**‘Enhance her pleasure – and your grip strength’: *Men’s Health* magazine and pseudo-reciprocal pleasure**

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**Abstract**

This paper providess a snapshot of the Top Ten free, digital *Men’s Health* magazine articles, accessed on a randomly selected day, that can be viewed as a collection; both a product for readership consumption, and a construct of readership priorities. Through close textual analysis. we examine how discourses about masculinity, heterosex, and consumerism have intersected to create a model of masculinity based on the discipline of male pleasure, which impacts on men’s approach to female pleasure and gender dynamics. The analysis contributes to the developing research about the sexual and bodily discourses the magazine promotes and identifies a model of masculinity where men can ‘have their cake and eat it’; seeming to adhere to ideals of gender equality and reciprocity while retaining their traditional patriarchal position of producer/provider. They are encouraged to do so by approaching female orgasm as a product, which they can ‘purchase’ through adhering to *Men’s Health* magazine’s sexual advice and bodily labour at control, delay and discipline of their own pleasure and orgasm. We argue that this approach to sex disenfranchises men, and in turn their partners, of opportunities to access alternative models of embodied pleasure.

**Keywords:** orgasm, pleasure, masculinity, *Men’s Health*, heterosex

**Introduction**

Since the sexual revolution, orgasm and ‘good sex’ have been conflated in advertising and the media to create a cultural ‘orgasm imperative’: where orgasmic sex is constructed as right, healthy, and normal (Frith 2013; Frith 2015; Gilfoyle, Wilson and Brown 1992), while the absence of orgasm is constructed as medical dysfunction (Frith 2015; Lavie-Ajayi 2005). In response, a diverse range of industries, including lifestyle magazines such as *Men’s Health* magazine (MHM), have emerged emphasising pleasure and personal fulfilment.

MHM is the world’s largest men’s lifestyle magazine brand, with 41 international editions globally (Men’s Health 2015). Because the magazine’s target customer is a middle- to upper-socio-economic group of young, heterosexual, educated men (Schneider, Cockcroft and Hook 2008; Stibbe 2004) its key focus countries are post-industrial with an established, consumer middle class: the USA, Western Europe, and major emerging economies like Thailand, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (Men’s Health 2015). Sexual advice forms a prominent part of the magazine’s print content (Alexander 2003), and overlaps heavily with advertising (both explicit and embedded) to serve the magazine’s commercial agenda (Boni 2002). The forceful and prescriptive nature of MHM’s sexual content, using imperative language, has been noted to be unique to the magazine when compared to other lifestyle magazines (Ménard and Kleinplatz 2007). As MHM’s print sales are declining, it is becoming increasingly reliant on an online audience of consumers (Halliday 2013), which has meant shifting to provide online content, including digital sex advice.

Feminist, postfeminist, postmodern and poststructuralist theorists have examined the discourses promoted through the print content of lifestyle magazines such as MHM, drawing together a rich critical body of literature about the ways magazines promote gender ideals to their audiences. Since the 1950s, the ideals of masculinity sold through this medium have adapted to and grown with consumer identities (for example Alexander 2003; Benwell 2004; Boni 2002; Frith 2015; Gill 2009; Horvath et al. 2011). Scholars have demonstrated the complexity in the sexual messages produced and conveyed to men which build on evolving and often competing discourses around male heterosexuality (for example Attwood 2005; Benwell 2004). However the majority of these analyses have focused on how discourses play out in practice and feed into patriarchal control of women’s bodies and pleasure. Conversely, male pleasure and orgasm are taken-for-granted both in popular culture and in the literature and there has been little focus on the ways in which competing discourses construct male sexuality in narrow and limiting ways.

This paper analyses a ‘snapshot’ sample of the Top Ten free, digital MHM articles on sex, accessed on a random day. Based on the readership’s preferences in the magazine’s online sex advice, we examine how men are encouraged to engage with ideals of masculine heterosexuality through the content of this digital medium. We first set out the discourses previously identified in the content of MHM and other men’s magazines. We then draw on this as a critical framework to examine how various discourses about reciprocity, exchange and gift-giving come into competition with older, established and prevailing ideas about male sexuality in the content of the digital version of MHM.

**Discourses of sex and pleasure in lifestyle magazines**

Since they first gained popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, men’s magazines have undergone a transition in how they have adapted the ideal of masculinity they sell to their consumer audience. Attwood (2005) has discussed how early men’s magazines such as *Playbo*y, which advocated sexual hedonism and pleasurable consumption, created the template for later soft-core pornographic and men’s lifestyle magazines. In the 1980s, new titles of men’s lifestyle magazines emerged to create a discursive space which invited men to venture into traditionally female arenas of consuming grooming, beauty and relationships advice and adopting traditionally ‘feminine’ traits such as sensitivity, caring, and a concern for gender equality (Attwood 2005; Crawshaw 2007). This contrasted with the ‘lads mags’ of the 1990s, which were said to represent an anxious rejection of this ‘new man’ and his ‘homoerotic’ focus on men’s fashion and bodies (Attwood 2005).

