



# THE SWIMSUIT ISSUE AND SPORT

Hegemonic Masculinity in *Sports Illustrated*

LAUREL R. DAVIS

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# *The Swimsuit Issue and Sport*

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Hegemonic Masculinity in  
*Sports Illustrated*

*Laurel R. Davis*

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## CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
 <i>Chapter 1</i>	
INTRODUCTION	1
Feminist Analysis with a Twist	2
Studying the Mass Media	2
Getting at the Meaning of the Swimsuit Issue	4
 <i>Chapter 2</i>	
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED'S SWIMSUIT ISSUE:	
THE RISE TO POPULARITY AND PROFITABILITY	9
History of the Swimsuit Issue	9
Popularity of the Swimsuit Issue	15
Profitability of the Swimsuit Issue	17
 <i>Chapter 3</i>	
THE BASIC CONTENT:	
"IDEALLY BEAUTIFUL AND SEXY WOMEN FOR MEN"	19
The Basic Content: Ideal Women's Bodies	19
The Ideal Readers: Men	20
Denotative versus Connotative Level Meaning	20
Factors That Encourage Denotative Level Consensus	22
Recognizing the Power of Producers and the Text	31
 <i>Chapter 4</i>	
THE STRUGGLE OVER PUBLIC SEXUALITY	33
Debating the Degree of Sexual Meaning	34
Debating the Morality of Public Displays of Sexuality	41

*Chapter 5*

A VEHICLE FOR PUBLIC DECLARATIONS OF HETEROSEXUAL IDENTITY	47
It's about Heterosexuality	47
Securing Heterosexual Status through Consumption	51
Using Heterosexual Status to Secure Masculine Status	53

*Chapter 6*

PROFITING FROM THE MASCULINITY CRISIS	55
The Masculinity Crisis and Response to the Crisis	55
Fashioning <i>Sports Illustrated</i> as a Men's Magazine	58
Critiques of the <i>Sports Illustrated</i> Strategy	65

*Chapter 7*

THE STRUGGLE OVER GENDER	73
Men Who Identify with Hegemonic Masculinity	73
Women Who Identify with Hegemonic Femininity	74
Men Who Do Not Identify with Hegemonic Masculinity	79
Feminists Who Criticize Hegemonic Masculinity and Femininity	80
Backlash against the Feminist Readings	85

*Chapter 8*

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY BUILT ON THE BACKS OF PEOPLE OF COLOR	89
Racism as a Central Component of Hegemonic Femininity	89
Racism as a Central Component of Hegemonic Masculinity	94

*Chapter 9*

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY BUILT ON THE BACKS OF "THE (POST)COLONIALIZED OTHER"	97
The Hegemonic Masculine Subject as Actual and Media Tourist	98
"The (Post)Colonialized Other" as Exotic Spectacle for the Hegemonic Masculine Subject	103
The Hegemonic Masculine Subject as Colonizer of "the (Post)Colonialized Other"	111

<i>Chapter 10</i> CONCLUSION	117
<i>Appendix A</i> SPORTS ILLUSTRATED'S SWIMSUIT ISSUES (from 1964 to 1991 and 1996)	123
<i>Appendix B</i> NON-ACADEMIC MEDIA MATERIAL RELATED TO THE SWIMSUIT ISSUES	127
<i>Appendix C</i> INTERVIEW SCHEDULES FOR PRODUCERS, CONSUMERS, AND LIBRARIANS	131
<i>Appendix D</i> RECRUITMENT OF, AND INFORMATION ABOUT, THE INTERVIEWED PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS	135
<i>Notes</i>	139
<i>References</i>	147
<i>Index</i>	161

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## *Introduction*

For over thirty years *Sports Illustrated* has produced an annual swimsuit issue. Each swimsuit issue features a picture of a woman model (or multiple models) in swimwear on the cover of the magazine, while a section inside the magazine contains pictures of the cover model(s) and other women models dressed in revealing swimwear. Over the years, the swimsuit issue has become a widely recognized part of United States popular culture, and an icon for many. Each year millions of people consume the swimsuit issue. Many mainstream news sources cover the annual publication of the swimsuit issue. In the last decade, magazines other than *Sports Illustrated* introduced their own swimsuit issues, and a whole new genre of magazines devoted to pictures of women in revealing swimwear emerged.

