The *Playboy* Rabbit Is Soft, Furry, and Cute:
Is This Really the Symbol of Masculine Dominance of Women?

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Images presented in the mass media often contain subtexts that perpetuate gender stereotypes. We suggest that in some instances, underlying messages in mass media can operate to oppose, rather than reinforce, gender stereotypes. To examine this hypothesis, we used the first ten years of *Playboy* magazine as our data source. We provide evidence that the magazine attempted to broaden the conceptualization of masculinity by defining as the ideal an identity that incorporated a number of characteristics traditionally associated with women. We identify several processes by which *Playboy* accomplished this goal. These processes included co-opting the meaning of the word “playboy,” associating sexual success with the possession of traditionally feminine traits, and using a rabbit as *Playboy*'s symbol.

**Key Words:** masculinity, gender stereotypes, feminine traits, media symbols, mass media, *Playboy* magazine

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Mass media provide consumers with messages that convey meaning on a number of levels (Hall, 1997; Kates & Shaw-Garlock, 1999; Mick & Buhl, 1992). An assumption of work in this area is that, because they are unexpected and convey subtle bias, certain meanings are difficult to detect or refute. These subtexts have been shown to exert an influence on judgment and behavior (e.g., Rudman & Borgida, 1995; Signorielli, 1989), even when invalid. For example, it has been shown (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Cash & Henry, 1995; Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992) that unrealistic media images of female beauty can cause women to develop unhealthy expectations about their own and others’ bodies.

One underlying meaning involves the reinforcement of stereotype-based expectations about men and women (Bordo, 1993; Douglas, 1994; Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; Richins, 1991; Wolf, 1991). Even when media do not appear to have a clear reason for the reinforcement of stereotypes, there is evidence that such instantiations occur. For example, teen magazines tend to portray female characters who require assistance in order to solve their problems (Peirce, 1993). In music videos, women display subservient behaviors and men display aggressive, dominant behaviors (Sommer-Flanagan, Sommer-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993). A greater proportion of men relative to women are presented in television commercials as possessing identifiable occupations (Allan & Coltrane, 1996).

In our analysis, we would like to consider the extent to which a medium may present messages that undermine, rather than reinforce, stereotypes about men and women. Moreover, we would like to entertain the possibility that even in a medium with a seemingly simple agenda regarding the behavior of men and women, there may appear seditious messages that oppose the apparent agenda. We feel that with rare exception (e.g., Beggan, Gagné, & Allison, 2000), this perspective has been ignored by social scientists.

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF GENDER STEREOTYPES IN PLAYBOY

Most social critics would agree that Playboy magazine has had an important influence on societal processes in the latter half of the twentieth century (e.g., Talese, 1980). Much of the critical analysis Playboy magazine has received can be conceptualized in terms of the analysis of power dynamics between men and women (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1997). Ehrenreich (1983) suggested that the magazine encouraged the males’ flight from responsibility by implying that men and women had incompatible goals with regard to commitment and marriage. According to feminist and pro-feminist writers (e.g., Brod, 1988; Brooks, 1995; Dworkin, 1988; May, 1969), the visual and written images of women presented in Playboy degrade women. By this argument, then, exposure to these images encourages men to perceive themselves as superior to women. Other authors (e.g., Brownmiller, 1991; Ewing, 1995; MacKinnon, 1986) have extended power dynamics to the point of suggesting that the written and visual images in Playboy promote a rape culture that is both misogynistic and violent.

Empirical analyses of Playboy magazine have failed to provide clear evidence of these dominance themes. For example, an analysis (Scott & Cuvelier, 1987) of violence in cartoons and pictorials in Playboy from 1954 to 1983 indicated that
depictions of violence were rare. Only 2.86 violent cartoons and .78 violent pictorials appeared per 1000 pages. Malamuth and Spinner (1980) reported a similar low proportion of violent imagery. Moreover, in an empirical analysis of the relationship between pornography and rape, Gentry (1991) found no effect between consumption of Playboy and rape rates, as reported in the Uniform Crime Reports.

In keeping with these latter studies, our analysis of Playboy magazine begins with a simple observation. We note that one curious fact, apparently ignored by social scientists who have critically analyzed Playboy, is that the world-famous symbol of the magazine is a white rabbit. The Rabbit symbol is a stylized rabbit head in profile, wearing a bow tie, most likely a tie that is part of a tuxedo. A Playboy tradition that began in the second issue of the magazine is to include, in some form, an image of the Rabbit on the cover. The dominant incarnation in the early issues was as a human-size, apparently sentient entity that often interacted with women in a romantic manner. The Rabbit has also appeared in a variety of other forms such as a bend in a telephone cord or a reflection in a woman’s eye. Over the years, finding the Rabbit symbol has become a contest for the readers. In some cases, the Rabbit was so well hidden, as a knot in a bikini bottom or as a curl in a woman’s hair, that readers complained that they could not find the image.

In explaining the choice of a white rabbit, Hugh Hefner, founder of Playboy, was quoted (Brady, 1974, p. 74), “Rabbits are the playboys of the animal world and they have a sexy reputation.” A justification based on reproductive rates makes only limited sense in that the means to reproduction rather than actual reproduction itself appears more consistent with the editorial focus of the magazine. The Playboy website (http://www.playboy.com) features a slightly different and more detailed explanation, “I selected a rabbit ... because of the humorous sexual connotation, and because he offered an image that was frisky and playful. I put him in a tuxedo to add the idea of sophistication.... The notion of a rabbit dressed up in formal evening attire struck me as charming, amusing and right.”

The synthesis of Playboy and the Rabbit is surprising when one recognizes that the dominant characteristics of a white rabbit are: soft, furry, cute, peaceful, fearful, and a prey rather than a predator. These are not the attributes expected as the symbol of a magazine with an ideology of the oppression of women. It is surprising that a rabbit would be chosen as the symbol for a magazine geared toward men, given that stereotypes about men (Bem, 1974; De Lisi & Soundranayagam, 1990; Street, Kimmel, & Kromrey, 1995) revolve around themes such as power (achievement, assertiveness), sexuality (sexual aggression and skill), and intellect (logic and difficulty in expressing emotions). In fact, justified purely on the basis of stereotypes, a white rabbit would be a more appropriate symbol of women rather than men. Moreover, a number of the adjectives used by Hefner to describe the rabbit seem consistent with stereotypes about women. Terms such as “frisky,” “playful,” “charming,” and “amusing” could be just as readily used to describe how critics of Playboy have characterized the women who pose for Playboy as how Hugh Hefner has characterized the Rabbit.

The goal of the present paper is to critically explore the observed inconsistency between the assumed ideology of Playboy and the image of the white Rabbit. If Playboy should be conceptualized as a media icon that reifies male values and prop-
agates male stereotypes, including among them the domination of women, in the
construction of a masculine identity, then how can these processes be reconciled
with the choice and consequences of a white rabbit as the primary symbol of the
magazine? In the process of addressing this apparent inconsistency, we provide an
interpretation of Playboy at odds with prior critical analyses.

Our thesis is that, despite the attention paid to the presence of nude pictorials,
Playboy's central ideological focus was to sanction men's attempts to expand the
boundaries of legitimate self-conceptualization rather than to subjugate or control
women. Thus, the magazine should be viewed as a lens to better understand how
men think or would like to think about themselves, not how they think about and
create identities for women. Playboy defined an identity for men, i.e., a masculine
ideal, which contained a component that went beyond stereotypes about the appro-
priate characteristics of men. More specifically, this component depended heavily on
the contribution of attributes and interests more stereotypically associated with
women than men. At a symbolic level, the merger of feminine attributes with the
male identity was accomplished by the representation of the archetypal playboy as a
white rabbit. At an instrumental level, the merger occurred through the editorial
material presented in the magazine. Thus, the central gender theme in Playboy
magazine was the integration, rather than polarization, of masculine and feminine rep-
resentations.

