

All a black woman needs is great sex and a sexy body: themes in True Love magazine cover lines

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Abstract

Drawing on social constructivism (Vygotsky 1978), and Stuart Hall's (1997 & 2003) representation theories, the purpose of this article is to examine themes of black femininity presented on the cover lines in the 12 front covers of South African *True Love* magazine published between June 2015 and May 2016. Moreover, Galician's myths (Galician 2004) are used to analyse the themes of sex, love and romance that are featured on the covers. A combination of social semiotic analysis (Hodge & Kress 1988; Van Leeuwen 2005) and qualitative content analysis of 83 cover lines published in the 12 issues was conducted to explore the themes used to construct and represent black women. The findings revealed that the cover lines provided a narrow range of discourses of black femininity. The pivotal themes centred on notions of good sex and a beautiful body. The underlying messages were that a desirable body is an asset that can get a woman very far in life and it is associated with sexual fulfilment. The cover lines tended to give instructions on establishing and maintaining healthy romantic relationships such as that a woman should look like a model or celebrity in order to attract male attention. Overall, the texts promoted unrealistic sex expectations and glamorous looks that are near impossible for an average *True Love* reader to attain.

Keywords: black women, bodily appearance, cover lines, sex, women's magazines, *True Love*.

Introduction

'All you need is love' the Beatles crooned half a century ago. But love is passé and so 1960s, particularly if you're black and happen to be a woman. In the third millennium, the English rock stars couldn't have been more wrong because most of the *True Love* magazine cover lines published between June 2015 and May 2016 talk about sex and give tips on achieving a

beautiful sexy body and seem to suggest that ‘all a black woman needs is great sex and a sexy body’. Media messages such as cover lines influence the reader’s world view, that is, the way they see themselves and the world around them (Gauntlett 2008, 1). Conversely, the values and ideals of community members shape and influence the content that is published in a magazine such as *True Love*. From the above argument it is apparent that *True Love* cover lines can play an agenda setting role and in some instances serve as a mirror that reflects back to society.

Before delving deeper to explore the above claims, I would like to point out that in this article the term ‘black women’ is used to refer to a diverse population of black African women, in terms of economic status, age, ethnic group, sexual orientation and social class, who have a shared historical reality of structural oppression (Few, Stephens & Rouse-Arnett 2003, 206). The issue of representation of black women has been a subject of many studies, however, most tend to focus mainly on the depiction of black women in diaspora (Patton 2006, Pinho 2006; Tate 2007; Bellinger 2007; Capodilupo & Kim 2014 & Versey 2014); hence, research on the representation of black women in the African context is limited (Etemesi 2007; Jere-Malanda 2014 & Masina 2010). This article, which focuses on the representation of black women in South African *True Love* magazine is an attempt to fill in that gap. This particular publication has been chosen because it is primarily targeted at black women and features mainly black women on its covers. The article focuses on black women because historically they have been and continue to be marginalised under patriarchal and racial systems in South Africa (Mabokela & Mawila 2004, 397; McKay & de la Rey 2006, McKay 2013). *True Love* is available online, therefore the stories about black South African women can be accessed by international audiences. It is therefore important to examine how black women are represented to the world. This article focuses on the cover lines in the 12 issues of *True Love* published between June 2015 and May 2016.

Theoretically, this research is informed by social constructivism and Stuart Hall’s (1997 & 2003:15) representation theory, which is divided into three approaches, reflective, intentional and constructionist. A social constructivist view assumes that reality is socially constructed when human beings interact with each other and the world they live in. To borrow from McQuail (2002, 57), magazine cover lines represent the fears, hopes and fantasies of its readers. From a social constructivist perspective, I argue that media messages such as cover lines may influence readers consciously or subconsciously. I therefore contend that the way black women are represented in *True Love* cover lines may shape the community’s perceptions of them and

also affect their status in society. Bourdieu's (1986) notion of forms of capital, particularly cultural capital explains how a group's status in society is asserted through the power accorded to it by social, cultural and historical factors. Furthermore, media texts like cover lines play an ideological role in society and are likely to impact the way black women negotiate and form their identities.

