

Gender differences in cancer pathographies

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Introduction

- Cancer is a major global health concern, causing one in four deaths in the United States alone (Siegel et al., 2011).
- The most common cancer among women is breast cancer, and the most common cancer among men is prostate cancer (Siegel et al., 2011).
 - A man who has prostate cancer will still outwardly look like a man, but a woman who has undergone a double mastectomy loses two obvious gender markers: her breasts (Broom, 2001; Davis, E., 2008; Manderson & Stirling, 2007; Schulzke, 2011).

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Introduction

- The ways in which women and men deal with these two types of cancer are reflected in the media (Clarke & Robinson, 1999), particularly in articles about health in women's and men's magazines.
- Studies have shown that female-centered magazines have a significant impact in readers' perceptions of body image (Duncan, 1994; Machin & Thornborrow, 2003); however, little research has been done comparing the discourse used to discuss cancer in female-centered versus male-centered consumer magazines.

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Why magazines?

- Readers see them as convenient sources of information about health care (Clarke & van Amerom, 2008).
- Articles are permanent, printed resources that can be referred to again and again, unlike television programs that are often considered ephemeral (Andsager & Powers, 2001).
- Articles often combines elements of news and entertainment (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003), which may have a greater impact on a reader's perception of his or her personal risk for cancer (Andsager & Powers, 2001).

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Gender-centeredness

- Although there is often a perceived masculine bias in news reports, it is unlikely that a male-dominant bias will be present in magazines with a predominantly female readership since most of the articles are written by and for other women.
- Andsager and Powers (2001) found that the women's magazines they examined – *Good Housekeeping*, *McCall's*, and *Ms* – supported a woman-centered approach to covering breast cancer.
- In contrast, men's magazines often reinforce negative behaviors instead of informing their readers about the advantages of regular medical check-ups and early cancer screenings (Stibbe, 2004).

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Pathographies

- McKay and Bonner (2002) describe personal accounts of illness as “pathographies” – interpretations of how an individual or group is influenced by a disease, which include both autobiographical and biographical narrative descriptions.
 - Breast cancer patients' personal stories could be more encouraging to cancer patients than more impersonal, preventative care reports in the same magazines (Andsager & Powers, 2001).
 - Women tend to prefer supportive communication more than men (Surbone, 2008), which supports typical assumptions about women and communication (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Wood, 2009).
 - This suggests that women would rather read someone's firsthand account of dealing with an illness rather than a scientific article about a medical condition.

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Research question

- Do pathographies in a female-centered magazine and those in a male-centered magazine support gender stereotypes?
 - Based on current research, the expectation is that men’s magazines will present cancer-related topics in ways that preserve traditional masculine stereotypes. Stibbe (2004) found that men’s magazines like *Men’s Health* downplay the effects of negative lifestyle choices since those choices are often at the core of what defines an American male.
 - Likewise, the expectation is that women’s magazines will present health articles in ways that reinforce traditional female stereotypes (Clarke, 1999; McKay & Bonner, 2002), particularly when discussing mastectomies and reconstructive surgery designed to make a breast cancer patient look like a “whole” woman (Davis, E., 2008; McKay & Bonner, 2002).

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Methods

- Articles were chosen from the web sites of two leading print magazines, *Woman’s Day* and *Maxim*, which represent two distinct gendered perspectives.
 - Articles were found by searching for “cancer” on the two magazine’s web sites: womansday.com and maxim.com.
 - In total, 219 *Woman’s Day* and 84 *Maxim* articles were examined.
- Articles from both magazines were read and categorized based on content in order to identify which articles were pathographies, resulting in 21 from *Woman’s Day* and 8 from *Maxim*.

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Results & Discussion

- Although generalizations can be made about the treatment of cancer by examining articles from each of the categories described above, this paper will only focus on articles in the *pathographies* category of both *Woman's Day* and *Maxim*. These pathographies include accounts of cancer survivors and caregivers.
- There were almost three times as many articles classified as *pathographies* from *Woman's Day* as there were from *Maxim*.

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Sample from *WD*

- Most were compilations of several people's experiences:
 - breast cancer bloggers (Greene, 2010)
 - beauty makeovers that included women who survived breast cancer (Matthews, 2009; Matthews, 2010).
- Some of the *Woman's Day* pathographies dealt with finding hope after a family member's illness.
 - two women look to family members who have died of cancer – one a husband, the other a daughter – as a source of inspiration for their daily lives.
 - a young woman whose father wrote letters to her and her sisters when they were little girls before he died from cancer.
 - woman found comfort and hope while visiting a library across from the hospital where her husband was receiving cancer treatment

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Typical Pathography

- One survivor story was written by a *Woman's Day* staff member whose article title asked, "You Have Breast Cancer... Now What?"
- Kandel (2008) offered readers nine steps to dealing with a diagnosis of breast cancer, ranging from "Scream, yell, and vent" to "Get support."
- The overall tone of the article was helpful and supportive: "Even though everyone's experience is different, here's what I wish someone had told me" (Kandel, 2008).

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Unlikely Story

- "Men Who Support the Fight Against Breast Cancer" (Gekas, 2011) describes the ways five men dealt with a loved one's diagnosis of breast cancer by starting support organizations.
 - These men describe themselves as "co-survivors" of breast cancer, and although the article is about men, again the overall theme is about support: both providing support to a sick wife as well as men seeking support from other men who have had to shift to the role of caregiver for a spouse with breast cancer.
- This emphasis on support confirms the expectations that women readers would prefer to read articles about personal experiences from a nurturing perspective even when the main subject of the pathography is male.

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Samples from *Maxim*

- The pathographies found on the *Maxim* web site provide a different picture of cancer.
- Of the eight articles identified as pathographies, most are short accounts of a male athlete's diagnosis of cancer and how he overcame the disease.
- Very little is mentioned about giving or receiving support or care.
 - Two brief accounts praise professional baseball player Jon Lester of the Boston Red Sox for beating lymphoma and then returning to pitch a no-hitter (Dobrow, 2009; Maxim staff, 2009).
 - Another brief pathography is part of "Hockey's toughest bastards" (Maxim staff, n.d.), which lists Mario Lemieux's "Tough Guy Cred" as, "He beat cancer."

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Unlikely Story

- The only *Maxim* pathography that was similar to those found in *Woman's Day* was "Grant Achatz is the real Iron Chef" (Schollmeyer, 2008), a story about an award-winning chef who survived Stage 4 squamous cell carcinoma, a cancer of the tongue.
 - The language in this pathography balances the need for cancer treatment with concern for the side effects, as well as with the support the cancer patient received.
 - This structure was found in most of the pathographies from *Woman's Day*; in fact, Schollmeyer (2008) could be reprinted verbatim in *Woman's Day*, and the magazine's predominantly female readership would accept Achatz's story without question. Reprinting a pathography from *Woman's Day* word-for-word in *Maxim*, however, would be highly unlikely.

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Conclusions

- Pathographies found in magazines with a gender bias follow the stereotypes associated with the gender.
 - The stories in the female-centered *Woman's Day* focused on the caring nature of women and the need to reach out to others, both to give and receive support when dealing with a serious illness like cancer.
 - The stories in the male-centered *Maxim* glossed over cancer and its effects on the person with the disease and his or her family.
- Most of the search results on maxim.com returned uses of “cancer” as part of a joke or metaphor.
- *Woman's Day* provided the most comprehensive coverage of cancer, with dozens of articles about cancer prevention and nutrition. Again, this supports the image of women as caregivers since mothers tend to set doctors' appointments as well as family menus.

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