Our analysis represents three potentially important contributions to the men's
studies literature. The first contribution is to elaborate on the gender role strain para-
digm (Pleck, 1981, 1995) in a way that might be viewed as counterintuitive. Accord-
ing to this perspective, a significant proportion of men violate gender roles and expe-
rience negative psychological consequences as a result (Levant, 1997). In our
analysis, we propose a novel interpretation of the way Playboy may have shaped the
male consciousness with regard to masculine identity. We suggest that the images of
the male presented in Playboy reduced gender role strain by legitimizing a broader
definition of masculinity than would be encapsulated by stereotypic images of men.
Moreover, this influence began in the early 1950s, prior to the occurrence of social
and political events (e.g., the women's movement) that might have called into ques-
tion the construction of a masculine ideal based on stereotypic representations.

A second contribution of our analysis is to promote a conceptualization of Play-
boy magazine at odds with much of the existing scholarly work. Playboy has been
viewed as a mechanism of fraternal bonding which reinforces a stereotypic represen-
tation of women as subservient, highly sexualized objects of pleasure (e.g., Ehrenre-
ich, 1983). Because Playboy is read by a great many men, it is assumed that these
men adopt an attitude toward women that is consistent with the theme of sexuality
and dominance. Our analysis undercuts this conclusion by invalidating the premise
that Playboy degrades women. Rather than degrade women, Playboy emphasized the
importance of women and their values in defining a masculine identity. Thus, we
assert that reading Playboy should not be viewed as synonymous with possessing a
negative attitude toward women.

A final contribution of our analysis is to reinforce the idea that the values and
attributes stereotypically associated with each gender may afford both benefits and
costs to the individuals who possess them (Brooks, 1990; Messner, 1992). When
Playboy elaborated on the definition of masculinity, it did so by drawing on certain attributes traditionally associated with women. The lesson to be learned from this fact is that the optimal definition of a human being may be an androgynous one (Bem, 1974) that borrows freely from the best attributes of both men and women.

We use the theme of identity construction as our primary tool to interpret the formative years of Playboy magazine, which we operationally define as its first ten years of existence. This initial period reflects the time during which Playboy was most active in defining a unique niche for itself and its readers.

It has been said that one of the great fibs of modern times, in relation to Playboy magazine, is the statement, “I buy it for the articles.” This statement is ironic because the unstated but implied truth is that the speaker buys the magazine to see pictures of naked women but uses the articles to disguise his true intentions. We reconcile the tension between text and pictures with the assertion of a third perspective (Éhrenreich, 1983). The presence of nude photographs of women served as the justification for purchasing the magazine, which, in reality, had been acquired to reinforce a preferred identity, one at odds with many existing beliefs about the nature of masculinity, i.e., that the correct mode of operation for a man was to be strong, unemotional, and confident. According to the philosophy articulated in the magazine, a playboy was free to be much more colorful and broadly defined. Part of the Playboy identity implied the freedom to admit weakness and vulnerabilities. This freedom was especially prevalent in the “Playboy Advisor,” an advice column which required men to reveal their soft underbellies of personal doubts as a prerequisite to obtaining assistance (Beggan et al., 2000).

In our analysis, we will explore the identity toward which Playboy suggested its readers should strive. We suggest that in addition to stereotypically masculine attributes, the identity Playboy instantiated in men incorporated a number of traditionally feminine attributes. Thus, according to Playboy, a man achieved the masculine ideal, i.e., became a playboy, by becoming somewhat feminine. We recognize that this proposition deviates from many of the prior analyses of Playboy magazine that have appeared in the scholarly arena and contradicts notions about Playboy that have appeared in American popular culture.

Playboy encouraged men to adopt stereotypically feminine abilities, such as becoming a better conversationalist and learning how to cook sometimes elaborate meals, through editorial features of the magazine. Other skills the magazine touted included how to decorate one’s office or apartment and how to dress more fashionably. We suggest that the display of these skills would have caused men to appear to possess traits such as supportiveness, commitment, and sensitivity. Men were also directly encouraged to develop feminine traits, such as compassion and sensitivity, through features such as the “Playboy Advisor” column.

We argue that Playboy portrayed women as having a great deal of control over men’s lives. The magazine encouraged men to adopt attributes and learn skills that women would find desirable so that women would find them more attractive. There is evidence (e.g., Clark & Reis, 1988) that an individual’s perceived attractiveness is positively correlated with the extent to which he or she can contribute benefits to a relationship. Recent investigations (e.g., Buss, 1989; Feingold, 1990; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994) of women’s preferences for sexual and marital partners have
found that women desire men who have potential for resource acquisition. As such, women prefer men who are intelligent, strong, and ambitious, i.e., men with stereotypically masculine attributes. In addition, however, women also express a preference for men who are supportive, expressive, sensitive, and committed, i.e., possess stereotypically feminine attributes. Thus, adopting these latter attributes would allow men to be seen as more attractive to women. Although the intention of this approach was to change to become more attractive to women, the implication, however, was that men should surrender sovereignty to women over how men should choose to define themselves.

How did the assertion of a feminine component to a masculine identity come about in the pages of *Playboy* magazine? We identify several aspects of the magazine that contributed to this process. One means was to adopt the name *Playboy* and then use several editorial features to carefully construct a meaning for the word. A second method was the choice of a rabbit as the symbol for the magazine. The third aspect was to promote a complex identity for the Rabbit through the way he was presented on the magazines’ covers. A final aspect was to link sexual success with the possession of the feminine traits advocated by the magazine.

**ON BECOMING A PLAYBOY**

The goal of identity construction appeared as early as Hugh Hefner’s initial editorial statement in the first issue of *Playboy* in which he referred to the magazine as a “primer.” Thus, the intention to educate and socialize the reader was established from the very beginning. Previous authors have recognized *Playboy*’s efforts to define a masculine identity for its readers. For example, in an early analysis, Cox (1965) argued that the success of the magazine was due less to its emphasis on sex than to its emphasis on identity construction. Ehrenreich (1983) suggested that *Playboy* represented an “attack” on the traditional male role. Readers recognized the magazine’s efforts in articulating an identity for them. Consider, for example, a letter published in the September 1959 issue. Reader Scott Mason, from Minot, North Dakota, commented, “I like your voice. It’s my voice.” The unique contribution of our analysis is to describe the seemingly paradoxical way in which *Playboy* assisted men in the construction of a new and better masculine identity by suggesting that they adopt characteristics traditionally associated with women.

The name *Playboy* had implications for identity construction. The magazine was about being the particular kind of person referenced in the title. *Playboy* magazine, then, was a multi-dimensional snapshot that conveyed the essential features of the playboy. The magazine established the directions along which the reader, a potential playboy, could develop and actualize the *Playboy* aspect of his self. *Playboy* intervened at the level of the individual and established the premise of a one-to-one relationship with each reader. As such, the magazine acted as a surrogate older brother who took the reader under the collective wing of the magazine’s editorial staff and taught him to become a playboy. The magazine, rather than other men, socialized the reader by providing advice on how to construct an identity as a playboy.

