

Representations of the Male Body in “Men’s Health” Magazine

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Social representations, according to the classic definition presented by Jodelet (1985) are modalities of the practical knowledge guided for the communication and the understanding of the social, material and ideal context in which we live by means of the contents taken in by the senses, by memory, imagination or by thought, contributing to the construction of a common reality. In the words of Alves-Mazzotti (2008), such representations must be understood from their production process since the representations investigate precisely how the reference systems we use work, so as to classify people and groups and to interpret facts of daily reality. This specific kind of socially elaborated and shared knowledge is the reference axis of this study the aim of which is to discuss how the magazine Men’s Health perceives and/or imagines the male body. This magazine was added to our corpus since it is a monthly publication and has been in existence since 2006 with a total of about 337,000 readers. Therefore, it has an identity in the market of printed media. Eleven covers of the magazine were analyzed following the sequence of the issues from the month of April 2008 to January 2009, since we intended to analyze the time in which the exposure of the body occurs more frequently: the summer. The choice of the magazine cover is due to the fact that it is in it that the where the dialogue between the enunciator and the reader is initiated: even with the communicative intention of the enunciator, which corresponds to the ideology of the magazine, there is also, on the other hand, the reader’s expectation, on the other hand. The theoretical and methodological support used was the Content Analysis. It can be defined as “an operation or a set of operations aiming the representation seeking to represent of the contents of a document in a distinct way from the original one so as to facilitate a subsequent state, its consultation and referencing” (BARDIN, 2007). We first approached the “way of expressing” of the discourse through the Content Analysis of the images on the covers, noting how the discourse is shown, interacts and seduces, establishing social and

cultural ties necessary to address the reader. The second approach, concomitant with the first one, regards the sentences used on the covers of the magazine (headlines) which, in a way, contribute for to the construction of the universe of discourse about of which the texts speaks besides allowing the observation of the explicit and implicit discourse meanings. In the results we have found the presence of just one social actor agent which appears in magazines of the genre, since its representativity itself only transmits the desired message. In all of the magazines analyzed we noticed that there is an emphasis on the body and not on the identity of men since, except in some cases, the men represented, despite being male models, are not iconic in the media. The social actors agents are always shown vertically on the right side of the covers, showing the region of the abdomen, chest and arms. That coincides with most the majority of men's worries in gyms. since they want to work mostly those muscle groups. We may infer that the use of strong muscular men encourages the purchase of the magazine for, in general, the readers wish to have the same aesthetical standard of the men shown on the covers. The body positions highlight the security and tonus that men "must" have. The configuration of the covers has the same idea in several respects, such as the name of the magazine (always in blue or red), the background always black or white, the invariable proportion of fonts and color, contrast, etc. That is so because the Idea of masculinity represents a fixed, inevitable and natural state of being. The use of a colloquial language is also present and is linked to a profile of "in tune" people who are searching for information on what can make them more attractive. "XX for summer!" The use of superlatives, figures of language speech and slang is common. They are utilized to emphasize the degree of effort which must be made by the readers in their struggle to be attractive. "Bye, bye, belly! Easy plan for a steel six-pack"; "Adios, slim guy! Making even a stick look muscular." These passages evidence the non-neutrality of the texts, mainly the texts found in the media, which shows the producers' take on the male body in order to reach as many readers as possible. As for the interactive meanings, there is also a fixed, penetrating and friendly look followed by an open smile which makes the social actor agent (good looking, friendly model) invite the reader and to identify with and interact with the latter. This atmosphere of "camaraderie" seems to be essential to

captivate the male readers since it denotes the existence of reliability. It is expected, therefore, that the messages sent by the magazine sound like advice to be followed. We live the “dictatorship of beauty”, which establishes that being beautiful and having a muscular body is essential for succeeding. So, the facial expression and the body position of the social actor agent are a common strategy of the product since they conciliate the image of “perfect and desired men” with headlines about diets, persuading the readers by telling them what they should look like, thus selling more magazines. Concerning sexual relationships, we have come to the conclusion that one night stands, that is, sex without the need for a regular companion, have gained today a more liberal character today. The mediatic mechanisms help to transmit this new posture in a more natural way. Therefore, sex is dealt with clearly and objectively, working as “recipes” of how men should proceed during foreplay and presenting “tips” on how to seduce women, as well as “manuals” of on how to become a stallion. Here are some examples of headlines: “Sex in Seven Steps – Have sex with her in on the first nights; “The Art of Sex – become a her master”; “Super Sex - She will climb up the walls”; “She’ll Go Crazy! And you’ll get Lucky...”. In spite of the magazine being focused on men, there is a certain sensuality in the poses made by the models. However, one can clearly see that the intention of the magazine is not to sexually seduce the reader, but, as previously said, the intention is to make the male readers attracted by the image of the character so as to be able to, through the many articles, “score” with women. It is possible to infer, in the case of the headlines related to physical exercises, an idealized piece of information since the magazine “promises” the loss of weight if the tips given are followed to the letter. Here are some examples: “Have a Perfect Body – an 8-exercise plan!”; “The Six-pack Diet – a simple plan to get in shape now!”; “New Body in 2009! More muscles, less weight.” The position of the models in on the covers creates the need for the reader to purchase the magazine to find out the secret of success in the most diverse sectors of life, be it personal or professional. In addition, the relaxed pose and the cool clothes show a modern, active man of with attitude, full of physical stamina, reinforced by the frequent headlines about travel, business, parties, and cars for instance. This male vibrancy confirms the precepts imposed by society in relation to men, portraying them as virile, strong and adventurous. The clothes worn by the people in the

magazine and statements like “The best clothes for work” draw attention to the stylistic resources that the reader must look for in order to be in fashion. Thus, we can associate the way in which the mass media contribute to and encourage the battle for beauty. Russo (2005) states that the body industry, through the mass media, creates desires and reinforces images, standardizing bodies, by means of its relations with language, ideology, social imagery and, mainly, by its role in guiding the behaviors and social practices. “We are pressured, in several circumstances, to materialize, in our bodies, the ideals of our culture” (TAVARES, 2003). We conclude, therefore, that visual communication through the reading of magazine covers, becomes a considerable representation of the world and of social interaction. The content analysis of the covers allows us to note the meanings as well as explicit and/or implicit senses working as a reference system to interpret happenings occurrences of everyday reality. The analysis of the images on the covers of Men’s Health magazines shows the displays imagery constructed around the socially stigmatized male body, since the body behaves as a symbol which is frequently marked by the established standards. This view of reality is reinforced by the headlines, which contribute to the construction of the universe of discourse of which the text talks about. The convergence between the aesthetics of the verbal and visual language taken on a persuasive character and is the first contact between the reader and the enunciator. In conclusion, we also notice the power of the media in the partiality of the presentation of facts achieved by means of hiding ideological standpoints. The media produces imaginary models which provide it with legitimacy and **social visibility**.

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