality. Poverty confronts you on every street corner in Indian cities. Slums exist side-by-side with high rises. Writes Mitter,

Curiously, such contrasts seem an integral element in the stability. They illustrate how unevenly distributed are the benefits of development. A

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194 Artz, 25.
195 “Faculty Updates”, Keynon College website, [http://bulletin.kenyon.edu/x2813.xml](http://bulletin.kenyon.edu/x2813.xml).
trickling-down effect is discernible further and further down the scale, but the disparities between have and have-not groups, castes, and regions persist or amplify. And whatever deprivation of a family or community, the women’s lot is systemically grimmer than the men’s.\textsuperscript{196}

Citizens of developing countries are told that the growth of the middle-classes will cause a trickle-down effect and eventually benefit all citizens. Mitter continues,\textsuperscript{196}

Yet the situation grows more precarious in direct proportion to its success…Each day in India, the number and variety of outrages and catastrophes reported in the press boggle the imagination. But the drivers, the professional politicians and the moneyed elite, are clinging to the steering wheel for dear life.\textsuperscript{197}

The system continues because the majority of Indians are told that the problems of India are separate, when in reality many of these large economic, social and environmental problems are connected to industrialization and global consumer culture.

As I was researching this project, I often took time to discuss \textit{Cosmo} with women my age. Not only was this an opportunity to start an interesting conversation, but the more people I talked to, the more I realized I was not alone in my view that \textit{Cosmo} does not reflect the realities or needs of Indian women. The \textit{Indian Cosmopolitan} staff, as well as the several Indian women and men with whom I discussed \textit{Cosmopolitan} during my travels were well aware of the flaws within the magazine’s messages. Payal Puri acknowledged that the reality of the Indian Cosmo Girl was not the reality for the majority of Indians. She also mentioned the continuing “challenges” of Indian women, recognizing that there was an underlying cause to the similar situations of women in India. Some problems, like homophobia, exist among all classes, because this is an aspect of both traditional and capitalist patriarchal systems. In an example of a moment of within-the-system resistance of \textit{Cosmopolitan}, a staff member told me of an article she

\begin{footnotes}
\item[196] Mitter, 6.
\item[197] Ibid., 5.
\end{footnotes}
wrote about lesbianism in India and explained that in *American Cosmo*, discussions of lesbianism usually are not allowed, suggesting that *Indian Cosmopolitan* was perhaps more progressive.¹⁹⁸ In my discussions with the *Cosmopolitan* staff and other middle-class Indian women, there was an explicit awareness that inequalities of women within a modernized society do not exist solely among the lower classes. Both the staff and readers understand that dominant ideals can be flawed, and are neither possible nor preferred by many Indians. Puri and her staff are not Hearst’s obedient “children” and readers often openly laugh at the constructions of womanhood in the magazine. However, these forms of individual resistance by *Cosmo* staff and readers are made without acknowledging that these ideals are constructed in order to preserve systems of patriarchy and capitalism for the benefit of elites in Western nations as well as India.

Problems like extreme poverty and eating disorders are more class specific, but they are both connected to capitalism. While *Cosmopolitan* might speak to issues like anorexia, it cannot tell its readers about the proven role that sexualization of women in the media plays in the spread of this disease. Similarly, while *Cosmopolitan* may encourage women to enter the workforce in a society that defines women’s place as in the home, it will not suggest that an expensive appearance does not equate to high self-esteem or love. Of course, *Cosmopolitan*’s pages are not the only source of this problem. Still, a challenge to the *Cosmopolitan* Empire would mean a challenge to capitalist and patriarchal discourses. On a smaller scale, it would also mean that maybe a few less girls would be exposed to harmful images, and that consumers would consider their purchases within the larger framework of economic stratification and environmental degradation.