Drawing on Hall's (1997 & 2003) representation theory, I contend that cover lines do not only reflect reality but construct and re-represent reality by including and omitting certain topics and themes because representation entails highlighting certain aspects of reality while ignoring others (Croteau and Hoynes 1997, 134). This shows that representation is linked to power and has an ideological component. Howarth (2006:22) argues that there are hegemonic and oppositional constructions of reality. On the one hand, hegemonic representations are often widely circulated while on the other hand, oppositional representations tend to be less circulated. Furthermore, borrowing from the constructionist approach to representation, which focuses on the social aspect of representation, I contend that things do not mean; rather meaning is constructed by members of the society (Hall 1997:25). To put it in another way, the members of a society use their cultural and linguistic systems to construct meaning (Hall 1997:25). The constructionist approach acknowledges that there is a mediated relationship between the material world, conceptual images and language.

This article also employs Mary-Lou Galician's (2004) myths (statements presented in quiz format) to de-mythify the stereotypes on the covers that may cultivate unrealistic expectations and dissatisfaction with *True Love* readers' real-life romantic relationships. In her book *Sex, love and romance in the mass media: analysis and criticism of unrealistic portrayals and their influence*, Mary-Lou Galician, presents the 12 myths and stereotypes of Galician's Dr. FUN!'s Mass Media Love Quiz© and proposes Dr. Galician Prescription (R), which explores the myths and stereotypes about sex, love and romance perpetuated by the media (Galician 2004). In this article four Galician myths (1, 4, 5 and 6) are used to identify and evaluate *True Love* covers' mythic and stereotypical portrayals of sex, love and romance, however, Galician tends to focus mainly on heterosexual relationships in Western culture thereby advancing heteronormativity and Western values as the norm. To counter this limitation, Hall's (1997) representation and social constructivism theories are brought in to explore how power, class and patriarchal ideology impact representations of black femininity, gender, romance and sex on *True Love* covers.

Methodologically, this article employs social semiotics to identify the semiotic resources, those ‘actions and artefacts we use to communicate’ (Van Leeuwen 2005, 3) and uses qualitative content analysis to uncover themes that feature prominently on the cover lines. All the 83 cover lines that featured on the 12 covers under purview were coded to identify the types of framing used. Qualitative content analysis is suitable for analysing textual data because it provides tools for identifying and describing the discourses that are promoted in these texts. On the other hand, social semiotics allows for delving deeper to uncover the motivations behind such portrayals and impact they may have on society. Social semiotics also examines how signs are used to construct meanings in society (Lemke 1990, 183), hence, allows for situating signs and messages within the context of social relations and processes (Hodge & Kress 1988).

Overview of *True Love* covers

True Love was founded in 1972 as a South African men’s magazine and relaunched in 1984 as a woman’s magazine. Running under the tagline ‘all a woman needs’, which seems to capture the publication’s editorial identity, the glossy magazine covers fashion, beauty, food, health and well-being. Most of this content is produced in-house but a significant percentage is sourced from syndication.

True Love covers use both visual and verbal text, and specifically uses a single image of a celebrity and many cover lines. The number of cover lines varies per issue; during the period of study a minimum of six and maximum of nine were featured on each cover. In total, 83 cover lines were published on the 12 covers. *True Love*, like other women’s magazines, mainly features women on the covers; during the period covered by this article, only one cover featured a man and a woman. The only exception featuring a couple suggests that they were topical at that particular time. The image of the couple is possibly used as a tool to boost the magazine’s sales and to refresh the magazine by breaking the monotony of having only one celebrity on the cover. *True Love* staff also tries to adapt in line with international trends and standards that are promoted at Design Indabas and Design Awards (*True Love* design team 2016). For instance, pairing male and female celebrities or putting many celebrities on the cover is a formula that is used by many publications, especially in the US, where the *Vanity Fair* March 2013 issue featuring Ben Affleck, Emma Stone and Bradley Cooper sold 274,987 and “the trio of Michelle Williams, Rachel Weisz and Mila Kunis performed best for *InStyle*, selling 585,282” (Maza 2013).