While the ideals of masculinity presented in men’s lifestyle magazines and lads mags seem to clash on the surface, they in fact overlap in several ways, with increasingly blurred boundaries between the soft-core pornography of the lads mags and the consumerism of men’s lifestyle magazines (Attwood 2005). Benwell (2004) has noted how irony is used by men’s lifestyle magazines to give voice to antifeminist and objectifying attitudes towards women’s bodies. Magazines such as MHM instead use irony, colloquialism, and humour as an editorial strategy to form a non-threatening ‘buddy’ relationship with readers (Boni 2002; Crawshaw 2007; Schneider, Cockcroft and Hook 2008; Stibbe 2004). The use of irony also allows the ‘new man’ advocated by MHM to occupy the uncomfortable ‘feminine’ consumer space by evading a specific masculine identity, and allowing MHM to simultaneously voice and deny allegiances to any particular stance (Benwell 2004). Both ‘lads mags’ and lifestyle magazines such as MHM are said to draw heavily on the ‘male sex drive’ discourse (Hollway 1984, 1989), which depicts men as driven by the need for (frequent) sex, and particularly by the ‘completion’ of sex through coitus and orgasm. This discourse has been noted to dominate in MHM (Schneider, Cockcroft and Hook, 2008) and other media concerned with heterosex **(**Braun, Gavey and McPhillips 2003; Duncan and Dowsett 2010), serving to establish coital and orgasm imperatives.

These imperatives are closely linked to the discourse of the hegemonic heterosex script, propagated through Western media, which dictates a ‘common sense’ order for sex acts that must finish in male ejaculation. For example, the US version of MHM delivered ‘advice on how to kiss, touch, perform oral sex and perform manual sex as well as on the best, usually orgasm-inducing, sexual intercourse positions’ (Ménard and Kleinplatz 2007, 9). This sequence of acts is portrayed as the ‘right’ and ‘normal’ pace and trajectory of heterosex, and fits the ejaculatory schema lens that Foucault argues all sexuality is seen through; one which focuses on the moment of ejaculatory emission as the core, and terminal, feature of sexual activity (Foucault 1984). In practice, this hegemonic heterosex script often manifests in an ‘exchange’ of female orgasm (usually from non-penile-vaginal sex acts) for subsequent male-orgasm-through-coitus (Braun, Gavey and McPhillips 2003). It also stereotypes male sexuality as following what Lorentzen (2007) calls the ‘simplest logic’ of seduction, erection, penetration, orgasm, and withdrawal.

In addition, both lads mags and men’s lifestyle magazines often focus on enforcing gendered sexual stereotypes, for example placing women’s orgasm as oppositional to men’s through the so-called ‘orgasm gap’ (Frith 2013). Grounded in the language of anatomy and physiology, this discourse of incommensurability between men and women’s orgasms serves to entrench the idea that the sexes are oppositional and binary in biology and nature (Crawshaw 2007; Ménard and Kleinplatz 2007; Schneider, Cockcroft and Hook 2008). It paints women’s orgasm as invisible and complex in comparison to men’s visible and straightforward orgasm-as-ejaculation (Frith 2015).

Since its first publication in the UK in 1995, MHM has however differed from ‘lads mags’ in that, while it too displays objectified images of the female body, it adds cover art and adverts with imagery of homogenous, idealised, mesomorphic male bodies. MHM legitimises its objectification and display of the male body through encouraging homosociality (Sedgwick 1985), including eschewing any possibility of the readership having non-heterosexual preferences, that allows bonds between men to be strengthened through the rejection of a perceived feminine or homosexual ‘other’. For example, Attwood (2005) notes that mediums where male bodies are subjected to a sexualised gaze often feel the need to keep the male body ‘intact’ by refusing to acknowledge the possibility of its penetration.

In their analyses of the US version of MHM, Stibbe (2004) and Alexander (2003) both found that the uniform, muscular body ideal in the magazine served a commercial purpose – creating a ‘body as project’ for readers that requires monitoring and management. MHM also extends this to men’s sex lives, depicting frequent, penetrative sex as an integral part of being a ‘healthy male citizen’ (Crawshaw 2007) and therefore the risk of impotence or dysfunction a matter of concern and control (Boni 2002).

