

CHAPTER 5

WHAT ARE WOMEN INTERESTED IN?

Here's how men think. Sex, work – and those are reversible, depending on age – sex, work, food, sports and lastly, begrudgingly, relationships. And here's how women think. Relationships, relationships, relationships, work, sex, shopping, weight, food.

Carrie Fisher 1956- American actress, screenwriter and novelist: *Surrender the Pink* (1990)

Women aren't interested in current affairs – a monologue on a train – clothes, shoes, colours – a study into women's interests – relationships, appearance, celebrities, soap operas – the naming of cars – women's relentless demand for advice – male and female dominance hierarchies – Katie Price – obesity – a female role model in *Mad Men*

Many years ago I remarked to a business colleague that I'd never encountered a woman with a deep interest in 'big picture' issues: politics, business and so on. He echoed my experience, commenting, 'That's why you'll never see a woman on the Tube [Author's note: the London Underground train system] reading *The Economist*, *New Statesman* or *The Spectator*.' Those magazines have long been the leading magazines in the United Kingdom devoted to current affairs. Since that conversation over twenty years ago, whenever I've travelled on the Tube I've glanced to see what women were reading. My colleague's assertion proved to be correct. I've seen the publications being read on countless occasions, but not once by a woman.

On 6 May 2010 there was a general election in the United Kingdom, anticipated to be the most important in a generation. A dire Labour administration had been in power since 1997, and the general election was a rare opportunity to kick it into the long grass. In the end the election results were inconclusive, and a Conservative / Liberal Democrat coalition was forged.

Two days before the election I took a train to London to spend a few hours with one of my daughters, and at the start of the return journey a couple of women sat opposite me. Their ages would be around 50 and 25, I guessed, probably mother and daughter. They appeared to be of Italian extraction, probably headed for my adopted home town of Bedford, a throbbing metropolis with the country's largest population of Italian extraction outside the capital. I'll call the ladies Mrs X and Miss X. Miss X barely stopped talking for the 45 minute duration of the journey, as she flicked through a clothes catalogue. Here's a flavour of her monologue:

'Mmm, I'm not sure that this oyster blouse goes well with that sky blue skirt. Now if the handbag didn't have those silvery lines it would be a better match with those shoes, and I don't think the scarf...'

Forgive me if I don't relate more of what she had to say, the memory is too painful. The inane wittering continued without a break for the full 45 minutes of the journey, and as a consequence I now know more terms for 'off-white' than any heterosexual man should ever know. The point is, the young woman's brain was utterly consumed by colours and fashion. I doubt she even knew a general election was imminent.

I blame the man who invented magnolia paint. For many years paint for the interior and exterior of houses was white, then some plonker invented magnolia paint and women's brains turned to mush as a result. You can't go into the paint section of a DIY store these days without seeing a hundred variants of off-white paint on sale. Women will happily spend an hour reviewing the options before finally settling on one almost identical to magnolia. Unbelievable. In the meantime

their partners, wearing haunted expressions, rest against nearby walls.

But women's interest in colours isn't limited to clothes, shoes and paints. Oh no. If you watch women looking at colour cosmetics in a store, you'll see the same rapt attention. They're in another world.

What else are women interested in? I figured that an obvious way to answer the question would be to analyse the content of 'women's interest' magazines. And so it was that I went to a supermarket in December 2009 to carry out the field research. Not without some embarrassment, due to the quizzical expressions on the faces of ladies passing by, I noted down the magazine titles and lead article titles of all 74 magazines in the 'women's interest' and 'women's lifestyle' sections. There were twelve such racks, contrasting with one rack for 'men's interest' magazines. The following table shows the results of the study.

Table 2.1: Articles in women's interest magazines

| Title | Leading article title | Topics |
|-------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| <i>99p</i> | Peter Andre – I want a new girlfriend for Xmas! | Celebrities, relationships |
| <i>All About Soap</i> | Stacy and Bradley: the wedding tragedy! | Celebrities, relationships |
| <i>BBC Good Food</i> | Everyday family food – quick suppers, leftovers, side dishes | Food |
| <i>Bella</i> | The claws are out for Colleen! Jealousy behind her new show | Celebrities, relationships |
| <i>Brides</i> | Shop smart – 563 of the newest looks! | Appearance |
| <i>Best</i> | Colleen's Xmas Heartache! | Celebrities, relationships |
| <i>Chat</i> | 'Please Mummy, can I ring Daddy in heaven?' | Relationships, mumbo-jumbo |
| <i>Closer</i> | The Osbornes' cracking Christmas! 'We'll hang stockings for our dogs!' | Celebrities, pets |
| <i>Company</i> | 264 sexy shopping ideas! | Appearance |
| <i>Cosmopolitan</i> | Lose weight while you eat – yes, you can! | Appearance |
| <i>Cross-Stitcher</i> | [Author's note: there were so many riveting article titles, it seemed unfair to choose just one.] | Crafts, appearance |
| <i>Diet and Fitness</i> | Lose half a stone in just two weeks! | Appearance |