No matter one’s social and physical location, all citizens should be concerned that

¹⁹⁸ Author’s notes from discussions with staff, New Delhi, 29-30 May, 2009.
corporations are able to flourish while they manipulate us, damage our bodies and create social/economic divisions within the societies they occupy. As a concerned citizen, I am critical of many of the products and ideas that are being shipped from my country into others. In her essay “Under Western Eyes Revisted: Feminist Solidarity through Anti-Capitalist Struggles” Chandra Mohanty emphasizes the need for feminists to find common ground in a united struggle against the practices multi-national corporations that harm women and men in developing and developed countries. She writes of the possibilities of historical narratives that

Link a historical materialist understanding of social location to the theorization of epistemic privilege and the construction of social identity, thus suggesting the complexities of the narratives of marginalized peoples in terms of relationality rather than separation.199

Perhaps unexpectedly, this history of Indian Cosmopolitan asks people of differing classes, gender identities, races and nationalities to unite and take notice of the sexualized imagery and rhetoric of consumption used by multinational corporations to sell their products. Women’s consumer magazines like Cosmopolitan harm women worldwide. As such, people must unite to understand their methodologies and take action to remedy ill-effects, such as sexualization and mass consumption.

The task of how best to raise consciousness must come from Indian activists who understand Indian culture and the role capitalism and patriarchy play in the everyday lives of Indians. Foreigners like myself can provide research, theories and assistance in implementation, but the solutions to issues of women’s health and human justice will be useful to the people of India only if developed by Indians. In the face of a capitalist

patriarchal media, many journalists and activists are currently attempting to promote already visible issues, like poverty, in the press, while other activists are using visually-oriented tactics to give less visible issues, like assault, more press coverage. For example, while I was studying at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in 2009 thousands of women, including many of the students at TISS, took part in the Pink Chaddi Campaign. The Pink Chaddi (or underwear) Campaign was a nonviolent protest movement in response to attacks on women who were violating “Indian culture” by drinking in a Mangalore pub without boyfriends or husbands. Women mailed thousands of pairs of pink underwear to Pramod Muthalik of the Sri Ram Sena, a Hindu orthodox group. Following the attacks, Muthalik threatened to take violent action against women who were out in public celebrating Valentine’s Day.200 The campaign received nation-wide coverage, and is an example of how women can manipulate the current patriarchal and capitalist media system to have their voices heard in the media.

Puri’s magazine is progressive in many ways, including its ability to reform some patriarchal ideas of women. There are many paths to alleviating and eradicating the oppression of women that exists worldwide, and it is not for me to say which is best. In my research I have found that the Indian woman presented on the pages of Cosmopolitan is not a suitable role model for young Indian women because she is sexualized and consumes without consideration for fellow citizens. Indian Cosmo allows for some of women’s demands to be heard. The demands that can exist within the Cosmopolitan framework are often liberatory discourses turned around to sell products to women and consequently robbed of much of their original subversive potential.

Large corporations like Hearst exploit middle-class and lower class women of all countries. A corporation “is governed by a ‘fiduciary duty,’ which requires that every act must have the aim of maximizing profit…by law, ethics and moral responsibility are irrelevant in matter of corporate policy.”\textsuperscript{201} Even with the best intentions, the employees of corporations must continually struggle against the best interests of people in order to make a profit. The continuation of consumer magazines helps corporations maintain discourses of capitalist “progress” and often amplifies patriarchal structures and encourages individuals to distance themselves from similarly oppressed persons. During our interview Payal told me, “People feel and react better when you are talking to them as one person. They don’t want to feel part of a universe, they want to feel special.”\textsuperscript{202} I humbly suggest that a healthier way to view development is more universal, and less based on individual economic success.