Noteworthy is that the 12 issues under question featured women from the entertainment industry, mainly soap opera actresses, because the team believes that television appeals to many people (*True Love* design team 2016). This resonates with Sumner and Rhoades' (2006, 50) observation that 'movie stars and entertainers sell better than politicians, business leaders, or sports celebrities'.

The picture on the cover is very important as many people tend to recall the image and the name of the person who was featured (Johnson & Christ 1995, 216). However, the pithy, catchy phrases framing the main picture are also important in reflecting and articulating *True Love* readers' aspirational identities. *True Love* uses an 'integrated' cover, wherein visual and verbal texts have a symbiotic, mutually supportive relationship. The discourses on the cover lines are influenced by both local and international dynamics since the cover lines are drawn from both locally produced stories and from international syndicated features. International stories and fashion and beauty trends are localised and become part of the narratives about black South African women. However, although *True Love* draws on international publications, it does not feature international celebrities or white women; rather, it uses images of famous local black women mainly from the entertainment industry and 'make them look international' (*True Love* design team 2016).

The positioning and size of the cover lines is crucial as it determines the primary and secondary texts, hence, the largest cover line usually accompanies the cover image and story. The main cover lines appear to represent black women in positive light with some focussing on celebrities who are coming from bad situations and have overcome and rebuilt or are in the process of rebuilding their lives. During the 12 months under study, the magazine featured recovering drug addicts (Figures 5 and 7), and women dealing with break-ups from loved ones (Figures 2, 10 and 11). However, drawing on social semiotics and delving deeper it becomes apparent that some of the representations are not quite favourable as the black female celebrities are hypersexualised and cast as dependent on men although they are successful in their own right. My findings resonate with Govender, Rawjee and Govender's (2014, 2282) observation that in *Drum* and *You* women's achievements are often downplayed and trivialised.



Figure 1: Phuti Khomo, cover of *True Love*, June 2015.



Figure 2: Bonnie Mbuli, cover of *True Love*, July 2015.



Figure 3: Denise Zimba, cover of *True Love*, August 2015.



Figure 4: Nomzamo and Maps, cover of *True Love*, September 2015.



Figure 5: Kelly Khumalo, cover of *True Love*, October 2015.



Figure 6: Thando Thabethe, cover of *True Love*, November 2015.



Figure 7: Khanyi Mbau, cover of *True Love*, December 2015.



Figure 8: Bessie Kumalo, cover of *True Love*, January 2016.



Figure 9: Pearl Thusi, cover of *True Love*, February 2016.



Figure 10: Manaka Ranaka, cover of *True Love*, March 2016.

The categories employed for this article were developed from analysing all the cover lines and identifying themes and thereafter the data was categorised under each theme. The themes that were identified are sex, relationships, fashion, beauty, diet, career, health, exercise, and finance. Although the cover lines feature different subjects, the content analysis of the 83 cover lines revealed that they mainly focus on sex, fashion, beauty and diets as if to suggest that black women are primarily preoccupied with these topics. The following sections explore in more detail how these *True Love* cover lines themes construct and represent black African women. It is important to note that although the themes are discussed under different subheads, they are intertwined since all of them are framed and defined through sex and physical appearance.

Sex and romantic relationships

One of the prominent themes that run through the 12 covers is that sex is important to a woman. Most of the cover lines that fall under this category have sexual, relationship and romantic implications. A few cover lines highlight forms of human relationships other than heterosexual romantic relationships. These reflect pertinent issues affecting black women in South Africa, for example, love children ('He made the other woman pregnant: will you accept his love child') and the challenges of being a single mother (Figure 9), divorce (Figure 2), break up (Figure 11), drug abuse (Figure 5) and dealing with death of a loved one (Figure 6). All the cover lines endorse heteronormativity and none mention single sex relationships probably because they are not considered acceptable in most black communities in South Africa. An alarming number of corrective rape cases have been recorded in this country (Oosthuizen 2017), where black men have raped lesbian black women to 'cure' them of being gay and 'correct' their sexual orientation.