There is a classic story associated with the name *Playboy*. The initial title Hugh Hefner chose was *Stag Party*. Shortly prior to publication, Hefner received a threat-
ening letter from the attorney representing the publishers of Stag, suggesting infringement. Rather than run the risk of a legal battle, Hefner decided to change the name of his magazine. It is useful to speculate about the implications of the name Playboy in comparison to the name Stag Party with regard to the construction of a masculine ideal. A stag party is a group process. With its homogeneous male composition, a stag party becomes a possible site of male fraternal bonding (Curry, 1991; Hood, 1995; Katz, 1995). Fraternal bonding refers to the high degree of group cohesion that can result when men interact together and is often characterized by a strong reliance on stereotypes about both in-group and out-group members (Curry, 1991; Harrison, Chin, & Ficarrotto, 1995; Satel, 1976). In a stag party, identities are created and maintained as the result of a social interactionist process in the mutual negotiation of identity. Fear of ostracism that accompanies fraternal bonding tends to promote a defensive posture with regard to the affirmation of identities. Thus, the process of identity negotiation is self-protective, conservative, and, as a result, builds on the safest common denominator, i.e., stereotypes. The dynamics of fraternal bonding promote group differentiation along gender lines and subsequent in-group favoritism (Tajfel, 1982). Women are unwelcome at stag parties, except in the limited role as sex objects. They are incorporated into stag parties as strippers and prostitutes. They may appear as images in pornographic movies. But the presence of a woman as a co-participant in a stag party contradicts its core concept. As such, a stag party becomes an environment and process that reifies, for both men and women, identity as a stereotype.

The dynamics of the Playboy identity focused on each potential reader’s capacity for evolution and change toward a Playboy-defined masculine ideal. There is evidence (e.g., Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1987) that people possess both a personal identity and a social identity. Social identity is derived from membership in various groups. A focus on an individual playboy rather than a stag party isolated the individual from the group and emphasized individual identity construction over group stereotype promulgation. As such, pre-existing group norms, values, and beliefs became less central in the definition of an identity. Once readers were distanced from these other anchors, the magazine was free to impose a new reference, which it did through a number of editorial features. To become a playboy required that the potential reader become exposed to and accept the messages conveyed by the magazine’s editorial content. Presumably, with more exposure to the magazine, each reader became better schooled in the requirements of being a playboy. From this point of view, then, the success of Playboy was based on its ability to short-circuit and undercut traditional processes of fraternal bonding that promoted a social identity based on stereotypes.

How did someone become a playboy? How did the transformation occur? And what was the role of women and their values in facilitating this transformation? At the most basic level, a person became a playboy by reading or, better yet, subscribing to Playboy. More generally, then, a reader became a playboy by incorporating the Playboy philosophy into his own belief system. Although Hugh Hefner ultimately wrote a long tome, called the “Playboy Philosophy,” that was published in installments in the magazine, we suggest that there already existed an underlying philosophy embedded in the magazine. This implicit philosophy served as a guide for the reader in the quest for a better, more playboy-like identity. Symbolically, as
we discuss later, the transformation into a playboy was accomplished by becoming Rabbit-like.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Playboy magazine developed a self-referential quality that served as the means by which it defined a masculine ideal. In the first ten years of publication, the editorial staff showed remarkable ingenuity in finding different ways to weave a definitional component into the magazine. The earliest method was in an unsigned editorial published in the first issue in which Hefner laid out his vision for the magazine.

Several regular features of the magazine were routinely used to prescribe images to readers of how they should appear. One way in which the magazine defined a playboy was the full-page subscription ads that appeared starting in the second issue. These ads, usually placed on the inside back cover, were creative and did much to help the magazine achieve its self-appointed task of developing a consistent identity for its readers.

A second regular feature with a self-defining component was the series of advertisements for the magazine that appeared under the heading “What Sort of Man Reads Playboy?” This breed of ad first appeared in the February 1958 issue and followed a standard formula. The ads always depicted a man engaged in a pursuit consistent with the image of a playboy. Another aspect of the ads was the presence of a woman, either interacting directly with the playboy or watching from a distance. In either case, the ads communicated that the woman was romantically involved with the playboy or would like to be. Thus, the ads suggested that adopting the Playboy perspective would yield sexual success. In later years, there was often a second woman whose presence indicated that the playboy was sufficiently attractive so as to be the subject of rivalry among women. Advertising copy reflected the theme conveyed in the photograph, but always included information regarding the extent to which Playboy readers were educated, had expensive tastes in liquor and clothing, traveled for business, and so on.

The covers were a source of definitional messages for readers. As we discuss in more detail below, the Rabbit images sent important messages about the nature of a playboy. Perhaps the clearest example of how Playboy, the magazine, co-opted control over the definition of playboy, the word, was the cover of the June 1961 issue. The cover appeared to be a page from a dictionary where the word “playboy” was defined.

The magazine also found other ways to include definitions of a playboy. The results of a reader survey conducted in the April 1955 issue painted a handsome picture of the prototypical Playboy reader. In two different “Playboy Advisor” columns, definitions of a “gentleman” were presented. Certain cartoons provided a humorous, but still ideologically consistent, message that following the prescriptions of Playboy magazine would permit a reader to enhance his standing with women. For example, the August 1955 issue contained a cartoon with the theme of marital infidelity in which an issue of Playboy magazine was featured.
ASPECTS OF Masculine AND Feminine Identity

To justify the argument that *Playboy* encouraged adopting feminine attributes, it is necessary to clearly identify those attributes that are considered masculine or feminine. Deaux and Lewis (1983) suggested that the breadth of gender stereotypes is quite large. They showed that gender stereotypes have four separate components: traits, role-defined behaviors, occupations, and physical characteristics. In our analysis, we focus on traits and role-defined behaviors. In an extensive investigation of the traits associated with men and women, Street et al. (1995) found that women were viewed as possessing traits associated with compassion, whereas men were viewed as possessing traits associated with power, sexuality, and intellect. Other researchers (e.g., Bem, 1974) have reported similar patterns of results. Bem (1974) found, for example, that men are seen as strong, assertive, and self-reliant. Women, in contrast, are seen as affectionate, gentle, sensitive to the needs of others, and understanding.

Men and women are also thought to engage in different roles (Deaux, Winton, Crowley, & Lewis, 1985; Eckes, 1994; Edwards, 1992; England, 1992). Edwards (1992) found evidence for several distinct stereotyped roles for men: businessman, blue-collar worker, athlete, family man, and womanizer. Other researchers (e.g., Deaux et al., 1985; England, 1992) found similar categories. Women’s role stereotypes included five separate categories (Deaux et al., 1985; Eckes, 1994): housewife/mother, sexy woman, career woman, athlete, and feminist.

Gender-based stereotypes are generally stable. Comparisons between 1972 and 1988 (Bergen & Williams, 1991) and between 1957 and 1978 (Werner & LaRussa, 1985) showed consistency in the way that men and women are perceived across time. A large-scale study among 30 nations showed common characteristics even in very different cultural contexts (Williams & Best, 1990). Moreover, evidence (e.g., Swim, 1994) also suggests that stereotypes about men and women do, in fact, contain a kernel of truth. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the stereotypes identified in studies conducted across different time periods would reflect stereotypes that operated in the early 1950s, when *Playboy* was founded.

THE Ironic Meaning OF Playboy

When Hugh Hefner found out that he could not use the name *Stag Party*, he spent a weekend with his wife, Millie, and friend Eldon Sellers trying to decide on a replacement (Brady, 1974). According to Brady, Eldon Sellers suggested *Playboy* because he recalled an old automobile with that name. Hefner liked the name and the fact that the word “playboy” was obsolete. “That way we can make it suggest whatever the magazine becomes,” Hefner is reported to have said (Brady, 1974, p. 73).

The dictionary (e.g., *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 1983) defines a “playboy” as “a man who is carefree, gay, and fond of playing; specifically, a well-to-do man who spends much time and energy to pleasure-seeking and dissipation.” It is worth noting that “dissipation” includes among its meanings the idea of squandering one’s life on excessive pleasure-seeking. A playboy, therefore, is someone who allows hedonism to consume too great a proportion of life. A play-
boy is harmless essentially but not taken seriously. In sum, then, being a playboy carries a somewhat negative connotation.