Despite the obvious popularity of the swimsuit issue, debates rage over its meaning, value, and whether it should exist at all. These debates take place within *Sports Illustrated*, within other popular media forums, and outside the media. Many appreciate the look of the models in the issue, sometimes pinning pictures from the issue on the wall. Some hide the issue from those who disapprove. Others find the swimsuit issue obscene or improper, especially for children. Some even pull the issue from library shelves. Many complain that the swimsuit spread has little to do with sports, and thus does not belong in a sports magazine. Still others critique the issue as sexist or racist. A spoof of the issue even appeared in the *Doonesbury* cartoon. Recently, Duncan (1993) analyzed the 1992 swimsuit issue text from an academic feminist<sup>1</sup> perspective. She argues that the formal structures of objectification, commodification, and voyeurism that are evident in this text disempower women and contain women's challenges to patriarchy. It is obvious

that the public debate over the meaning of the swimsuit issue is fraught with emotion and that many people take action based on their interpretations of its meaning.

### *Feminist Analysis with a Twist*

My original interest in the swimsuit issue stemmed from my standpoint as a feminist sport sociologist. As a feminist, I was sympathetic to the view that the swimsuit issue represented the epitome of the widespread practice of sexual objectification of women in our society. Also, I objected to the fact that the swimsuit spread, which I do not define as sports coverage, was published by a magazine that is ostensibly devoted to such coverage. Although *Sports Illustrated* finds space for the swimsuit spread, the magazine has a "bad track record" when it comes to the quantity and quality of its coverage of women's athletics.

Yet, when employing a feminist perspective to analyze the swimsuit issue, I wanted to go beyond the common feminist complaint that the issue sexualizes and objectifies women. In fact, after reading a wide variety of feminist scholarship on pornography, nude bodies in art, pin-ups, and advertising, I became convinced that sexual images and objectification should not be seen as the enemy of feminism. Nevertheless, as opposition to the swimsuit issue seems to come mainly from feminists and from those who oppose sexual representation, it is clear that gender and sexuality are central to the meanings of the swimsuit issue in United States society. My readings of the latest feminist theory also led me to focus on issues of inequality other than sexism. Thus, although I examine the connections between the swimsuit issue and sexism in this book, I also focus on heterosexism, racism, ethnocentrism, and economic forces.

My goal is to move beyond superficial interpretations to achieve an in-depth understanding of the societal meanings of the swimsuit issue. Why is the swimsuit issue so popular with so many? Why is the issue so severely condemned by others? How is the popularity of the issue related to its condemnation, and visa versa? In order to arrive at some adequate answers to these questions, one needs to examine the interactive relationship between the production of the swimsuit issue, the swimsuit issue texts, audience interpretations of the swimsuit issue, and the wider sociopolitical and economic context.

### *Studying the Mass Media*

At the same time that my feminist sensibilities created an interest in initiating a formal critique of the swimsuit issue, my academic interest

in the mass media was growing. As a critical scholar, my main goal is to understand and expose the ways that inequality and injustice are legitimated and maintained. This academic goal stems from my political interests. If we can understand how various forms of stratification are justified and preserved, then our scholarship can be used to devise more effective strategies to undermine these forms of stratification. Through my reading of critical theory, I became convinced that the mass media plays a central role in legitimating and maintaining various forms of stratification in contemporary Western societies.

Just as I was turning my attention to the field of critical study of the mass media, many scholars in this field were in the process of reassessing their prior theoretical positions. For many years, scholars in the field of mass communication have been engrossed in a debate over the degree to which media producers, and the texts they create, influence the perceptions and actions of audience members. In the past many scholars focused on the power of media texts to affect the audience; now they focus on the ability of the audience to interpret media texts in a wide variety of manners and their work often implies that media texts have limited or nonexistent affects on the audience.

Many scholars now view the early approaches to media analysis—the direct effects research and the uses and gratifications research—as too simplistic. Although the media help to shape categories and frameworks through which audiences perceive reality, the media do not effect perspectives or behavior in a direct and overdetermining manner. In an attempt to understand the link between production and consumption, some scholars turned to the encoding/decoding model. This model is based on the idea that producers encode meanings in texts, while audience members decode the texts to create meanings (Hall, 1984).