Feminist theorists have coined the useful term ‘technologies of sexiness’ to describe how women are targeted as sexual consumers through lifestyle magazines and other media (Evans, Riley and Shankar 2010; Gill 2007; Harvey and Gill 2011). Through these technologies, women are expected to embody a neoliberal, individualised, self-governing work ethic, working on their bodies through diet and exercise and working at their sexual prowess through learning practices previously associated with the sex industry and pornography, such as pole dancing (Harvey and Gill 2011). Recently, Frith (2015) has analysed how postfeminist concepts of female agency and desire are further commercialised by encouraging women to be sexually adventurous and ‘teach’ their male partners to give them pleasure, as such ‘taking responsibility’ for their own orgasms.

Similarly, lifestyle magazines targeted at men also use ‘technologies of sexiness’, but instead to promote a ‘branded masculinity’ (Alexander 2003; Rubio-Hernández 2010) achievable through hard work and the consumption of lifestyle products aimed at bodily transformation and sexual prowess. MHM is no exception, focusing its editorial content (both in print and online) on articles giving advice about body, fitness and nutrition in line with the health, grooming and consumer concerns of the ‘new man’. Men’s magazines have been shown to provide a commodified response to men’s gender anxieties (Jackson, Brooks and Stevenson 1999), for example encouraging men to consume sexual advice and purchase props to overcome the potentially ‘fallible phallus’ where ‘when the sexual act is performed correctly, the reward is affirmed masculinity, but when it is done incorrectly, masculinity is placed in doubt’ (Schneider, Cockcroft and Hook, 2008, 145).

These technologies of sexiness also extend to working at the ‘labour intensive’ female orgasm (Frith 2013). Recently, Frith (2015) has looked at how these technologies of sexiness sold to men encourage them to create ‘constructed certitude’ from sexual uncertainty through mastering the mechanics of sex, and how this plays out on the dynamics of orgasm exchange in heterosex. She has drawn on broader literature around reciprocity in heterosex (Braun, Gavey and McPhillips 2003; Frith 2013; Gilfoyle, Wilson and Brown 1992) to analyse how the orgasm imperative and orgasm gap have constructed an understanding of female pleasure dependent on men’s work and skill – creating an obligation for men to ‘give’ orgasms to women, and creating an obligation for women to deliver an orgasm (fake or real) in exchange to reward the man’s work and affirm his status as a lover (Frith 2015, 117). This unequal distribution of entitlement and obligation constitutes what Gilfoyle, Wilson and Brown (1992) call the ‘pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse’ – a distortion of reciprocity in which sensibilities of equality are promoted on the surface but the male sex drive discourse requires men to satisfy their sexual urges above all else. In the course of such distortions, women become passive in the exchange while men remain the subject of all interactions.

These concepts and discourses previously identified in the content of MHM and other men’s magazines can be drawn upon as a critical framework to understand how the magazine continually constructs and reconstructs ideal masculinities to serve its commercial agenda, and can provide the backdrop for analyses of how ideals of sexual reciprocity are distorted by other discourses on masculinity and heterosex.

**Methods**

MHM UK is the most widely read men’s magazine in the UK, remaining at the top of the list of paid-for men’s magazines in the first half of 2014, despite print sales falling (Plunkett 2015). Its continued success is accounted for by its substantial digital circulation, catering to what the magazine’s parent company Hearst-Rodale, call ‘upscale readers who are tech-savvy early adopters’ (Halliday 2013). Apart from the print and digital paid-for circulation, MHM UK also has considerable content freely available online, which is accessed by millions: the MHM UK website reportedly receives 6,301,707 page views to their UK webpage monthly from 2,025,000 unique users (Men’s Health 2015). Free online articles arguably have a wider readership and therefore more potential impact than print or even digital paid-for articles, especially because the UK site is accessible to the international English-speaking public.

Around 86% of the MHM readership is male (Men’s Health 2012), mostly between the ages of 25 and 44 (Men’s Health 2015). According to its current Editor, Toby Wiseman: ‘Men’s Health is the magazine for active, successful, intelligent men who want to make the most of their physical, professional and emotional lives. We give men the tools they need to make their lives better’ (Men’s Health 2015, 2).

The sample for this analysis consisted of the Top Ten most popular free articles on the ‘Sex’ tab of the UK website ([www.menshealth.co.uk](http://www.menshealth.co.uk)) downloaded on a randomly selected day (13th March 2015) and included all imagery, small print and subsections. This sampling strategy aimed to create a snapshot of articles to which the average reader would have had easiest access if they had been searching for sexual health advice on the site on that day. In choosing only the Top Ten articles on the site, we recognised the fact that a reader in this age of constant media consumption would have been unlikely to read beyond those articles on that day and we understood this collection of articles to be seen both as a product for readership consumption, but also a construct of readership priorities.