The magazine’s editorial staff elaborated freely in crafting a much more positive meaning of the word. The negative connotation was excised and the range of positive attributes increased to where the magazine’s definition of a playboy was the opposite of the dictionary definition. The attributes included in the various definitions of a playboy presented by the magazine were often consistent with stereotypes about men and included characteristics such as strength, power, intellect, and assertiveness. As we will show in more detail below, however, some characteristics attributed to playboys were consistent with stereotypes about women.

Subscription ads described *Playboy* and playboys in a variety of ways. A representative ad described *Playboy* as a “magazine that breaks the old taboos,” and implied *Playboy* readers were free-thinkers and courageous. Early subscription ads defined a playboy in relation to the characteristics of famous historic figures. In this way, the magazine basked in the reflected glory (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976) of these figures. One early ad was titled “Poor *Playboy’s Almanac*” and included a drawing of Ben Franklin. The accompanying text cited Franklin’s “Advice on the Choice of a Mistress” and suggested that *Playboy* was “published for fellows very much like Ben.” Another ad compared the *Playboy* reader to Moliere and defined a *Playboy* reader as “a man of good humor, with a broad mind and a great capacity for pleasure; a sophisticated man; an aware man; a man of taste.” Other ads drew parallels between *Playboy* readers and Johann Sebastian Bach and Izaak Walton. By comparing *Playboy* readers to these historic figures, the magazine allowed its readers to feel more positive about themselves.

Perhaps the most important ad in terms of our analysis of identity construction appeared in the April 1956 issue under the heading, “What is a Playboy?” A sketch of a man in a tweed jacket, cap, and smoking a cigarette accompanied the description. The copy of the ad was:

What is a Playboy? Is he simply a wastrel, a ne’er-do-well, a fashionable bum? Far from it: he can be a sharp-minded young business executive, a worker in the arts, a university professor, an architect or engineer. He can be many things, providing he possesses a certain point of view. He must see life not as a vale of tears, but as a happy time; he must take joy in his work, without regarding it as the end and all of living; he must be an alert man, an aware man, a man of taste, a man sensitive to pleasure, a man who—without acquiring the stigma of the voluptuary or dilettante—can live life to the hilt. This is the sort of man we mean when we use the word *playboy*.

The meaning of “playboy” conveyed in this ad directly challenged the dictionary definition. The dictionary does in fact provide a meaning for “playboy” akin to “wastrel” or “fashionable bum” and indicates the word has a stigmatizing connotation. This ad asserted a radically different meaning for the word, and suggested that a playboy was a highly skilled professional who successfully negotiated the thin line
between being a “lover of life” and a “waster of life.” According to the ad, a playboy managed to avoid the negative slant endemic to the word.

Note that this ad, as well as others, associated a number of additional characteristics with the playboy, such as alertness, good taste, and awareness, which are not present in the dictionary definition. Equating being sophisticated with being a playboy, absent from the dictionary definition, made the goal of being a playboy more attractive and desirable. In fact, one subscription ad, using the dictionary motif that appeared repeatedly in Playboy, defined the word “sophistication” in terms of being a Playboy reader. The June 1961 cover included the definition, “A sporty fellow bent upon pleasure seeking; a man-about-town; a lover of life; a *bon vivant*.”

**The Masculine Component of the Playboy Identity**

The masculine identity *Playboy* defined included a component that reflected existing stereotypes about men. Editorial features included coverage of automobiles, business, sports, and electronic equipment, standard topics of traditional interest to men. The “Playboy Advisor” also published letters that sometimes reinforced the stereotypic sentiments of men (Beggan et al., 2000).

The “What Sort of Man Reads Playboy?” ads presented a great deal of information about the appropriate masculine identity, as defined by *Playboy*. These ads often echoed themes about masculinity consistent with stereotypes about men’s characters. One ad described a *Playboy* reader as “A young man who knows where he’s going and how to make the best time getting there.” Another ad described the *Playboy* reader as “apt to make his move.” An ad set in a bookstore emphasized that *Playboy* readers were educated and had broad interests beyond romance and dating, a theme revisited by an ad that stressed *Playboy* readers were logical, adept thinkers. An ad that showed a man being measured for a suit emphasized that *Playboy* readers had the skills, drive, and ability to become social and business successes.

Most readers were no doubt pleased to see themselves associated with the sophisticated images presented in the “What Sort of Man Reads Playboy?” ads. One exception was Wayne Peterson, from Enderlin, North Dakota, who wrote, “... your readers are not always glamor-boy, cocktails-at-seven, gotta-beat-the-women-off-with-a-stick types. I could be wrong, but it is possible that more young men would buy *PLAYBOY* if you were to aim your campaign at Mr. Average a little more, instead of directing it at the young executive group.” The editorial response was, “There are plenty of magazines for Mr. Average, Wayne. *PLAYBOY* is edited for a special sort of guy—a bit above average in taste, education and income.”

Two early covers implied that adopting the tenets of *Playboy* could make a man more independent and stand out from the crowd. The November 1956 cover showed several cartoon men and women in an elevator. Among them were the Rabbit and his girlfriend. Only the Rabbit and his girlfriend had faces, and, by extension, identities. The other people on the elevator were faceless. This image appeared again on the May 1957 cover, where the Rabbit and his girlfriend were shown boarding a cruise ship, surrounded by faceless others.
INCORPORATING FEMININE ATTRIBUTES INTO THE MASCULINE IDEAL

As noted by Cox (1965), the editorial stance of Playboy implied that by adopting the philosophy advocated by the magazine, one would become a playboy. As we will argue in more detail below, Playboy successfully maintained that a portion of the recommended philosophy involved developing interests, abilities, and attributes traditionally associated with women without ever explicitly describing them as women’s attributes. Playboy’s accomplishment is surprising given the evidence (e.g., McCreary, 1994; O’Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986) that men reject gender-specific behaviors typically considered within the feminine domain, such as emotionality and sensitivity.

Playboy’s success in advocating an identity for men that incorporated traditionally feminine elements was due to framing these elements in terms of increasing one’s ability to succeed with women. Thus, a key to understanding the influence of Playboy is to recognize that the magazine suggested that the extremely heterosexual goal of sexual relations with women could be best accomplished by developing a decidedly feminine set of skills and attributes. In any context other than a glossy magazine filled with pictures of naked women, advocating the adoption of feminine ideals would be immediately suspect. The patina of female nudity, however, made the message immediately palatable because it incorporated the adoption of feminine values in the enactment of masculine values.

PLAYBOY’S INITIAL DIRECTION AND CONTENTS

Playboy magazine was founded on a shoestring budget. The contents of the first few issues represented Hugh Hefner’s vision of what he wanted limited by the reality that he had little money with which to purchase top-rate editorial material. Thus, the first few issues are a cruder version of what the magazine would quickly become. At the same time, however, the key elements appeared even in the first issue. Hefner’s editorial in the first issue was the initial contribution to defining a playboy. His editorial read:

IF YOU’RE A MAN between the ages of 18 and 80, PLAYBOY is meant for you. If you like your entertainment served up with humor, sophistication and spice, PLAYBOY will become a very special favorite.

We want to make clear from the very start, we aren’t a “family magazine.” If you’re somebody’s sister, wife or mother-in-law and picked us up by mistake, please pass us along to the man in your life and get back to your Ladies Home Companion.

Within the pages of Playboy you will find articles, fiction, picture stories, cartoons, humor and special features culled from many sources, past and present, to form a pleasure-primer styled to the masculine taste.

Most of today’s “magazines for men” spend all their time out-of-doors—thrashing through thorny thickets or splashing about in
fast flowing streams. We’ll be out there too, occasionally, but we
don’t mind telling you in advance—we plan on spending most of
our time inside.

We like our apartment. We enjoy mixing up cocktails and an
*hors d’oeuvre* or two, putting a little mood music on the phonograph, and
inviting in a female acquaintance for quiet discussion on
Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex.