We now know that the meanings of media texts grow out of the interrelationships between production, the texts themselves, consumption, and the wider sociocultural environment. In other words, the meanings of any particular media text are influenced by the meanings producers intend to convey, various parts of the media production process, features of the media text itself that encourage and discourage particular interpretations, the perspectives of audience members, and elements of the wider sociocultural environment that influence the production process and the perspectives of both the producers and the audience members.

Although producers shape media texts in ways that encourage consumers to create particular interpretations of meaning in a given cultural context, these texts are not necessarily interpreted in the ways producers intend. All media texts contain the potential for multiple

interpretations. Consumers, influenced by both their cultural and sub/countercultural knowledge/beliefs, and the situation in which they consume a media text, interact with media texts to construct a variety of interpretations. Some consumers interpret texts in ways that match the intentions of producers (a preferred or dominant reading), some interpret texts in ways that deviate only slightly from the intended meaning (a negotiated reading), some understand the intended meaning but evaluate the text in ways that run counter to the producer's intent (an oppositional reading), and still others interpret the texts in ways that seem unrelated to the intentions of producers (a resistant reading) (e.g., Condit, 1989; Fiske, 1987b; Lewis, 1991; Morley, 1980).

As I read the new media theory, I noticed that there were very few attempts to examine these new ideas empirically. Very few researchers actually gather the empirical data that enables them to scrutinize the interactive relationship between production, texts, and consumption and assess the degree to which producers, texts, and audience members influence cultural meanings. The swimsuit issue seemed like an ideal media text to use for this project, as I knew that there were many different and conflicting opinions of this text.

When most researchers study the mass media, they either analyze texts, production, or consumption. Here, I not only analyze the swimsuit issue texts, but also analyze interviews with some producers of the swimsuit issue and a diverse group of audience members, and then discuss how the relationships between production, the texts, and consumption generate meaning. In addition, I attempt to describe some of the ways that the wider sociocultural environment and media texts other than the swimsuit issues influence production practices and audience interpretations. It is important to understand how meanings are created so that these meanings can be effectively affirmed, subverted, or reconstructed. The study of the swimsuit issue discussed in this book is one of the few studies that actually documents the interrelationship between media production, texts, and consumption in the empirical world.

### *Getting at the Meaning of the Swimsuit Issue*

My study of the swimsuit issue began with textual analysis. The texts are: the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issues from 1964 to 1991 and 1996 (see Appendix A), follow-up issues of *Sports Illustrated* which contain the letters of reader response to these swimsuit issues, and other media material that is related to the swimsuit issues (see Appendix B). In addition, I examined

most other issues of *Sports Illustrated* from 1954 to 1991, in order to situate the swimsuit issue in the larger context of the magazine and its history.

Analysis of the swimsuit issue texts went beyond the pictures on the magazine covers and in the swimwear spreads. Other features of the swimsuit issue that I analyzed include the table of contents, magazine articles, Letter from the Publisher, titles, captions, and other written text that accompanies the pictures.

I considered a variety of intertextual forces that influence consumer interpretations of the swimsuit issue. Intertextual forces are media texts that affect consumer interpretations of the studied text. The intertextual forces that I examined include: media texts produced by *Sports Illustrated* about the swimsuit issue, media texts produced by others about the swimsuit issue, and genres that resemble the swimsuit issue. These genres include pornography, pin-ups, advertising, and nude images in art.

Not only do *Sports Illustrated* producers suggest particular interpretations of the swimsuit issue through the textual structure and content of the issue itself, but they also school the readers by encouraging particular interpretations of the issue through other media texts that they produce. These other texts include swimsuit issue videos, swimsuit issue calendars, advertisements for the calendars, advertisements for *Sports Illustrated*, and the Letters to the Editor section.

References to the swimsuit issue in the mass media by people who do not work for *Sports Illustrated* serve as evidence of the popularity of the issue and inform my understandings of audience interpretations of the issue. These references appear in many different forms, such as television, newspaper and magazine stories that define the swimsuit issue or a competitor's imitation as news, media criticism of the swimsuit issue, and actual imitations of the swimsuit issue. Some other examples of media texts that refer to the swimsuit issue include an article about dolls, a fashion column, a greeting card, and cartoons. Significant criticism of the swimsuit issue appears most often in so-called alternative publications. For example, a feminist newsletter called *Media Watch* features a feminist critique of the swimsuit issue and a report about a protest against the issue at the Time-Life Building in New York. Several magazines other than *Sports Illustrated*, such as *Sport* and *Ebony* Man, produce their own versions of the swimsuit issue. Whereas most magazines simply imitate the swimsuit issue, *Spin* magazine produced a parody of the issue (see Appendix B).