The close textual analysis was deductive in nature, recognising that ‘coding does not happen in an epistemological vacuum’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, 84), and drew on a critical framework of discourses around sex and pleasure from the literature (outlined above) as a starting point for understanding the manifestation of the discourse of reciprocity.

Due to the frequent use of euphemism in the articles – for example, ‘clinch the result’ and ‘going for gold’ – and the subtlety of the embedded advertising, the textual content of this sample was coded separately by the three co-authors and the coding triangulated in order to ensure consistency in the interpretation of references to pleasure/arousal, orgasm, and instances of embedded advertising.

Our analysis focused particularly on the language, euphemism, metaphor and imagery used to characterise the dynamics between the (assumed) male reader and his (assumed) female partner. We looked particularly for reference to the ‘orgasm gap’, language around giving and exchanging, and how men were encouraged by MHM to conceptualise their own and their partner’s orgasm in relation to one another.

**Results**

The ten articles in order of popularity were titled: (1) Give her an orgasm in 15 minutes; (2) 8 exercises to improve your sexual prowess; (3) 17 sex moves she’s never tried; (4) Avoid these dating mistakes; (5) A new twist on 3 old sex positions; (6) Morning sex positions; (7) How to delay ejaculation; (8) Get a healthy penis; (9) 5 ways to last longer; and (10) How to hit her G-spot. End of edit

***The orgasm gap and ‘constructed certitude’ of consumption***

All of the articles reviewed assumed that the male reader wanted to have more heterosexual sex than they were currently having – ‘The one thing that everyone seems to want more of is sex’ – and the orgasm imperative was evident in the frequent mentions of orgasm/ climax/ coming/ ejaculation (36 mentions) as well as coded euphemistic references, for example ‘going for gold’ and ‘reaching the finish’.

Male orgasm was almost always equated with coitus and direct genital stimulation, for example two of the articles, ‘How to delay ejaculation’ and ‘Get a healthy penis’, focused almost entirely on the sexual functionality of the penis, which was defined as it being able to maintain ‘good, sturdy erections’ and being able to slow down the ‘ejaculatory response’ during coitus. Throughout the articles, there was only a single reference to male embodied pleasure beyond the genitals – ‘… you’ll diffuse pleasure throughout your whole body’. By contrast, in many of the articles, coitus was not depicted as necessary for female pleasure. Instead, this was accessible through multiple areas – breasts, clitoris, neck, and G-spot.

Several articles assumed sexual novelty was desirable to its male readership, using language such as ‘sex moves she’s never tried’ and ‘new twist’, despite depicting ‘variety’ as only coming in one package: penetrative sex with a female partner, exemplified by the 23 illustrations of sexual positions included in the articles that showed variety only in the angle of penetration. The conflation of penile-vaginal penetration with sex positions further evoked the coital imperative of the male sex drive discourse.

The articles seemed to use the logic of the coital/orgasm imperative to organise men’s work at female pleasure into the hegemonic heterosex script, based on the unproblematised timeline of the man’s assumed sexual trajectory from erection to stimulation to orgasm. For example, while the article ‘How to hit her G spot’ advised stimulation of the female genitals using hands and a vibrator, it ended with the suggestion of shallow penile penetration. Similarly, while in the article ‘How to give her an orgasm in 15 minutes’ it was posited that ‘cunnilingus is the most reliable route to orgasm for 80% ofwomen’, this was part of a prescribed script that moved through kissing, touching, manual stimulation, cunnilingus, and ended in coitus. Non-penile-vagina sex acts were limited to oral and manual stimulation of the woman, with no mention of oral or manual stimulation of the man.

In this sample of articles, the discourse of the orgasm gap was most evident in the discussion of the timing of male and female orgasms. These were presented as utterly oppositional: the language around male orgasm included words like ‘slow’, ‘control’, ‘longer’, ‘endurance’, ‘resist’, ‘delay’, and ‘prolong’ to ‘set longevity records’ and focused mainly on the mechanics of sex, namely through metaphors such as ‘prepare for take-off’ and ‘piston away’ to achieve a ‘broadband orgasm’.

By contrast, the language used to describe female orgasm focused on ‘speed’, ‘sooner’, ‘quickly’, ‘faster’ and ‘instant’. It also focused on racing analogies, for example: ‘speed your girl to the finish line’, ‘set the stop watch’, and ‘clocked her average climax’, warning men not to go ‘back to the starting blocks’ but to ‘reach the finish’. In fact, the quantified speed of the female orgasm was the topic of the number one most popular article - ‘Give her an orgasm in 15 minutes’ – suggesting it was of most concern to the MHM online readership. While this article focused on a minute-by-minute breakdown of how to get a woman to orgasm within the allotted timeframe, it also contained one throwaway comment about how ‘Feeling that time is short prevents a woman from reaching orgasm’.