Going by the premise that the cover lines showcase the aspirations of readers, it appears as though black women are portrayed as beings that are preoccupied with sex as evident in that almost all the covers under consideration had one cover line addressing a sex theme. To be precise, only one out of 12 covers did not contain the word 'sex'; on each of the 11 covers, 'sex' appeared in one or more cover lines. Out of a sample of 83, 12 cover lines had the word 'sex'. This means that 14 per cent of the cover lines contained the phrase 'sex'. My findings resonate with results from other studies which have also shown that sex sells (Sumner & Rhoades 2006, 50; Carlson 1997). Peter Carlson's (1997) research revealed that in the US, 'sex is a perennial feature of magazine cover lines, of course, but the true masters of this genre

understand that good sex isn't good enough and neither is better sex – magazine cover line sex must be the best sex'.

It is also worth noting that the media reinforce and reproduce gender stereotypes. Research shows that in South Africa “stereotypical, dismissive and confining representations of women prevail in magazine media content” (Govender *et al*, 2014, 2282). In line with Gifford L Star's (1988, 200) observation that ‘the new woman stereotype is most frequently represented in a commodity context and almost unfailingly with a man, my research found that black women are presented as sexual objects whose lives are completed by sexual attachment to a man. In this regard, in some cover lines, black women are constructed as individuals who should shoulder the responsibility of establishing and keeping a good romantic relationship with a man. The cover lines, ‘Fight to keep your man’ (Figure 2), ‘Attract the guy you want its easy!’ (Figure 4), and ‘Tame his controlling mom and keep your man’ (Figure 5), appear as though they connote that a woman should do everything within her power to attract and keep her man. A Women's Health Project study confirms this finding on social expectations and pressures put on women. The Women's Health Project research found that black women used vaginal potions to reduce the body's natural lubrication during sex, to tighten the vaginal canal after multiple births, and to enhance the ‘flavour’ of the vaginal canal in order to ensure that their partners would stay in the relationship and not cheat with other women (Masina 2010, 107-108). The above findings seem to contradict Dr Galician's Myth 1, which states that ‘your perfect partner is cosmically predestined, so nothing/nobody can ultimately separate you’ (Galician 2004, 51). Some of the strategies for attracting and keeping a man that are suggested are burning belly fat, having good skin, and trying sex moves that men love (Figure 2). These attributes are believed to be important in attracting men and the opposite holds true, that is, a woman who has a sagging stomach, skin full of blemishes and shies away from new sex moves stands to lose her man. A woman is encouraged to be attentive to a man's needs and to channel her seductive and sex appeal as evident in ‘When he can't get it up bring the magic back’ (Figure 1) positioned close to an exposed thigh. A woman who embraces the advice is promised a happy life, while a person who does not only has herself to blame for her miserable life.

Cautionary cover lines such as ‘Celeb love gone wrong: he hurt me I'm completely broken’ (Figure 6), and ‘He'll charm you and then dump you: how a narcissist operates’ (Figure 3), serve to warn readers about bad men. These cover lines seem to burden the woman with the responsibility of ensuring a happy life. Some cover lines blatantly blame the woman for her

unhappiness and misfortunes; for example, the woman is blamed for her partner's misdemeanours. One cover line reads, 'You are the reason your man cheats' (Figure 8), and the other cover lines on the same cover seem to offer a way out of the problem; 'Take charge: up your sex game' and 'Make money, lose weight, take risks and achieve more greatness'. These cover lines seem to suggest that there is no gender equality as they appear to prescribe the roles for women as well as determine their position in society.

Some cover lines seem to construct the black female reader as a sexual being, who needs information to improve her sex life while depicting the magazine as an authority that gives information and advice on establishing and maintaining a successful romantic relationship. The power relations between the reader and magazine is evident in cover lines such as 'How soon can you move in with him' (Figure 12), 'His place or yours: new men, new sex rules' (Figure 7), 'Ways to tell he is a liar' (Figure 1), and 'Sex moves men love: you'll want to try them all!' (Figure 2). In the above examples, the magazine adopts the tone of an agony aunt. This 'aunt' uses bold statements yet she also comes across as friendly and knowledgeable therefore qualified to give advice on matters of the heart and private bedroom issues. Historically in most black communities in Southern Africa black women used to receive relationship advice from female relatives including sisters, aunts and grandmothers, however, with the changing social and cultural environment, women's magazines such as *True Love* now serve this purpose. These magazines and images they contain serve as socialising agents that influence women and girls' attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours" (Linder 2004, 409).