We believe, too, that we are filling a publishing need only
slightly less important than the one just taken care of by the Kinsey Report. The
magazines now being produced for the city-bred male (there are 2—count ’em—2)
have, of late, placed so much emphasis on fashion, travel, and “how-to-do-it”
features on everything from avoiding a hernia to building your own steam bath that
entertainment has been all but pushed from their pages. *PLAYBOY*
will emphasize entertainment.

Affairs of state will be out of our province. We don’t expect to
solve any world problems or prove any great moral truths. If we
are able to give the American male a few extra laughs and a little
diversion from the anxieties of the Atomic Age, we’ll feel we’ve
justified our existence.

The tone set by this editorial positioned *Playboy* as distinct from other men’s
magazines and presented a view of men as indoor creatures who welcomed the
company of women and sought to engage them in discourse on topics ranging from
popular music to depressing and dark philosophy. The ideal setting for such
interaction was presented as a man’s apartment with the promise of somewhat exotic food
waiting in the background. The presumption was that the man, rather than the woman,
had prepared this food. Thus, from the initial issue, a tone was set to distance men
from the aggressive, hunter-gatherer image and push them toward a more nurturant
and homey, nest-building model.

In crafting his initial image of a playboy in his first issue editorial, Hugh Hefner
focused on several activities that would become staples of the magazine as it
evolved. Many of these activities *a priori* might be expected to appear in a women’s
magazine rather than a men’s magazine. It is interesting to note that the first issue
included a recipe for sob-sob rice and chicken and a layout on “desk design for the
modern office” written by a woman. Topics such as decorating and cooking might be
expected to appeal more to women than to men. They were interests consistent with
the woman’s traditional role as a wife and mother and could be viewed as reflecting
values such as sensitivity to style and nurturance.

An interest in conversation and an appreciation of the arts reflected the compas-
sion and sensitivity often associated with women. Moreover, the emphasis on the
importance of conversation focused on a skill that women are assumed to possess to
a greater degree than men (e.g., Tannen, 1990). In addition, the editorial implied that
a playboy would seek women who were intelligent and educated. It is interesting to
note that the physical appearance of the playboy’s female companions was left unde-
fined. Beauty, apparently, took a backseat to brains. These facets of Hugh Hefner’s
editorial and the magazine’s editorial content stand in stark contradiction to the view of the magazine held by social scientists and the lay public with regard to the philosophy of the publication.

An emphasis on cerebral, rather than physical, activity was reinforced in the first issue by the inclusion of an excerpt of a Sherlock Holmes story called “Introducing Sherlock Holmes.” Just as Hugh Hefner was introducing his conception of men to the world through his publication, the piece served to introduce Sherlock Holmes. The theme of the story was the self-creation of an identity. It is clear that Sherlock Holmes prides himself on his self-made identity as the world’s only “unofficial consulting detective,” just as Playboy readers would come to pride themselves on their playboy identities. Moreover, the reprint emphasized Sherlock Holmes’ prowess in mental rather than physical abilities. He is quoted as saying, “I cannot live without brainwork. What else is there to live for?”

As early as the second issue, subscription ads also drew attention to those aspects of the playboy that were inconsistent with stereotypes about men. In keeping with Hefner’s initial editorial, one subscription ad defined Playboy as a magazine styled for the tastes of the “city-bred male” who was concerned with “proper dress, food and drink, art, literature...” The ad positioned Playboy against other men’s magazines with “nothing on their minds but the great out-of-doors” and distanced Playboy readers from existing conceptualizations of men.

The modern Playboy magazine evolved rather quickly. The third issue had a humorous article on Brooks Brothers fashions. By the fifth issue, there was an article by Thomas Mario on the “pleasures of the oyster.” Service articles on fashion and cooking became regular features. On a surface level, these features were geared toward the goal of educating men about the skills they needed to become playboys. Some of the skills were decidedly masculine. Others, however, such as fashion and cooking, reflected feminine interests.

**Creation of the “Advisor” Column**

In 1958, Playboy published an amusing parody of the advice columns of Ann Landers and Abigail Van Buren. The parody consisted of real letters taken from their columns that were answered by a cold-hearted and insensitive bachelor. The response to the parody was so favorable, Playboy initiated a real advice column in the September 1960 issue. Its purpose was to answer “questions on a wide variety of topics of interest to the urban man—from fashion, food and drink, hi-fi and sports cars, to dating dilemmas, taste and etiquette.”

From its inception, the “Playboy Advisor” column promoted the values of sensitivity, compassion, and understanding in dealing with the complexity of the emotional components of sex and relationships (Beggan et al., 2000). A willingness and ability to adopt this perspective in dealing with emotional issues are unusual for men, given the influence of their gender-related role socialization (Levant & Kopecky, 1995/96). Although the editorial voice of the Advisor was definitely masculine, he personified a cluster of attributes more often associated with women rather than men. The Advisor’s responses were characterized by sensitivity to women’s perspectives. The Advisor argued against double-standards, encouraged men to be
thoughtful with regard to emotions, and published a significant number of letters from women that further permitted women to voice their own concerns in the pages of the magazine. In addition, the column’s anonymous nature promoted among male readers a willingness to discuss personal problems and to admit weakness and ignorance about topics that were considered areas of traditional male expertise. In other words, the Advisor prompted men to display the vulnerability that is more traditionally associated with women.

THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE RABBIT

In the first issue of *Playboy*, the Rabbit appeared on the party jokes page and as a symbol to indicate the end of each article. In the second issue, he made his first cover appearance, as a cartoon-like figure standing next to two beauty contestants. In the eighth issue, his appearance on the party jokes page was changed so that he looked more urbane. Although the Rabbit was initially created as a male symbol, he has developed a complex identity that is highly interconnected with women.

The magazine’s covers document the many different ways in which the Rabbit has been represented over the years. It is possible to speculate whether there is a single Rabbit, with many facets to his character, or perhaps there are many Rabbits, each with different properties. One characterization of the Rabbit is as the reification of *Playboy* values in a non-human but corporeal form. In this identity, he served as a romantic escort for women and modeled the ideal characteristics of the playboy. See Figure 1 for an example of such a representation. The portrayal of the Rabbit as a desirable date for women is repeated in a number of covers. The September 1955 cover showed a faux newspaper with a story on the Rabbit written up as a socialite. The article described him as a bon vivant, sportsman, gourmet, raconteur, and playboy. The cover also showed two theatre tickets and gloves resting on the newspaper. The overall impression was that the Rabbit was attending the theatre that evening and had just seen, or was about to see, the newspaper article on himself. On the November 1955 cover, a lovely co-ed had carved a Rabbit head into a tree trunk. She was clearly in love with the Rabbit.

The September 1956 cover is especially useful in understanding the incarnation of the Rabbit as a real entity. It suggested that there really was a Rabbit, named Playboy, who frequently dated human women and possessed the attributes of the perfect playboy. The cover showed a photo album with pictures of the Rabbit engaged in vacation activities, such as golfing and biking. One photograph showed the Rabbit standing next to a beautiful woman. In the lower right-hand corner of the cover was a letter in a woman’s handwriting that provided a context for the pictures. The salutation implied that the Rabbit in the photograph was named “Playboy.” The text of the letter made it clear that the woman had spent her vacation with Playboy and thinks fondly about the pictures that document that vacation. In this context, it is interesting to note that the Rabbit has never been represented as a real rabbit. We feel the failure to present the Rabbit in this manner is because the Rabbit represents an anthropomorphized construction of the masculine ideal.