Table 2.1: Articles in women's interest magazines (cont'd)

| Title | Leading article title | Topics |
|-----------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| <i>Diva</i> | Penelope Cruz – 'I knew my lesbian kiss would get a big reaction!' | Celebrities, sex |
| <i>Elle</i> | When he <i>doesn't</i> love your curves – an honest bedtime story | Appearance |
| <i>Essentials</i> | 15 new beauty fixes – younger skin, easy make-up and thicker hair can be yours | Appearance |
| <i>Full House!</i> | Now our Kelsey's dancing in heaven! | Relationships, mumbo-jumbo |
| <i>Glamour</i> | No money? No problem! 482 chic looks | Appearance |
| <i>Good Housekeeping</i> | 30, 40, 50, 60+? Feelgood tips to turn back the clock | Appearance |
| <i>Grazia</i> | Your horoscope for the next 10 years | Mumbo-jumbo |
| <i>Hair</i> | 834 New Year style ideas! | Appearance |
| <i>Hair Ideas</i> | 786 wedding ideas – real results! Exercises for brides-to-be | Appearance, relationships |
| <i>Hair Now</i> | Frizz fighting special! | Appearance |
| <i>Hair Styles Only</i> | 709 new season's solutions! | Appearance |
| <i>Health & Fitness</i> | Burn fat, fast – easy moves to blitz calories | Appearance |

Table 2.1: Articles in women's interest magazines (cont'd)

| Title | Leading article title | Topics |
|---|---|--|
| <i>Herts. and Beds. – Your Wedding</i> | Magical locations – perfect venues for a winter wonderland | Relationships |
| <i>I'm Pregnant!</i> | How will a baby change your relationship? | Relationships |
| <i>In Style</i> | 265 glam pieces + the new layering rules | Appearance |
| <i>It's Fate (The Most Expert Psychic Advice and True-Life Stories)</i> | Only a miracle could save me from the firing squad! | Mumbo-jumbo |
| <i>Let's Knit!</i> | 19 stunning patterns for the New Year | Crafts, appearance |
| <i>Let's Make Cards!</i> | They'll be flocking to admire your creations! [Author's note: not all of them, possibly.] | Crafts |
| <i>Love It! Real Life and Celebs</i> | Sarah Harding – 'Cheryl thinks I'm a nutter!' | Celebrities, relationships |
| <i>The IT Dresses – so-this-season rags</i> | Boots we love! | Appearance |
| <i>Marie Claire</i> | Cameron Diaz – hot, smart, single, having it all her own way | Celebrities, appearance, relationships |

Table 2.1: Articles in women's interest magazines (cont'd)

| Title | Leading article title | Topics |
|------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| <i>My Weekly</i> | Lulu's beauty secrets! | Celebrities, appearance |
| <i>Natural Health</i> | More energy plus less stress – your holistic guide to better health this year | Health |
| <i>New!</i> | Mums at Christmas! Exclusive interviews and pictures | Relationships |
| <i>Now!</i> | Posh and Becks's Christmas of War! | Celebrities, relationships |
| <i>OK</i> | Our first Xmas at home alone – Peter Andre | Celebrities, relationships |
| <i>Pick Me Up!</i> | I castrated my rapist Dad! | Relationships |
| <i>Pregnancy & Birth</i> | Look and feel fantastic – boost your bump confidence today! | Health, confidence, appearance |
| <i>Prima</i> | Kick-start your confidence! | Confidence |
| <i>Psychologies</i> | Relationships – 2 years or 20? How to grow closer over time | Relationships |
| <i>Real People</i> | Baby Jess miracle at 23 weeks | Relationships |
| <i>Red</i> | Too busy to lose weight? Your bespoke eating plan starts here | Appearance |
| <i>Reveal</i> | 'Our brave little boy is home for Xmas!' | Relationships |
| <i>Scarlet</i> | Red-hot sex resolutions – your <u>orgasmic</u> 2010! | Sex |