The almost constant presence of this language around timing served to emphasise a sense that male orgasm were inevitable and irrefutable (though sometimes ‘too soon’) in heterosex, while female orgasm was elusive, ‘too slow’, and therefore carried the risk of non-occurrence within the androcentric timeframe.

The weight that this digital sample placed on the risk of this ‘sexual failure’ arguably served multiple purposes, not least implying the need for readers to consume more magazines and products to gain ‘constructed certitude’ and overcome any sexual performance anxiety arising from the challenge of the orgasm gap. An imperative to consume more advice and products was supported by at least 25 instances of advertising embedded in the articles, often including hyperlinks to other websites. The products advertised ranged from stimulation devices and lubricant to books and services by various ‘sexperts’ – semi-celebrity figures who may or may not have any medical or therapeutic training but who embody a trusted position based on their penning of self-help books and/or websites (Harvey and Gill 2011).

Interestingly, in this sample of articles, there was only one mention of condoms and it was in the context of using a particular brand in order to help delay male orgasm. However, in the ‘Get a healthy penis’ article, condoms featured at least twice in the imagery (unmentioned in the text) suggesting MHM was trying to subliminally recommend condom use without having to mention it. This suggests that brand and product placement in the magazineonly extended to products deemed to fit with MHM’s ideals of consumer masculinity, which would largely seem to exclude condoms; a paradoxical position for a magazine that presents itself as promoting men’s health in the UK context of increasing rates of heterosexual sexually transmitted infection (Public Health England 2015).

***Reciprocity and pseudo-reciprocity in orgasm***

The ideal of reciprocity embodies a focus on female pleasure as equal to male pleasure, in theory leading to an exchange where each partner ‘gives’ the other an orgasm during heterosex encounters (Braun, Gavey and McPhillips 2003). In this sample of articles, there was a strong sense not of an equal ‘gifting’ of orgasm between heterosexual partners, but of directing the male reader to prioritise and work at female pleasure; reflected by the many more references to female than male arousal and orgasm. The few references that were made to mutual orgasm or desire fell within discourses of neoliberal hard work and masculine endurance:

‘Try one of these techniques tonight… to maximise pleasure for you and your partner.’

‘It’s harder to plug in, but better for everyone’.

One comment in the sampled articles focused on open communication with a partner as important, but only with regards to helping men last longer.

The power to overcome the orgasm gap and organise a female partner’s orgasm into the hegemonic heterosex script was depicted as in the hands of the male reader, if he consumed the right advice and products and did the ‘right work’. The right work appeared to consist of a disembodied technical and mechanical management of the male sexual response. Two articles specifically offered techniques to delay male orgasm – ‘How to delay ejaculation’ and ‘Five ways to last longer in bed’ – while another article advised on specific exercises to increase stamina for sexual purposes, aligning the two experiences as tests of endurance. Indeed, words like ‘endurance’ and ‘stamina’ were used repeatedly and directly linked to sexual ‘success’, for example: ‘Hone your physique for more stamina and increased pleasure in the bedroom’.

Imperatives for action, backed up by research or sexperts, included to ‘go slowly’, ‘delay reaching it’, ‘breathe slowly and deeply’, ‘ask her to stop’, ‘pull away’, ‘regain your composure’, and ‘stop thinking of your orgasm’. This language reflected an active diversion of attention from male pleasure in the name of ejaculatory control. While female embodied sexual pleasure was a concerted focus, male pleasure was discussed as deriving principally from control of both his own and his partner’s pleasure - ‘… gives you slow, pulsating sensations that you control…’ – including instructions for men to ‘feel the force’, enjoy a ‘strong-man power trip’ and ‘…enhanc[e] her pleasure – and your grip strength’.

Coital sex positions were laid out like a workout plan in the articles, with step-by-step illustrations and notes on the muscle groups exercised through particular positions, in line with discourses about the efficient management of bodily and sexual risk:

‘…effective sex positions to maximise her pleasure while giving you a tough full-body workout in the process. Now all you need is a training partner…’

In the same vein, the language around female orgasm painted it as something labour-intensive and challenging: something for which a man had to sit an ‘entrance exam’, to ‘rise to the occasion’, and get on the ‘high score board’. The promised ‘reward’ or ‘exchange’ for this hard work in prioritising female pleasure was a forthcoming female orgasm, which would in turn lead to female approval and the reward of more frequent sex:

‘It all adds up to extra boom in the boudoir – she will approve.’

‘…aside from the instant spike in your approval ratings, there’s more sex in it for you.’