Karl Polanyi, author of \textit{The Great Transformation}, pointed out in 1944 that in any complex society, such as the modern global economy, there are two types of freedom, good and bad. Bad freedoms include “the freedom to exploit one’s fellows, or the freedom to make inordinate gains without commensurable service to the community.”\textsuperscript{203} \textit{Cosmopolitan} utilizes constitutional freedoms bestowed on American corporations to elicit profit, with little concern for the well-being of citizens. Yet, as Polayni states,

the market economy under which these freedoms thrrove also produced freedoms we prize highly. Freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of meeting, freedom of association, freedom to choose one’s own

\textsuperscript{202} Author Interview with Payal Puri.
\textsuperscript{203} David Harvey, \textit{A Brief History of Neoliberalism} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 36.
It is this paradox that poses the greatest challenge when dealing with the discourses presented in *Cosmopolitan*. On one hand, these publications have supported women’s inclusion in the public sphere, on the other hand their messages and presence are creating new tensions between genders and classes and also increasing health problems. As socialist feminist Gayatri Spivak explains,

> We are already seeing the difference between capitalism and communism being recorded as free choice versus state censorship or state terrorism…I’m just as afraid of the so-called right to freedom of choice. Because what are you taught to choose?

The discourse circulated by Indian women’s magazines is both liberating and oppressive for Indian women. However, the liberation is limited and the oppression is persistent. While women’s magazines promote strength, independence and choice, they also create and reproduce strict gender norms and consumerism as the only or main route to liberation within middle-class Indian culture.

Patriarchal and capitalist discourses upheld by communication tools of the market economy, such as *Indian Cosmopolitan*, maintain women’s mental and physical oppression, and promote stratification of classes, races, genders and individuals. Polayni proposes a solution to the apparent dual-nature of globalization:

> The passing of the market economy can become the beginning of an era of unprecedented freedom. Juridical and actual freedom can be made wider than ever before; regulation and control can achieve freedom not only for the few, but for all. Freedom not as an appurtenance of privilege, tainted at the source, but as a prescriptive right extending far beyond the narrow confines of the political sphere into the intimate organization of society itself. Thus will old freedoms and civic rights be added to the fund of new freedoms generated by the leisure and security that industrial society offers to all. Such a society

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204 Ibid.
can afford to be both just and free.\textsuperscript{206}

The emergence of this free society requires a revolution in media that will bring about not only the regulation of corporate media practices, but also, the proliferation of alternative independent media where the needs and ideas of the people who are most oppressed by the market economy can be heard.

It is in the interest of the \textit{Cosmo} brand to promote sexual exploration and economic independence as well as insecurities and consumerism among women. \textit{Cosmopolitan’s} suggested path to liberation is a distraction from finding solutions to the immense societal and ecological problems women of the world must confront, such as anorexia, rape, child marriages, female infanticide, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, population growth, pollution, water shortages and climate change among others. These problems cannot be solved while tolerating patriarchal oppression or the continued influence of unregulated and naturalized capitalism. Indian social scientists are beginning to produce more research on the issues of media and culture and the role this plays in Indian development. I offer this thesis as a contribution to ongoing efforts to develop India, in the hope that it will develop not as a consumerist, capitalist and patriarchal country, but as an egalitarian nation, rich with tradition and true beauty.

\textsuperscript{206} Harvey, 37.
Appendix A: Section Three Figures

Figure 1
Figure 1 continued
Figure 3

Subtitle Text: “If you’re like millions of women you beat yourself up every time you grab a burger for lunch or have a little chocolate for dessert. Banning your diet-polic attitude will get you leaner, healthier, and lovin’ life.”
Figure 4
She's Bollywood royalty, yet there's nothing uptight about Kareena Kapoor. Her uninhibited vitality shines through every frame. Photographs by Atul Kasbekar; Text: Priyanka Chowdhury

Styling: Nupur Mehta Puri; Clothes co-ordination: Malini Baeerji and Sahiba Kaur; Makeup & hair: Mickey Contractor for M-A-C; Dress by Manish Malhotra.