Table 2.1: Articles in women's interest magazines (cont'd)

| Title | Leading article title | Topics |
|--|--|----------------------------|
| <i>She</i> | New Year, new you – boost your confidence, lose weight, gain energy | Confidence, appearance |
| <i>Simply Knitting</i> | Essential reading for every knitter | Crafts |
| <i>Slim at Home</i> | Two week party plan – drop a dress size! | Appearance |
| <i>Slimming World</i> | Real-life cover star Joanne – ‘I lost two stones in three months!’ | Appearance |
| <i>Soul & Spirit (your spiritual life coach)</i> | 11-page special on Lunar Love – harness the moon to find your soul-mate! | Mumbo-jumbo |
| <i>Take a Break</i> | A headless body . . . a missing Aunt! | Crime, relationships |
| <i>Tatler</i> | Is it rude to vote Labour? . . . and other social dilemmas resolved. | Politics |
| <i>That's Life!</i> | Want to diet? Why you shouldn't | Appearance |
| <i>Top Santé</i> | Glowing skin <u>now!</u> Five-step make-up masterclass | Appearance |
| <i>TV Choice</i> | Hello Mum! Ronnie and Roxy are stunned by the arrival of their mother | Celebrities, relationships |
| <i>TV Easy</i> | Shock arrest! Archie's killer revealed! | Crime, relationships |

Table 2.1: Articles in women's interest magazines (cont'd)

| Title | Leading article title | Topics |
|---|---|-------------------------------|
| <i>TV Guide</i> | So you think you can dance? Cat, Nigel and Arlene bring the US hit to British screens | Celebrities |
| <i>Ultra Fit</i> | Fight fat fast! | Appearance |
| <i>Vogue</i> | How to wear lace now | Appearance |
| <i>Wedding Flowers</i> | 398 elegant looks – how to get perfect big day blooms | Appearance |
| <i>Weight Watchers Magazine</i> | Lose weight – and keep it off! | Appearance |
| <i>What's on TV?</i> | Killer! Sam's arrested for murder! | Crime, relationships |
| <i>Woman</i> | A Mum's goodbye – 'letters of love for my kids' | Relationships |
| <i>Woman & Home</i> | Lulu – 'Love, men, special friends . . . my new life.' | Celebrities, relationships |
| <i>Woman's Own</i> | Fern exclusive – my life- changing decision | Celebrities |
| <i>Women's Fitness</i> | Fighting fit – tone-up boxing | Appearance |
| <i>Women's Health</i> | Burn more fat! Boost your metabolism to drop a dress size fast! | Appearance |
| <i>You & Your Wedding</i> | Real brides – 359 inspired ideas for weddings and honeymoons | Appearance |
| <i>Your Hair</i> | 876 stunning cuts for 2010! | Appearance |

Table 2.1: Articles in women's interest magazines (cont'd)

| Title | Leading article title | Topics |
|--------------|--|-----------------------|
| <i>Yours</i> | Fern – 'My faith gets me through' | Celebrities, religion |
| <i>Zest</i> | Skin that glows – see results in 7 days! | Appearance |

Back at my office I calculated the frequency of the 12 topics of the articles. The following numbers add up to more than 74 because numerous articles covered more than one topic.

| | |
|-----------------|----|
| Appearance | 35 |
| Relationships | 25 |
| Celebrities | 16 |
| Mumbo-jumbo | 5 |
| Crafts | 4 |
| Crime | 3 |
| Sex | 2 |
| Confidence | 2 |
| Pets | 1 |
| Food (exc diet) | 1 |
| Religion | 1 |
| Politics | 1 |
| TOTAL | 96 |

The only article on a political topic was in *Tatler*, and even that concerned social issues rather than politics, 'Is it rude to vote Labour?... and other social dilemmas resolved.' There wasn't a single article about business, or people in business.

Now I would contend that apart from the 'relationships' topic itself, a number of the other topics are also clearly reflected an interest in relationships, for example the interest in appearance,

celebrities, sex and confidence. These ‘related topics’ come up 55 times. Added to the 25 mentions of ‘relationships’ we come to a total of 80 mentions out of a total of 96. So 83% of the article topics that interested women, in the publications they choose to buy, were relationship-related. *Why* are women obsessed with relationships? Possibly because it’s often women’s personal relationships – rather than the work they personally undertake – which dictate their standards of living as well as their level of happiness in life?