While there was no question in the text that this was a fair exchange, there was also no mention of the possibility of women teaching men about their bodies and orgasms that was noted in postfeminist analyses of women’s lifestyle magazines (Frith 2015). Indeed, in this snapshot sample, only one reference mentioned the woman being active during coitus – ‘Relax and let her do the work’ – and only one reference was made to a woman’s ability to self-stimulate; the latter only in the context of supplementing penile penetration.

Furthermore, the language around ‘giving’ in this sample always placed the male reader as the subject – ‘… you can give…’, ‘… give her different sensations…’, ‘…give her an orgasm she won’t forget…’ – or it discussed how men could engineer situations to give them opportunities for more control – ‘This position gives you a more intense way to mount her’, ‘This gives you access to her perineum…’. His ‘gift’ to his partner was also frequently mythologised and spectacularised: there was talk of men being able to ‘orchestrate’ the female orgasm with ‘shuttle-launch precision’ and ‘choose [their] weapon’ for the battle of the G-spot.

The male role in producing the female orgasm was discussed as an extension of the detached mechanical lens through which he was encouraged to conceptualise his own sexuality - ‘start her engine’ to provide ‘an electric treat, just for her’ - as if her ‘natural’ pleasure could be somehow brought under control through mechanisation. In two instances, literal mechanical vibrating tools were recommended - once to reach the G-spot and once as a mechanism for delaying ejaculation.

The sampled articles were heavily concerned with the G-spot, which was mentioned 20 times within them, and was framed within language of it needing to be ‘mastered’. It was also mythologised through comments such as ‘55% of men have never found their partner’s G spot’ and ‘the G spot can be frustratingly elusive’. There was an implicit sense of female orgasm through G-spot stimulation being the ‘gold standard’ – and purportedly producing superior orgasms to clitoral orgasms – perhaps because of the potential for G-spot orgasms to adhere neatly to the hegemonic heterosex script and coital/orgasm imperatives.

This extension of control from the male reader’s body to his partner’s seemed unquestioned in the articles. One article on the art of ‘seduction skills’ included advice to ‘take control’, ‘Plan the date in advance… and don’t run it by her’, and ‘Women don’t always mean what they say’. The space for female autonomy was marginalised even further when it came to sex, where ‘guarantees’ were made by sexperts and ‘research’ that women would respond in pre-programmed ways: ‘women love’, ‘she’ll be thinking’, ‘This will get her excited’, ‘she’ll be demanding [more]’ and ‘she’ll enjoy’. The gender dynamics of sexual exchange male readers were expected to set up can be summed up in the following quote:

‘On a first date, you should always – always – insist upon treating her. “Even if she offers, she'll think of you as cheap,” says [Ian Kerner](http://www.iankerner.com" \t "_blank), author of Date Scene Investigation. “Tell her you're happy to pay and she can do so down the line,” advises Kerner. This advertises your generosity with no danger of appearing overbearing or patronising.’

This quote exemplifies how MHM encourages men to ‘appear’ to embody the sensibilities of a postmodern form of masculinity concerned with equality by not being overbearing or patronising, while retaining the position of being in control of any pleasure creation. Another trait men were encouraged to ‘fake’ in the language was care for their partner, for example:

‘… tilt your head to the right – scientists in Germany found this makes you seem more caring, flooding her system with the ‘connection’ chemical oxytocin, building trust and encouraging her to come quickly.’

Running up against the other discursive currents in the sample, the discourse of reciprocity therefore appeared to become distorted into a pseudo-reciprocal one-sided, controlled ‘gift’. Instead of equality in mutually giving orgasms in heterosex, the language of the articles continually painted men as the principal actors in initiating, progressing, and mastering sexual pleasure both within themselves and in their female partners.

**Discussion**

In this snapshot sample, MHM evoked hegemonic and stereotypical understandings of heterosex, including emphasising the male sex drive discourse through coital and orgasm imperatives, a rigid androcentric script of heterosex, and the mythologised orgasm gap. Reified oppositions between female and male orgasm were woven through the text enough to stimulate a consumer craving certitude; certitude which was ‘guaranteed’ through advice and embedded advertising. Male and female orgasms were constructed as being incommensurable in their timing, despite research showing that the length of time to orgasm in both sexes varies (Bohlen et al.1982; Waldinger et al.2005). Furthermore, female orgasm was paradoxically depicted as intelligible and achievable for men through diligent hard work and yet still elusive, mysterious and ‘secret’, as it has been depicted for centuries (Gowing 2013).