Analysis of all of the media texts mentioned above, including the swimsuit issues, involved identifying elements of the textual structure and content that appear on a regular basis and that may encourage

particular interpretations of the swimsuit issues. Conventions appearing in the swimsuit spreads include the use of particular types of models, suits, body positioning, people who are pictured with the models, written content, backgrounds, props, appearance management techniques, and camera techniques. Textual analysis reveals some changes in the swimsuit issue over the years. During the textual analysis, issues related to economics, gender, sexuality, race, and nationality received special attention.

I obtained information about the production of the swimsuit issues primarily through telephone interviews with some of those who control(ed) parts of the production process and/or have a particularly informative view of this process. These producers answered questions about the production process and the meanings they attempt(ed) to express<sup>2</sup> (see Appendix C). My original study of the swimsuit issue featured interviews with nineteen former or current producers. This book contains information derived from only fifteen of these original interviews because four of the producers interviewed for the original study were not willing to grant me permission to use their interviews in this book. The fifteen producers include a managing editor, an advertising sales director, a director of marketing, a business manager, a circulation director, a design director, a modeling agent, a swimwear designer, two photographers, three models, and two letter department workers (see Appendix D). All but one of the interviewed producers are currently involved with the swimsuit issue or have recently been involved with the swimsuit issue. Several of the interviewed producers worked on the swimsuit issue in the 1960s and 1970s. When referring to the interviewed producers in the body of this book, I only identify the title of the producer when relevant. Other times, I simply use the term "interviewed producer."

Many, but not all, of the interviewed producers seemed guarded in their responses to my questions. Sometimes they ignored particular questions, hesitated before answering, offered a party line response, or answered questions in a superficial manner. In fact, one of these producers says that *Sports Illustrated* is "very hush-hush about any sort of information" related to the swimsuit issue. A few of these producers maintain that they need to be careful about what they say due to possible repercussions. One interviewed producer empathized with the difficulty I experienced when attempting to obtain these interviews:

Well, people are scared to talk, because, well, even me, I was like, "Oh, my God, I don't want this to come back and haunt me."

Because if it's going to be read anywhere, it can, really. You know, it's very negative, anything that's written about you, or your name is included. If you say something to piss someone off, then it can really affect your career. So, I think a lot of people are scared.

One interviewed producer attributes the producers' hesitancy to share information about the swimsuit issue to "protests" against the issue. Obviously, many people involved with the production of the swimsuit issue feel afraid to share information about the issue in a forthright and open manner. I suspect that this hesitancy stems mainly from a fear of releasing information that can be used to buttress the case of those who oppose the issue.

The data obtained from the interviews with producers contains two different types of contradictions. Occasionally an interviewed producer contradicts herself/himself, such as stating that there is no relationship between fashion and the swimsuit issue but later in the interview explaining various ties between the fashion world and the swimsuit issue. More common than these internal contradictions are contradictions between interviewed producers. For example, some of these producers maintain that, prior to the shoots, producers preplan ideas for many of the pictures, while others maintain that producers come up with ideas for pictures more spontaneously. The data presented in this book is a composite picture of what the interviewed producers say about the swimsuit issue. Most often the contradictions appear as contradictions, as differences in opinion or approach. Other times, if sufficient evidence exists to resolve a contradiction, I present a single opinion or approach. I resolved contradictions by considering the number of producers articulating a particular point of view, the status positions that have the greatest knowledge regarding particular parts of production, and my faith in a producer's candor. I considered a producer more trustworthy if she/he did not withhold information or hesitate when answering, did not use as many routinized answers, and did not often contradict herself/himself.

In an attempt to achieve a better understanding of consumption, I conducted telephone interviews with thirty-nine consumers and thirteen librarians about the swimsuit issue. The librarians represent three junior high school, three high school, three college, and three public libraries. I selected the libraries from the telephone book of a diverse metropolitan area to represent urban, suburban, and small town communities. Questions focused on what happens to the swimsuit issue within each library (see Appendix C).