Coupled with the friendly tone, the verbal text uses personal modes of address and speaks directly to the reader through use of words such as 'you' and 'your', as seen in the following cover lines; 'A younger man can make you happy' (Figure 7), and 'Hot sex: find your style and make him stay' (Figure 6). Black women are represented as powerful beings with agency and are called upon to take charge of their sex lives in order to achieve sexual bliss. Prioritising sexual fulfilment involves opting for great sex with the wrong guy and choosing 'Fab lovemaking over Mr Right!' (Figure 9). This punches holes into Myth 4, which says, 'if your partner is truly meant for you, sex is easy and wonderful' (Galician 2004, 51) because sex can be enjoyed with the 'wrong' guy. The emphasis seems to be on the physical satisfaction rather than on the three pillars that are espoused by psychologist Robert J Sternberg's (2006) Triangular Theory of Love, namely intimacy, emotional passion and commitment. These cover lines simply give guidelines for 'easy wonderful sex' (Galician 2004, 148).

The subject-object dichotomy within which black women are framed is prevalent in most cover lines. For example, in cover lines such as ‘Love and career: how couples keep romance alive’ and ‘We have sex with the same men at the same time’ – sisters (Figure 11), black African women are represented as sex partners. The above resonates with hooks and Bobo’s observation that black women are not just enacted upon but are active agents who play an important role. To elaborate on this notion, hooks and Bobo use the dance metaphor where black women play the role of a leader and follower. Pertaining to the second cover line (sisters having sex with the same man at the same time), in some South African black communities such as the Ndebele (Relationship by marriage...) and Northern Sotho (Wilhelmina 2013, 22), if a married woman could not have children, her husband was given her younger sister to bear children for her but a threesome was unheard of. However, some black women who live in urban areas where they are exposed to influences from other cultures are spicing up their sex lives by embracing some alien practices.

Closely related to the above is the discourse of success and happiness. Black women are presented as strong career women who are successful in their own right but happiness and success are also linked to sex and a beautiful body. Success is not only measured in monetary value, but being in good physical shape, healthy, contented and looking attractive are also promoted as the other significant determinants of success. The discourses of personal choice and self-improvement construct and represent black women as subjects who are in control of their bodies. However, it is worth noting that the choices and self-improvement strategies are made within certain social and cultural constraints and guidelines. The media and society promote certain ideals such as the toned and thin ideal and eschew some choices such as voluptuous body and those who do not control their bodies are punished.

Leading a happy, contented life is also associated with having a successful romantic relationship, being single and independent and having good sex. The cover lines promote contradictory notions of sex such as marital sex, one night stands, and solo sex. *True Love* presents contradictory messages probably because it is targeted at married, divorced, and single women and tries to cater to their different needs.

Some of the discourses promoted above such as solo sex (Figure 3) depict challenging and daring feminine heterosexuality that is not under patriarchal power. The black feminine body is represented as a site of resistance to capitalist and patriarchal domination. Furthermore,

speaking about unmarried couples moving in together seems to be a radical departure from ideals promoted in most African cultures. For example, in most African cultures couples are not encouraged to live together before marriage. This could be an influence of Western culture introduced through using syndicated material. Probably this can be explained by the fact that the local exists alongside the global. Although syndicated copy is localised in some cases it still retains some of its Western undertones. It could also be a reflection of the changing trends in urban areas where lovers opt to move in together to cut on rental costs.

While the above examples illustrate the portrayals of black women as subjects, on some cover lines they are depicted as visual objects “to be consumed” (Bordo 1993, 287). The toned body that is promoted in some cover lines can be seen as an expression of normalisation. For Susan Bordo (1993, 273), the normalising images are ‘suffused with the dominance of gender, racial, class, and other cultural iconography’. Moreover, according to Bordo (1993) the processes that transform the body sometimes lead to eating disorders, exercise addictions and fatal operations. On the one hand, *True Love* cover lines strive to promote the positive image of black femininity, however, on the other hand, they also seem to perpetuate feelings of inadequacy and insecurity (Figures 2, 6, 8 and 12).