The sample depicted a masculine teleological trajectory of sex as dictating heterosex encounters, encouraging men to work to ensure female pleasure fitted this timeline. This was apparently a readership concern, given their prioritisation of the article ‘Give her an orgasm in 15 minutes’. Rather than helping his partner realise her own orgasmic potential, being ‘taught’ about her orgasm, or exploring pleasure beyond orgasm, the configuration of the relationship between male and female orgasm in MHM continued to paint the male as the provider/producer who worked to achieve the ‘final victory’ (Foucault 1984, 128) of orgasm both for himself and his partner. This hegemonic heterosex script drew on the Foucauldian concept of the ejaculatory schema that is ‘carried over unchanged from man to woman, and used to decipher the relationships between male and female roles in terms of confrontation and conquest, but also domination and regulation’ (Foucault 1984, 127).

The language in the sample around giving and exchange almost exclusively placed men as the gift-givers and women as the gift-receivers. The work of Braun, Gavey and McPhillips (2003) and Frith (2013, 2015) shows that when female orgasms are constructed as a result of men’s intervention due to asymmetric gender power relations, it allows men to retain the role of producer of pleasure, and confers upon women an obligation to deliver their orgasm as part of the exchange. Women are therefore arguably disproportionately caught up in this pendulum of entitlement and obligation: many studies have noted that one of the main concerns around the absence of female orgasm in heterosex for both men and women was how this reflects on the man’s status as a lover (Braun, Gavey and McPhillips 2003; Fahs 2014; Frith 2015; Salisbury and Fisher 2014).

Pro-feminist discourses of reciprocity in sex and pleasure were heavily present in the MHM sample, but undermined by advice to ‘fake’ reciprocal sensibilities while privileging male control. It is this entanglement of feminist discourses (such as reciprocity in pleasure) with pre-feminist and anti-feminist discourses (such as the male sex drive and orgasm gap) in magazines that lends a sheen of acceptability to these configurations - making them all the more difficult to disentangle (Gill 2009). As Gilfoyle, Wilson and Brown (1992) and Braun, Gavey and McPhillips (2003) note, it is ironic that this discourse of reciprocity aims to ‘enlighten’ men as to their responsibility for their partner’s pleasure, but when it encounters other heterosex discourses it in fact creates another example of male appropriation of power, the limitation of female sexual agency, and the entrenchment of gendered stereotypes. In these articles MHM revels in the ‘ironic space’ – using irony as a stylistic tool to voice antifeminist sentiments while posturing concern for equality; to allow men to sexually objectify other men without being considered homosexual; to be a consumer without losing control of the means of production; and to play the ‘new man’ without losing the traditional privileges of masculinity.

In this sample, embedded and explicit advertising expose consumer discourses through which men are encouraged to symbolically ‘purchase’ female orgasm as a product with the ‘currency’ of disciplined masculine pleasure. The gender relations set up through the language in this MHM sample did not provide space for female giving, teaching or agency, despite current women’s lifestyle magazines promoting these postfeminist ideals of female agency in desire and ‘taking responsibility’ for their own orgasm (Frith 2015). This poses the question of how these ideals of masculinity and femininity would be expected to interact in heterosex in real life with both seeking to take ownership and control of the female orgasm.

Frith (2015) argues that women tend to conceptualise men’s hard work towards female orgasm either as a selfish attempt to affirm their own sexual prowess, or an act of care for their female partners. However, we argue that MHM encourages men to ‘have their cake and eat it’ by passing off their desire to affirm sexual prowess as an act of care and concern for equality. Therefore, while there was a disproportionate focus in these articles on female orgasm – prioritised, always, under the guise of reciprocity – in practice this concern crossed over from obligation to an *entitlement* to female orgasm. Through this process, the female orgasm became advertised as what Jackson and Scott (1997) call a ‘finished product’ manufactured through men’s actions - a gift that was both the ‘new man’s’ responsibility, but also his consumer *right,* to give his partner.

The female orgasm was depicted in this sample as a site where men could affirm their own masculinity through satisfying the (pseudo)reciprocal discourse of exchange and ‘faking’ care. It was simultaneously depicted as a site where they could produce a satisfactory ‘return’ on their investment in bodily and sexual work, consuming the product they had been guaranteed would result from their neoliberal labours at control, discipline and delay. It was positioned as a site for the successful resolution of the orgasm gap, whereby the obligation of female pleasure had been fulfilled by both parties and the hegemonic heterosex script could continue to its natural conclusion of coitus and orgasm-as-ejaculation. For the rare reader who could achieve the magazine’s hallowed sexpert status, female orgasm was also sold as the site on which his mastery of the ‘gold standard’ and mythologised G-spot allowed him to organise his partner’s pleasure into his own ejaculatory schema to achieve simultaneous orgasm-through-coitus.