In another conceptualization, the Rabbit acts like a “familiar,” a spirit often in animal form charged to attend, serve, or guard a person. In this case, the guarded
person is the *Playboy* reader. There is a dramatic tradition for a rabbit to act as a supernatural conduit to a better, more special world. Consider, for example, the giant white rabbit who is Jimmy Stewart’s companion in the movie *Harvey*. A white rabbit also served as the impetus for Alice to travel down the rabbit hole to Wonderland. The association between a rabbit and Easter, a holiday that celebrates rebirth, is consistent with the notion that the Rabbit served as a means to a better place.

In the role of familiar, the Rabbit’s identity manifests itself in a symbolic fashion. He was an artful bend in a telephone cord on the March 1961 cover. On the July 1958 cover, the Rabbit appeared stylized in a woman’s bathing suit. In June 1962, the Rabbit appeared as a knot in a bikini bottom. In February 1963, the Rabbit appeared as a glint in a champagne glass. In these covers, the Rabbit’s spirit exists even without a bodily manifestation. He is a guardian angel whose presence guarantees that festivities will transpire in a fashion consistent with the *Playboy* lifestyle.

Another identity illustrated by covers is the Rabbit as the outgrowth of women. The idea that women should contribute to the manifestation of the Rabbit is consis-
tent with the biological reality that women give birth, and, as a result, men do owe their existence to women. Moreover, the theme of a woman as earth mother and creator runs through the mythologies of many modern and ancient cultures (Campbell, 1968). Covers that highlight the contributions of women in the display of the Rabbit take at least two forms: transformational and creational. In transformational covers, a woman creates the Rabbit by presenting his key features. The most striking example of this category is the May 1964 cover that showed Playmate of the Year Donna Michelle in a white leotard, her body twisted into the shape of the Rabbit. Her legs formed the Rabbit’s ears and her torso formed his head (see Figure 2). On the August 1962 cover, a woman in a bathing cap is shown in a pool of water. Her reflection in the water forms the shape of the Rabbit. In the July 1955 issue, the Rabbit appeared as a non-suntanned portion of a woman’s back. These transformational covers imply that women have strongly contributed to the make-up of the Rabbit characterization.

Figure 2. An example of a transformational cover.
The importance of women in defining the Rabbit is also revealed in covers that show women creating the Rabbit with a conscious effort to invoke his presence. As early as February 1955, the Rabbit was shown as being crafted by women, in this instance from snow. In April 1955 the creation theme was revisited in a cover showing a woman making Rabbit paper dolls. This cover is reproduced as Figure 3. The Rabbit has been incarnated as a clay sculpture shaped by a woman artist on the March 1959 cover. Janet Pilgrim drew him in a steamed window on the December 1955 cover. A similar cover appeared in October 1963. The Rabbit has been shown as a shadow created from the arrangement of a woman’s fingers on the May 1959 cover and the September 1963 cover. On the October 1959 cover, a woman was shown playing connect-the-dots. The dots, of course, create the Rabbit. Thus, the Rabbit was often shown owing his existence to the effort of women to craft him.

On the creation-oriented and transformational covers, the Rabbit—the symbol of *Playboy*—merged the masculine identity with the feminine identity and reinforced the magazine’s underlying message that the masculine ideal should contain a feminine component. Given that the Rabbit has been created by or from the essence of
women, it would follow that his character would be consistent with women’s desires in a companion. These attributes would be expected to include both stereotypic male characteristics, as well as non-stereotypic attributes such as gentleness and supportiveness (e.g., Buss, 1989; Sprecher et al., 1994). In other words, removed from the metaphor of the Rabbit, women were consistently shown contributing to the development of the masculine identity. The portrayal of the Rabbit on the covers was therefore consistent with service features of the magazine that emphasized the importance of learning to behave in a manner congruent with the desires and values of women. Moreover, covers that demonstrated the Rabbit’s success with women sent a clear message concerning the utility of the Rabbit’s strategy. By adopting the magazine’s recommendations, the reader chiseled an identity as a playboy, in the process, became Rabbit-like, and was granted the opportunity to emulate the Rabbit’s achievements with women.

WHY THE RABBIT WAS THE PERFECT CHOICE

There are several reasons why the Rabbit was the perfect choice as the symbol for Playboy magazine. First, on a pragmatic level, a cute, furry, and defenseless animal served as a suitable foil to many critics who charged that the magazine was too sexually explicit. Although tame by today’s standards, the early issues of Playboy occasionally pushed into the forefront of First Amendment issues. The Post Office, for example, tried to prevent Hugh Hefner from having a preferred mailing status on the grounds that the magazine was pornographic. The Rabbit symbol most likely softened the impression conveyed by the magazine.

Because the Rabbit is non-human, his presence and success with women, as typified by contexts created on the covers, did not represent a threat to the male readers of the magazine. The reader was not competing directly with the Rabbit for the affection of women. Rather, the Rabbit served as a mirror in which each reader was able to see his own reflection. In addition, the use of the Rabbit may have diverted some attention from Hugh Hefner as an object of invidious comparison. The typical reader, without the money, the magazine, or the mansion would be unable to attain Hefner’s playboy status.

The idea that the Rabbit permitted male readers to imagine themselves immersed in the Playboy lifestyle is reinforced by noting the minimal role played by men on cover illustrations. When men did appear, they did so as cartoon figures and body parts. The first instance of a man’s appearance on a cover was the July 1956 issue. The picture showed a cartoon drawing of a man’s wrist and hand carrying a suitcase. The implication was that he was going on an extensive world tour and intended to visit a number of beautiful women along the way. The Rabbit was manifested as an image on his cuff link. On the April 1958 cover, a man’s hand, again with a Rabbit head cuff link, placed a bet on a roulette table. In September 1958, the Rabbit appeared as a tie tack against the background of a man’s shirt. On the December 1959 cover, a man’s arm, wearing a Rabbit cuff link, was shown, along with two women’s arms, toasting the New Year. On the May 1960 issue, a woman was shown putting a flower in a man’s jacket lapel. On the May 1961 cover, a man’s hands
JAMES K. BEGGAN AND SCOTT T. ALLISON

appeared, with the Rabbit shown as a ring on the man’s hands. On the October 1961 cover, a man’s legs were shown. In July 1962, a man’s leg in pajamas was shown.

We have conceptualized the Rabbit as a means by which men were encouraged to adopt traditionally feminine values. The Rabbit also served as a way in which men were able to imagine themselves within the drape of the Playboy lifestyle. By associating the Rabbit with the outward signs of masculine success, the magazine was able to deftly sidestep the incongruity associated with representing masculinity by so obviously feminine a symbol. In doing so, the magazine was able to embed a message concerning the importance of adopting feminine values.

THE CREATION OF THE FEMALE RABBIT: THE BIRTH OF THE BUNNY

The idea that Playboy merged masculine with feminine identities in the construction of a male ideal is perhaps best represented by invention of the Playboy Bunny to work in the Playboy Clubs. In a manifestation as cocktail waitresses, the Rabbit icon—a masculine symbol with feminine attributes—metamorphosed into a female icon with masculine attributes.

A number of the most important features of the Playboy mythology evolved by the operation of fortuitous circumstances. The initiation of the Advisor column resulted from the positive response that a parody of advice columns received. Likewise, development of the Playboy Clubs occurred as the direct result of a story the magazine ran on “Gaslight” clubs in the November 1956 issue. In these clubs, waitresses wearing bust-enhancing costumes said to be inspired by gay nineties fashions served members food and drinks. According to Miller (1984), when over three thousand readers wrote in asking about how they could join a gaslight club, Playboy employee Victor Lownes hypothesized that many more readers would be willing to join a Playboy Club.

The Playboy Club was first mentioned in the January 1960 issue. The Club was described in glowing terms as “an attempt to project the plush and romantic mood of the magazine into a private club of good fellows interested in the better, more pleasurable aspects of life.... It will have the warmth, the intimacy, and the fun of a private cocktail party....” The article also implied that membership would be selective. “The limited membership will be drawn from the most aware and affluent group in each community,” the article stated. Of course, in reality, members were accepted as long as they paid their fee.