Noticeably, except for the above examples, most cover lines seem to suggest that black women get into romantic relationships and copulate for pleasure; hence sex is presented as a recreational activity that should be enjoyed. There is nothing wrong with enjoying sex; however, the problem is that the cover lines appear to shy away from procreation, protection and contraception. There is nothing on safe sex, condom use, the pill and other contraception methods. Only one cover line addresses the issue of violence and sex, ‘Must read: Careful: that drink can get you raped’ (Figure 6), one mentions abortion (Figure 12), another one highlights human trafficking, ‘My mother sold me for sex’ but I got my life back’ (Figure 10) and one more tackles the HIV problem, ‘HIV crisis: thousands still get infected everyday’ (Figure 7). This is surprising because in South Africa there are many cases of date rape, human trafficking and high prevalence of HIV/Aids, teenage pregnancies and unwanted pregnancies that result in unsafe abortion, yet the magazine is seemingly silent on the dangers associated with casual, unprotected sex. These issues may be tucked somewhere inside the magazine but the cover is the face of the publication; hence not highlighting and featuring them on the cover gives the impression that *True Love* does not regard them as important. I therefore argue that as a

socialising agent the magazine has failed to fulfil its mandate to educate and inform members of the society about important issues.

Looks count

Exploring representations of the black body in contemporary South African society is significant since the body is central to personal and ethnic identity. The notions of the body are partly shaped by society, its culture and history. For example, the black body was disparaged and images of black beauty suppressed during the colonial and apartheid eras (Barnard 2000, 345-362). Moreover, black people were not allowed to participate in beauty pageants because “like the Springbok Rugby symbol, [Miss South Africa] belonged to white South Africa” (Barnard 2000, 351). Media representations have the power to shape the body and people’s perceptions of body politics. My research found that *True Love* cover lines give the impression that sexual desirability can be achieved by transforming one’s physical appearance through dieting and using fashion and beauty products. My findings are similar to those of another South African study, which found that *Drum* and *You* magazine “suggest that women always need to improve their physical appearance” (Govender *et al* 2014, 2282). Having a beautiful body is presented as the cure for all a woman’s problems. A beautiful body is presented as an asset; it can be used to get a woman what she wants, including sex. It is portrayed as a manifestation of heterosexual desire and key ingredient to a successful relationship and sexual fulfilment, which is intricately linked to happiness. Physical attractiveness is equated to being sexy and this reinforces the notion that it is an important component in establishing a relationship and corresponds to Galician’s (2004, 51) Myth 5, which proposes that ‘to attract and keep a man, a woman should look like a model or a centrefold’. However, real-life experiences have shown that there is more to a successful relationship and sexual fulfilment than just possessing a beautiful body. In a nutshell, the cover lines seem to falsely construct and give a distorted reflection of the South African black communities’ attitudes and beliefs about ideal feminine beauty and attractiveness.

The cover lines set the standard regarding how women should look and promote the culture of dieting. Sexy physical appearance is associated with the thin ideal; hence, the cover lines focusing on dieting do not give any information on nutrition, instead the focal point is on controlling body shape and weight management. Leaving out vital nutritional information while focusing mainly on outward appearance may lead to unhealthy eating habits.

It is worth noting that the body is not passively shaped by society and media messages but is an active player, consequently, in some cases the relationship between the body and society may be at odds. The lived experiences of the individual body may be different from the media representations and social perceptions of the ideal body. For example, owing to some genetic factors it may be difficult for a woman to achieve the thin ideal. Therefore, the cover lines seem to be aspirational and targeted at ‘wannabes’ (Sumner & Rhoades 2006, 52), people who want to have beautiful bodies but have not achieved them yet. This is in line with the editorial team’s perceptions of *True Love* as a magazine that is in the business of ‘selling dreams’ (*True Love* editorial team 2016). The cover lines such as ‘Quick simple diet: get your dream body’ (Figure 4), ‘Diet right and look good naked’ (Figure 6) and ‘4 weeks to a tight tummy’ (Figure 12) show that the motivation for dieting is related to appearance. More emphasis is put on dieting to look better (change appearance) as opposed to feeling better (become healthy). They influence perceptions of the ideal body and their intention seems to be to encourage readers to transform quickly. Instead of giving healthy dieting advice, the focus is on instant gratification; cover lines offer quick fix solutions to problems, for instance, ‘Beat cellulite now!’ (Figure 1). The benefits that accrue from losing are mainly appearance-related and the cover lines give the impression that when a woman loses weight and attains a ‘dream body’ she becomes a desirable sex partner and she can get the man she wants. This resonates with findings from a study conducted by Amy R Malkin, Kimberlie Wornian and Joan C Chrisler (1999, 647), which found that losing weight and improving one’s outward appearance improves quality of life. A few cover lines promote weight loss for the sake of one’s health and well-being for example, ‘Reality: obesity is killing women’ (Figure 5).