This approach to female orgasm is arguably the inevitable side effect of the disciplined male pleasure which MHM sells to its readers. The magazine privileges a narrow stereotype of male sexuality rather than supports any broad or embodied understanding of masculine pleasure as equally complex as women’s. MHM privileges heterosex, coitus, and orgasm; presents men’s sexual response as linear, uncomplicated, and limited to genitalia; makes the affirmation of masculinity dependent on disciplining men’s own pleasure; and generates anxiety about the orgasm gap and men’s duty/right to overcome it. Even where MHM encourages men to seek sexual variety (three of the articles in the sample were about sex positions), in practice the positions are homogenous: penetrative coital positions with a female partner, ranked according to their potential to elicit orgasm.

In the text, male orgasm was unequivocally present and inevitable – the only threat was that it may come ‘too soon’. However we argue that this denial of the plurality and nuance of men’s lived sexual experiences is problematic. The mechanised, controlled, quantified, self-objectifying and anxiety-driven approach to producing female orgasm encouraged by MHM relies on men applying the same approach to their own pleasure. They are encouraged to act unthinkingly, even to *endure*, in heterosex encounters, not to feel or reflect or engage on equal terms. Their own orgasm at the end of such encounters is almost irrelevant as a sensation – what matters most is that they overcame the orgasm gap to ‘achieve’ female orgasm ‘in time’ and prove their masculinity. This comparative lack of focus on their own sensations arguably turns men into ‘sexual thieves, forcing them to steal their pleasure’ as described by Chia and Arava (1997, 42) in their self-help book promoting an alternative conceptualisation of male sexuality. It is this thievery - this vicarious consumption of female pleasure through obsessive mastery of her orgasm - that arguably occurs as collateral damage of the disciplining of male sexual pleasure.

In this sample, there was no recognition of the fact that sex does not require penetration; that male pleasure can be accessed through activities other than coitus; that ejaculation and orgasm are not inherently biologically the same response; that embodied pleasure can occur with or without ejaculation (Robbins and Jensen 1978); or that a significant minority of men in fact fake orgasm (Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010). According to MHM, there is no space in conceptualisations of male sexuality for gender or sexual fluidity, nor for the non-teleological ‘spirit of play’ in heterosex described by men in the work of Duncan and Dowsett (2010).

The analysis offered here builds on Frith’s (2013, 2015) important work applying theory on reciprocity in heterosex to the digital content of lifestyle magazines to examine how this works within contexts of asymmetric gender power relations and evolving gender ideals. We expand that analysis to argue that the disciplining and limitation of masculine pleasure is causally linked to controlling female agency and pleasure, and is indeed the ‘currency’ with which men are expected to ‘purchase’ the female orgasm as a product. By taking into account men’s preferences for sexual advice in this digital readership era, this analysis uniquely focuses on the consumer/producer approach MHM are encouraged to adopt – both towards its content but also towards female orgasm.

Limitations of this analysis include the fact that these ten online articles available to male readers on one day may not have been representative of the usual daily content of the MHM Sex tab Top Ten feature. It is also possible the Top Ten algorithm on the site was not led by number of ‘hits’ (as assumed) but by editorial decisions, undermining the sample’s accurate reflection of the readership’s priorities in sexual advice.

In addition, there is very little research on how men incorporate these media discourses into their lived sexual experiences. There is evidence that media consumption increases men’s expectations of thinness in women (Hatoum and Belle 2004) and can normalise sexist thinking (Horvath et al. 2011). However, focus group discussions conducted by Boni (2002) suggested that in practice, male audiences are sceptical of the homogenisation and commodification of bodies promoted by MHM. Other studies of the incorporation of media discourses into everyday sexual experiences have found readers both absorb and resist assumptions of their sexual failure (Lavie-Ajayi and Joffe 2009) and that men’s occupation of discursive positions in their sexual subjectivity is dependent on context (Mooney-Somers and Ussher 2010). The reality of how men consume MHM’s sexual advice within their relationships therefore requires more research, especially where its content is being consumed regularly and more broadly on digital platforms.

If the discourses that MHM propagated in this sample are being incorporated into men’s lived sexual experiences, they could arguably be linked to damaging ideas of entitlement and obligation in heterosex; the stigmatisation of homosexual experiences; the over-medicalisation of anxiety-induced sexual ‘dysfunction’; the denial of autonomous female pleasure; the reinforcing of unequal gender relations; the compromise of health advice in favour of hegemonic masculine ideals, ignoring issues such as sexually transmitted infections and contraception; and, underpinning it all, the suppression in men of embodied and non-teleological pleasure, free from coital and orgasm imperatives. Far from ‘giving men the tools to make their lives better’, MHM’s consumer approaches to female orgasm arguably deny both men and their partners the discursive space to consider alternative conceptualisations of pleasure.

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