A number of the articles concerned storylines in television soap operas. And what are soap operas if not explorations of moral dilemmas, love, hatred, jealousy, betrayal, and all the other countless dimensions of relationships? Soap operas are watched by women, not men.

Women even manage to have emotional relationships with inanimate objects. One of my daughters, who is now in her mid-twenties, isn’t exempt from this phenomenon. She drove a Ford Fiesta during her university course and nicknamed her car ‘Raef’ on account of the car’s number plate ending with the letters ‘RFE’. She told me it was customary for her friends of the female persuasion to name their cars, while her friends of the male persuasion didn’t.

Further reflections on the articles:

- How can articles on dieting still have commercial value? What substantial new insights have there been in the past 100 years about losing weight? None.
- Which advertising genius first discovered that exclamation marks lower women’s IQs and persuade them to buy their particular titles?
- What is behind women’s fascination with celebrities in general and celebrity couples in particular? Possibly the heady combination of a man at the top of the male

hierarchy due to his fame and/or wealth, and a woman at the top of the female hierarchy due to her fame and/or beauty?

- Why do women need so much advice? And why do they need essentially the same advice time after time? The content of women's magazines was similar *decades* ago

Women's relationship with shoes has long fascinated me. Every season there appears a range of new styles which soon become 'must have' styles for women. Women shopping for shoes exhibit the same utter absorption that they do for colour-related matters.

Let's be honest, shall we? Women are utterly absorbed by their relationships with family, friends, and work colleagues. They are far less likely than men to be interested in the worlds of politics and business, although that doesn't stop them seeking equality in those fields.

Individual women rarely make the effort or accept the sacrifices necessary to achieve success in those fields: they expect *other* women to do so and thereby deliver equality. So it falls to a miniscule number of women to fight a large number of men for the top positions in politics and business: how could that *ever* result in gender balance?

We come to the thorny topic of physical attractiveness. British author Steve Moxon, in his book *The Woman Racket* (2008), describes the male dominance hierarchy ('DH'). In the pre-industrial world a man's position in the DH was largely dictated by physical prowess or access to men and arms, while in the developed world it is largely dictated by actual or potential financial resources. Women seek partners as high up the hierarchy as they can manage, and have their own dominance hierarchy, as Moxon explains:

So how does a female DH form if it does not involve physical contest? Mostly it's simply by inheritance – including in primates and human societies. The physical attributes of females that are attractive to males in signalling fertility of youth and beauty are predominantly genetically based, so are well conserved from one generation to the next. Attractive women will tend to have attractive daughters. The key attribute of youth is an even more pronounced 'given', in that older age cohorts are simply not 'in the game'.

In traditional societies a woman's position in the DH is largely a product of nature, as youth and beauty are the main factors. However the existence in modern societies of multi-billion dollar cosmetics, fashion and plastic surgery industries shows that beauty can be enhanced and the ravages of age can at least be postponed. The rocketing sales of celebrity and beauty magazines show that women are indeed keen to rank themselves according to a uniquely female DH; but the great difficulty involved in attempting to overcome the limitations of nature has manifested itself in the form of modern female epidemics such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia, slimming disorders being rare in males.

Perhaps the sheer difficulty of the task of climbing the female DH (males simply have to work harder or take extra risks) explains the fascination of Victoria Beckham to a female audience – her strange elfish features and cyborg-style cartoon body are more frequently found on the front covers of women's magazines than anyone else. If such an odd-looking creature is attractive to an uber-alpha male like her husband David, then women are understandably eager to re-assess their *own* DH ranking in the light of this.

Females also tend to compete by doing down other females in terms of sexual propriety – hence the common playground 'ho' and 'slag' derogations. This alerts men to a woman's propensity to indulge in extra-pair sex, and consequently might well put them off considering her as a long-term partner.

In the summer of 2009 I walked into a branch of WH Smith, a national retailer selling newspapers, books, and more besides. Something unusual was evidently about to happen: the store was full of girls and young women between the ages of 12 and

18, clearly excited to be there. The reason for the excitement turned out to be the imminent appearance of Katie Price for a signing of her third autobiography *Pushed to the Limit*. Ms Price was known as 'Jordan' during her early career as a glamour – i.e. topless – model, during which time her breasts publicly changed size a number of times with different breast implants.