An immediate problem was deciding what the cocktail waitresses would wear (Miller, 1984). Initially, the idea of dressing the waitresses to represent the Rabbit symbol was rejected on the grounds that the Rabbit was male and the cocktail waitresses would be female. But after seeing how attractive a woman could look in a prototype costume, the decision to use the Rabbit image was made. In an attempt to distinguish the masculine and feminine constructions of the Rabbit, the cocktail waitresses were dubbed “bunnies” whereas the symbol that appeared on covers was typically referred to as a “rabbit.” In the March 1986 issue, “The World of Playboy” described Playboy’s Empire Club and noted that it would be staffed by both Bunnies and Rabbits (“boy Bunnies”), but the Empire Club appears to have been a short-lived
phenomenon, and the Rabbits had a short life-span.

A story on the first Playboy Club, which opened in Chicago, appeared in the August 1960 issue. Bunnies were introduced as “invitingly attired in brightly colored rabbit costumes, complete to the ears and white cottontails.” The initial costume was essentially a one-piece bathing suit made of a satiny-like material with a built-in corset but did not include the bow tie or French cuffs that became a part of the classic Playboy Bunny outfit. The bow tie and cuffs further blended the male and female aspects of the Rabbit identity. By April 1963, when a Bunny appeared on the cover of Playboy with tie and cuffs, the merger of male and female was completed.

It is important to note a conceptual relationship between the Playboy Club and the magazine’s brief but initial incarnation as Stag Party. In terms of identity construction, the shift in name from Stag Party to Playboy carried with it a shift in focus from a collectivity of men interacting in a homosocial environment to an individual, that is, a single playboy. Less than ten years after Playboy was conceived, the Playboy Club represented a shift from the individual back to the collective. Having carefully defined a masculine ideal, it was only logical that this army of playboys should be free to interact with each other in an environment sanctioned by Playboy. The Playboy Club was a place where men sympathetic to Playboy ideals would be able to interact. In other words, having created a new kind of man—the playboy—Hefner attempted to create a site where they could engage in fraternal bonding. The bonding would not haphazardly reflect the naturally occurring processes that take place in homosocial settings. Rather, it would be regulated carefully and reflect the motives of the magazine. In the August 1960 article, there was a stern warning about one’s membership entitlements. The fifty-dollar initial fee would provide lifetime membership as long as the member “broke none of the club rules.” Courtesy of Playboy, there was a party going on, only now it was a Playboy party, and one that was laid out according to the parameters developed in the magazine.

Readers’ responses to the article on the Chicago Playboy Club were printed in the November 1960 issue of the magazine. Not surprisingly, the tone of the published letters was highly favorable and enthusiastic. One letter, from Lt. Leon M. Costanten, of the 4th Psychological Warfare Co., Fort Bragg North Carolina, was particularly insightful. He wrote, “It is, I feel, the inner desire of all males to be of a ‘playboy nature.’” He added that the creation of the Playboy Club permitted modern men to express this playboy nature.

Women in Control of the Rabbit: Who’s in Charge Here?

Although most critics of Playboy (e.g., D’Emilio & Freedman, 1997; Dworkin, 1988; Ehrenreich, 1983; May, 1969; MacKinnon, 1986) have suggested or implied that Playboy presents an image of women as subservient to men, we have argued that some imagery in the magazine actually reversed this power relationship. According to our interpretation, the magazine was a guidebook for the reader about how to develop an arsenal of skills and attributes that would make him attractive to women. Thus, the needs, desires, and demands of women serve as the underlying
and primary motivator of men reading the magazine. This perspective on the construction of the masculine ideal indicates that women in the *Playboy* world were afforded significantly more power than is generally recognized by social critics.*

*Playboy* is seen by social critics (e.g., Brownmiller, 1991; Ewing, 1995) as antithetical to the interests of women as a whole. In this paper, we have argued in favor of an alternative perspective. We suggest that *Playboy* has advanced the goals of women by encouraging men to adopt a masculine ideal that incorporates some of the values and desires of women. Despite the overt emphasis on the nude pictorials, the subtext contained within *Playboy* magazine was in favor of blending the characters of men and women.

The magazines’ covers often showed images of women as creators of the Rabbit. Just as women can be seen as creators of the Rabbit, they can also be seen as creators of *Playboy* and the playboys it spawned. To the extent that the Rabbit symbolized the masculine ideal of the playboy, the message was that men owed their identity to the values of women, just as the Rabbit owed his existence to the intervention of women. In the world of *Playboy*, the goodwill of women is the primary reinforcer for men. Rather than serve as trophies, as critics (e.g., May, 1969) have suggested, however, women serve as arbiters of taste.

The thesis of the present paper is that *Playboy* encouraged men to adopt the characteristics, traits, and abilities of women. Although outside the scope of the present article, it is interesting to examine the degree to which the magazine also encouraged women to expand the boundaries of their self-conceptions. Scholars (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991) have considered the way in which unrealistic media images have a deleterious effect on women’s body images. We have shown (Beggan et al., 2000) that women’s letters published in the “Advisor” column contained information that was inconsistent with stereotypes about women. Were stereotypes about women contradicted in other features of the magazine? If so, could this stereotype-inconsistent information help women develop more complex and favorable representations of themselves and other women? Such questions could serve as the basis for future scholarly efforts with regard to *Playboy* magazine.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Mass media are one way in which stereotypes about men and women are maintained in our culture (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; Richins, 1991; Wolf, 1991). These stereotypes are often deeply ingrained in the assumptive framework that provides a backdrop for communications within a medium. Stereotype-consistent images can be expected to have a reliable influence on perceivers (Cash & Henry, 1995; Signorielli, 1989; Rudman & Borgia, 1995; Wiseman et al., 1992).

Our analysis is premised on an alternative perspective. We have suggested that a medium that appears to transmit a message consistent with a stereotype may, in fact, generate meanings that advocate renunciation of that stereotype. *Playboy* magazine is often presented as the prototype of a mass medium that has contributed to the maintenance of stereotypes about men and women (e.g., Ehrenreich, 1983). A number of scholars (e.g., Brod, 1988; Dworkin, 1988; May, 1969) have further argued that *Playboy* maintains misogynistic views of women. In our analysis, we have pre-
sented and provided support for an antithetical position. Playboy magazine opposed stereotyping by encouraging men to adopt a masculine identity that incorporated a number of attributes more strongly associated with women than with men. This perspective is provocative given the assertion by scholars (e.g., Blazina, 1997) that men fear and attempt to disown the feminine component of their own identities.

We have found that the magazine did not relegate women to a subordinate status. Rather, it actually gave them a significant amount of authority by advocating their values, by suggesting that men incorporate key feminine attributes into their own identities, and by implying that men should conform to women’s preferences. We do not deny that some material contained in Playboy could be construed as sexist (e.g., Brooks, 1995). Rather, we are asserting a complementary perspective. That is, at least some material contained in the magazine was actively non-sexist and opposed, rather than affirmed, stereotypes about both men and women (e.g., Beggar et al., 2000). Moreover, we suggest that Playboy’s ability to effect change in the beliefs of its male readers may stem in part from its appearance as a stronghold of masculine values.

We can reconcile our perspective with the contradictory positions of other scholars by recognizing certain facts about scholarship with regard to Playboy magazine. First, other work on Playboy has not always found results consistent with expected sex stereotyping. For example, an analysis of centerfolds failed to reveal evidence of objectification of women (Bogaert, Turkovich, & Hafer, 1993). Second, much of the scholarly work on Playboy has focused on graphics, such as the centerfolds (e.g., Harris, Fine, & Hood, 1992; Rich & Cash, 1993) and cartoons (e.g., Bradley, Boles, & Jones, 1979). It is not clear how conclusions drawn from analyses of graphics might relate to conclusions drawn from text features. Finally, scholarship focused on the editorial content of the magazine (e.g., Ehrenreich, 1983; Knuf, 1994; Matacin & Burger, 1987) has tended to examine only a small subset of available data. We know of no other researchers who have used as much of the editorial content of the magazine as the basis for their analysis as we have in the present work.