The focus on physical appearance is in line with other studies that have shown that women’s magazines carry many messages pertaining to ‘bodily appearance’ (Malkin, Wornian & Chrisler 1999, 647) and “portray women as unblemished, coy and figure conscious” (Govender *et al* 2014, 2282). The cover lines promote the feminine thin and beauty ideals that advance a glamorous lifestyle as opposed to health-related messages that promote a healthy body. As a result, the ideal attractive body is synonymous with spending a lot of money on new diets, beauty and fashion products, a trend that has been labelled ‘costuming for seduction’. It appears as though some women have accepted consumerism and commodification as facts of life that are intricately linked to an individual’s identity since self-identity is mediated and to some extent dependent on the appropriation and consumption of products. The goods an individual buys and consumes define who they are and can be used to transform the person and empower

them to achieve what she wants. From this point of view ‘costuming for seduction’ does not render women powerless and is not necessarily disempowering because women self-objectify and self-commodify themselves for various reasons. On the one hand, some women ‘costume’ themselves for men but not in a demeaning way; they view it as empowering since they use the products for self-promotion. The products become marketing tools that increase the women’s visibility and enable them to get what they want, including the attention from men. On the other hand, ‘costuming’ can also be used as a means of attaining self-fulfilment and enhancing psychological well-being. Therefore consumerism and self-commodification can aid self-empowerment and in some cases they can be disempowering.

Complementary and mixed messages on *True Love* covers

The cover lines set the tone for what to expect inside the magazine. Some complement each other and the cover image. For instance, ‘Attract the guy you want: it’s easy’ (Figure 4) positioned near the image of South African movie stars Nomzamo and Maps. Another example of cover lines that complement each other is on a cover where one warns women about a narcissist (‘He’ll charm & then dump you’) in Figure 3 and another one that appears to give some tips on having a sex life to women who find themselves without a partner (‘Solo sex time to explore’).

However, in some instances, cover lines in the same issue send out mixed messages or contradict each other and the main image. Most of the cover lines contain an action word meant to spur the reader into action: ‘Fight to keep your man’, ‘Solo sex time to explore’, ‘Attract the guy you want: it’s easy’. Women are called upon to do things that appear to be contradictory. In the above example they should embrace solo sex yet they should also actively look for a male romantic partner. However, these cover lines are not contradictory per se, they are probably presenting black women with different options to try out.

Some cover lines seem to resist patriarchal ideology while others promote it. Women are portrayed as active sexual predators with agency. They are strong, successful career women (‘Why career girls have the best sex’ in Figure 1 and ‘Love and career: how couples keep romance alive’ in Figure 11) who also have fulfilling sex lives. In addition, some cover lines turn previously held patriarchal views on their head by suggesting ‘A young man can make you happy’ (Figure 7). This seems to contradict Galician Myth 6, which states that “the man should not be shorter, weaker, younger, poorer, or less successful than the woman”. In the

majority of romantic relationships, a man is normally older than the woman; however, in the West there are older women who date younger men. These women, most of them Hollywood celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez, Madonna, and Cameron Diaz, are known as cougars. This trend has since spread to other parts of the world including South Africa as evident in a website for Pretoria cougars (<https://mingle2.com/online-dating/adrar/pretoria/cougars>) and colloquial terms such as Ben 10 used to describe young men who date older women mainly for financial gain. Some black celebrities have dated or are dating men who are younger than them, for example DJ Zinhle and AKA, and actress Mary Makhatho and James Mohohlo; both couples have a four-year age difference.