The moment you get a glimpse of Kareena Kapoor there’s just one phrase which comes to mind—peaches ’n cream. And it’s not just her flawless complexion we’re talking about. As succulent as a ripe peach and even more sensuous than whipped cream, the blue-blooded beauty takes your breath away! The best part is that she’s remarkably unselfconscious about her off-the-shoulder appeal. Coz she decided to take a few rounds from a day in the life of a true goddess and come away totally floored. Read on for a rocket ride down Kareena’s lane. You’ll beg for more.
The slimmest in the biz—it’s a Sony!

when two titans meet, there’s bound to be a ‘wow’ outcome—VAIO®
X Series notebook—slimmest in the business! By Pratishtha Dobhal

If curvy was the way to go aerons back, it’s slim that’s back with a
bang and well, understandably so—Kareena Kapoor has taken it to a
different level altogether with the association with Sony Vaio. The
latest offering from Sony is the VAIO® X Series notebook which you
can take along with you wherever in the world you are. The perfect
accompaniment and accessory, you will be surprised by how
compact this technological marvel is and how perfectly it packs in
your life’s essentials. Kareena does it like a pro and there’s no reason
why you shouldn’t be delighted to do the same with an arm candy
like Vaio!

The new VAIO® X Series is touted as the world’s lightest notebook. It might
look light but it packs in a lot. Designed to lightweight yet durable carbon
fiber for reinforced durability, the X Series features reliable solid-state drive with
no moving parts, seamless aluminum keyboard panel for structural rigidity
and an 11.1 (28.5 cm) scead assistant widescreen display. The X Series
touchpad uses multi-touch functionality that’s perfect for working on
the go. Zoom in and out, flip through pictures, rotate items and scroll vertically
and horizontally without even touching a mouse. It’s obvious then that a fit
stylish and chic, Kareena looks sporting it whenever she goes—it fits
wonderfully well with her lifestyle and her glamorous life. It’s all about who
you can depend on at the end of the day. No wonder then that along with
the Vaio® X Series notebook she has surrounded herself with people she
adores—her sister and her mother are her support systems. Kareena is
visibly excited when she talks about her little ones Sonakshi. She says,
“Being with her makes me forget who I am and the kinda goern my
profession makes me go through. Watching her grow up is such a great
experience, and now thanks to my new Vaio I can see her pictures and talk
to my loved ones even when I am travelling.” This year has been especially
great for the star with superhit movies and brand endorsements. The new
VAIO® X Series notebook is totally up her street too, it’s as sexy and as sleek
as the brand ambassador herself. Catch her on TV on the promo and you
will know what we are talking about. On the association with Sony, Kareena
says, “Thank god for technology and thank god for Sony, it’s so sleek that I
can carry it around anywhere. I get really upset when I can’t connect. Have
you noticed how new users aren’t just a body type thing, the world is going
shimmer and technology is going case too? Instead of? Now need we say
more about the current queen bee of Bollywood? What you see is what you
get with Kareena... Always!

Figure 5
Figure 7
Figure 8
LOOK FLAWLESS ON YOUR WEDDING DAY.

Wedding night. Honeymoon. 6-month anniversary...

The most important day of your life is here. And you’re tired. Of running around and making choices. Of ensuring the day goes by flawlessly. Allow us to help. Pond’s flawless white™ has a range of products to reduce dark spots. And give a flawless, blushing complexion. Just the right shade for a bride. A newlywed. And everything that’s to come beyond.

Figure 9
Figure 10
Figure 13
What Men Want...

V-Day (Beauty) Moves to Master

...That 'guy-scent' isn't the same as 'girl-scent' to something we've kind of neglected over the years, but what really is the guy version of goodlooking? We Clock a bunch of men to set your beauty games PERFECT in line for V-day's rhythm.

OMG!!!

Are trying to kill me
with that
stuff glitter?

Figure 14

Blunder Babes Tell All

Dress Up Your Life

Blunder Babes Tell All

Dress Up Your Life

Bobby Chatterjee

Dress Up Your Life

Radhika’s

Dress Up Your Life
Appendix B: *Research Photographs*

Hearst Tower, New York, New York (January, 2010)
Despite numerous attempts, I was unable to get beyond the front desk of the Hearst Cooperation (January, 2010)
Consumer Magazines Sold at a news and convenience Store near the Hearst Tower (January, 2010)
View from Kamala Nehru Park, Breach Candy, Mumbai, India (June 2009)
Man Selling Magazines near Chembur Station, Chembur, Mumbai (March 2009)
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