There is evidence that a minority perspective may be able to sway a majority opinion (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969). Minorities are most successful as influence agents if their messages are varied in content but consistent in ideology. It may prove insightful to interpret Playboy magazine in terms of an analysis based on how minorities can be influential (Moscovici, 1985). The magazine presented an ideologically consistent message to men to adopt the values of women from multiple perspectives. Features such as the “Advisor” column permitted both men and women to provide their views on a wide range of issues relevant to stereotype disconfirmation (Beggar et al., 2000). The complex message sent by the Rabbit symbol and the Rabbit’s role in defining the relationship between men and women contradicted stereotypes about men. Hugh Hefner’s installments of the “Playboy Philosophy” that appeared in the early 1960s and the Playboy “Forum” promoted central processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981) about social and political issues. In sum, then, a number of distinct voices in the magazine promoted a coherent and unified message with a theme that affirmed the importance of the values of women. It is reasonable to assume that at least some readers found this perspective challenging to their belief systems and processed the information systematically. Their attempts to assimilate it,
and the fact that it originated from Playboy magazine, might have led to permanent attitude change on the parts of these readers, with a general softening of reliance on stereotypic representations as the basis for self-definitions.

It would be interesting to explore the extent to which the magazine’s content might have had a lasting influence on its readers. On the basis of our analysis, we would expect that men who read Playboy consistently would differ in their self-concepts relative to men who did not. Specifically, Playboy readers would be expected to score differently than non-readers on assessments of their degree of masculinity and femininity. Playboy readers might be more likely to score as “androgynous” (Bem, 1974), that is, score high on both masculine and feminine personality characteristics, rather than sex-typed as masculine. In addition to differences in personality characteristics, differences might be obtained with regard to Playboy readers being more “pro-feminine” than non-readers, both in terms of expressed attitudes about and behaviors toward women. A third prediction is based on evidence that women desire attributes in a mate that relate to nurturance and kindness (e.g., Buss, 1989; Sprecher et al., 1994), that is, what would typically be considered feminine traits. It is possible, then, that the wives of Playboy readers might view their spouses as better husbands, relative to the wives of Playboy non-readers.

Typically, in research on minority influence (e.g., Clark, & Maass, 1990), the majority and minority opinions are represented by distinct groups. What is unique about interpreting Playboy from the literature on minority influence is that in this instance, Playboy served dual roles as the majority opinion and a minority perspective embedded within that majority opinion. A minority’s influence may be derived from its ability to promote systematic information processing (Mackie, 1987) and subsequent creative thinking (Mucchi-Faina, Maass, & Volpato, 1991) among majority members. Given Playboy’s status as representative of the majority, i.e., masculine, opinion, the magazine might be expected to be an especially effective change agent for stereotyping because anti-sexist statements would appear to run counter to the magazine’s dominant viewpoint and be likely to promote cognitive processing. In other words, from an attributional perspective (e.g., Kelley, 1967), the magazine would be a credible source (Clark & Maass, 1988) and its messages would be especially influential in altering the attitudes of majority group members, i.e., men.

The spirit of our argument is consistent with much of the work on the reduction of prejudice (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969; Stephan, 1987), which is based on the premise that stereotyping becomes less likely as in-group members learn more about out-group members. In our analysis, we suggest that, although women may be lower in power and status in our culture compared to men, through the male-dominated communication medium of Playboy magazine, the interests and values of women were given expression. In this instance, selected representatives, i.e., the editorial staff, articulated a position sympathetic to the interests of women, even in an environment that would appear primed to develop a high degree of group cohesion within the context of male fraternal bonding (Curry, 1991; Hood, 1995; Katz, 1995).

The questions raised by the present work serve as intriguing hypotheses that could be tested using experimental or quasi-experimental methods. Evidence supportive of these hypotheses would be very interesting, given the arguments (e.g., Brooks, 1995; Dworkin, 1988; Hill, 1987) that the consumption of Playboy maga-
zine should contribute to the development of negative attitudes toward women. There is some reason to expect our hypothesized pattern of results, given that recent investigations (e.g., Barak, Fisher, Belfry, & Lastambe, 1999; Davies, 1997; Jansma, Linz, Mulac, & Imrich, 1997) have failed to find evidence of a negative relationship between consumption of pornography and attitudes toward women. Evidence that reading *Playboy* magazine contributes to the development of more favorable attitudes toward women would reinforce the need to develop a better understanding of the potentially very complex effects of sexually explicit material on thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

Although potentially very interesting, it is important to note that any research that attempted to test for relationships between reading *Playboy* and psychological attributes of *Playboy* readers would be correlational in nature and subject to interpretive difficulties. For example, even if *Playboy* readers are shown to possess less stereotyped views of women, it would be impossible to determine whether reading *Playboy* was a cause of these views. It is possible, for instance, that a third variable might be responsible for both the tendency to read *Playboy* and to possess less stereotyped views of women. At the same time, however, beginning such a line of inquiry could prove fruitful in better understanding how men come to see themselves, and women, as a function of the media to which they are exposed.

We have restricted our analysis of *Playboy* magazine to its first ten years of publication. Our reason for imposing this limitation is that in its early incarnations, the magazine was an unknown quantity. As a result, the editorial staff was free to define the magazine as it chose. This identification process was novel and less subject to a self-consciousness that would have developed as the magazine came under greater and greater scrutiny from sources such as the press, scholars, and the lay public.

It is interesting to speculate about the influence of *Playboy* magazine on men in our current society. On the one hand, *Playboy* magazine, although viewed as the grandfather of men’s magazines, may be seen as less influential. By current standards set by other men’s publications, such as *Penthouse* or *Hustler*, *Playboy* is rather tame. At the same time, however, it is important to note that by remaining aloof from other men’s magazines, *Playboy* may be able to maintain its position as a source of identity definition for men.

The central mission of *Playboy* is not to present sexual images. Rather, its mission is to present images of a masculine ideal. This goal remains in force even in the year 2000. In a recent analysis of *Playboy*’s attempt to become a presence on the Internet, company spokeswoman Martha Lindeman was quoted describing the *Playboy* site as, “... a lifestyle and entertainment site” (Koerner, 2000, p. 42). The main focus of the Internet site was described as concerned with “travel and nightlife and gaming and what’s going on on campus, rather than pure sex-slash-eroticica” (Koerner, 2000, p. 42). Given the greater ambiguity about appropriate roles that can be adopted by both men and women in our modern culture, it seems as if the need for some assistance in ways to best define the masculine ideal still exists.

It is possible to argue that although *Playboy* was in some ways sympathetic to the position of women, its attempts to become the defenders of women represented an unnecessarily paternalistic approach that would have reinforced stereotypes of women as the helpless, weaker sex. We disagree with this position because the mag-
azine did not only attempt to give value to a feminine perspective, it also gave women the opportunity to speak in their own voices. It is important to recognize that outlets for women developed relatively early in the history of the magazine in what appears to be a natural, evolutionary process. The “Playboy Advisor” column regularly published letters from women. A great many of these letters asserted positions that contradicted stereotypes about women (Beggan et al., 2000). Moreover, the magazine has published many articles and stories by women. Thus, in sum, it can be argued that Playboy achieved an ironic and unexpected goal that has been ignored by prior social critics of the magazine. The magazine should actually be conceptualized as a source for women’s perspectives.

REFERENCES


369