The disconnects in the same issue can be attributed to the fact that each magazine issue features a collection of stories by different writers covering various topics. Tim Holmes (2013, xvi) notes that the word collection ‘bears many connotations, some of them contradictory’, for instance among other things it signifies transience and incompleteness.

Conclusion

The above discussion shows that the cover lines reflect and construct individual personal identity as well as collective black feminine identities. Drawing on Hall’s representation theory (1997 & 2003) and Galician’s (2004, 51) myths of hegemonic representations of sex, love and romance, I argued that *True Love* cover lines, like other media, mainly features black women as glamorous sex objects and presents unrealistic portrayals and expectations of sex and romantic love. Presenting unattainable notions of sex and romantic love may lead to dissatisfaction, which in turn could result in the breakdown of relationships. Some of the Western hegemonic notions of sex and romantic relationships that are represented are in conflict with the social and cultural values of some South African black communities. Culture plays an integral role in influencing how people view sex and in governing who a person has sex with, where, when and how.

Drawing on social constructivism, which purports that social order is in constant flux, it is worth noting that *True Love* covers seem to present more of the Western hegemonic depictions of sex, such as a three-some and solo sex compared to the Afrocentric notions that promote marital sex, probably owing to the social and cultural changes that the country has experienced over the years, which has resulted in the adoption of a Western way of life particularly among

the urban black communities. Values and ideals are constantly negotiated and renegotiated as people from different cultures interact. For example, while in most South African black communities sex was something that was experienced within the confines of marriage, the attitudes are changing and some people are opening up to casual sexual encounters such as one-night stands. The Western-centric influence is strong in *True Love*, particularly because the magazine uses syndicated material and takes inspiration from international magazines.

Most cover lines tended to sexualise black women yet doing so may have several negative consequences on women and the society at large. Most of the things black women (the primary target readership) are encouraged to do to improve themselves, for example advice on skin and hair care, dieting, exercising and sex, are focussed towards gaining the attention of men. The emphasis on the beautiful, glamorous body gives the impression that to attract and keep a man a woman should look like a model. It is likely that black women will try hard to enact ideal femininity prescribed by the cover lines and society because doing so is associated with certain rewards and failure to adhere to the set standards attracts harsh judgement and punishment.

However, this is not realistic since not everyone can achieve the dominant standard that is promoted. Some studies have shown that failure to attain this ideal often leads to body image dissatisfaction and anxiety, which is linked to shame, feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem (Holmstrom 2004; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn & Twenge 1998). Appearance anxiety has been linked to mental problems such as low self-esteem, eating disorders, depression; unhealthy eating practices; and body alteration through undergoing invasive and non-invasive cosmetic procedures such as plastic surgery, laser hair removal and Botox. Furthermore, the cover lines promote consumerism as evident in that all the products are presented as props for attracting men. When consumption takes centre stage women may get into debt trying to acquire expensive clothing, beauty and dieting products.

Coupled with the negative impact sexualisation has on women in general and black women in particular, it also impacts the whole society. Media messages shape the community's perceptions and attitudes towards black women, therefore presenting a narrow view and casting them as predominantly sexual beings may perpetuate sexism, racist and sexist attitudes. Objectification and sexualisation of black women in *True Love* may result in racial stereotypes and gender role stereotyping resulting in society believing that black women are 'seductive and frivolous sex objects' (Lavine, Sweeney & Wagner 1999, 1050) and treat them as such instead of according them respect. Viewing them as sex objects may lead to discrimination,

exploitation and violence against black women, a problem that is prevalent in South Africa where many cases of abuse against women have been recorded. Many women have been sexually abused and even murdered (Dlamini 2017). Continuous exposure to media messages that overly sexualise women may also create an environment that does not “value girls’ and women’s voices or contributions to society” (Merskin 2004, 126). Bordo (1993, 282) notes that the truly resistant female body is not the body that wages war against feminine sexualisation and objectification, but the body that ‘uses simulation strategically in ways that challenge the stable notion of gender as the edifice of sexual difference... an erotic politics in which the female body can be refashioned in the flux of identities that speak in plural styles’.

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