During the 2001 British general election Jordan ran as a candidate in Stretford and Urmston under her real name, using the slogan 'For a Bigga and Betta Future'. As part of her comical election campaign she promised free breast implants, more nudist beaches, and a ban on parking tickets. In the end, Jordan won 713 votes, 1.8% of the votes cast.

Her personal relationships, and especially her relationship with the singer Peter Andre – who she later married – attracted extensive tabloid and celebrity magazine attention, as well as television series coverage. Her personal fortune is estimated at about £40 million. So this was the woman all the young women in the store were excited about. If the President of the Women's Engineering Society – celebrating its 90th anniversary in 2009, as you know – had been launching *her* autobiography, would the young ladies have been quite so excited?

Let's move on to a topic of relentless fascination for women: obesity. How might we explain the increase in obesity of women in the modern era? The increase has also happened with men but it simply doesn't seem to bother them to the same degree. A glance at women's magazines reveals women's obsessions with attractiveness in general and weight in particular. I don't believe that women become obsessed about these issues because of what they read, or see on television and in films. Those media are simply making money from women's pre-existing obsessions.

Has anything genuinely new been said about dieting in the past century? 'Eat a balanced diet, consume fewer calories than you expend, take some exercise. You may experience a little discomfort at times but you'll lose weight as surely as night follows day.' Let me know if there's anything more to it than is contained in those 33 words. Women don't want to face up to the reality, so they are perennial targets for dieting advice.

With the demise of the New Labour administration in May 2010 I hoped we had seen the end of Harriet Harman style pronouncements on women in the public eye: actresses, newscasters, models, and so on. Not a bit of it. From *The Daily Telegraph* of 26 July 2010, an article titled, 'We should be more like the sexiest woman alive, says minister':

As an aspiring actress, Christina Hendricks was constantly advised to lose weight. The size-14 redhead was often told: 'We think you're an amazing actress, but you're a little too heavy for the role.' But she refused to slim down and consequently became a star of *Mad Men*, one of the most successful dramas of recent years.

Now Hendricks, commonly described as 'voluptuous' in her role as the feisty secretary Joan Harris, has been hailed as an 'absolutely fabulous' physical role model for girls by Lynne Featherstone, the Equalities Minister...

In May, Hendricks was voted the 'Sexiest Woman Alive' by female readers of *Esquire* magazine, eclipsing her fellow actress Megan Fox and Michelle Obama. The Liberal Democrat minister cited Hendricks as she criticised the 'overexposure' of skinny models, which she said was causing a crisis in 'body confidence' among the young. The use of models, as well as the routine use of airbrushing, meant that girls and women came under 'dreadful pressure... to conform to completely unachievable body stereotypes', she said.

Mrs Featherstone said, 'Christina Hendricks is absolutely fabulous. We need more of these role models. There is such a sensation when there is a curvy role model. It shouldn't be so unusual.'

Hendricks appeared to relish the attention that her 36C breasts had generated. Asked how she felt about them, she responded, 'They are fabulous.' She also gave advice to men in the magazine on how to get women in bed. They should engage in conduct that many feminists would see as outdated, the actress said. 'Stand up, open a door, offer a jacket,' she advised. 'It makes us feel important.'

Mrs Featherstone plans to meet representatives of the fashion industry later this year and will propose that digitally enhanced images carry a warning so readers know they were altered.

Yes, Mrs Featherstone, the fashion industry will agree to do that. Give me strength. Are women really so feeble-minded as to need such interventions? The story attracted the following riposte from one of the paper's journalists, Melissa Kite:

Someone needs to tell poor Lynne Featherstone that the world has changed. The equalities minister has just announced that she intends to hold a 'body confidence summit' to tackle the problem, as she sees it, of undersized fashion models.

Ms Featherstone, a Liberal Democrat member of the Coalition who was this year voted Parliament's most attractive MP, is clearly still living in the New Labour era of pointless initiatives and, dare we say, window dressing. She also seems blithely unaware that the nanny state is on its last legs.

I have a mental picture of her sitting in the Equalities Department near Buckingham Palace with her fingers in her ears muttering 'not listening, not listening' as all around her ministers slash and burn and rip up politically correct red tape. Indeed, it is testament to how much David Cameron has managed to change about Britain since May, that Ms Featherstone's proposal already looks so ridiculous.

In a few months we've been spoilt with a raft of initiatives sweeping away the interfering, opinionated state, and, guess what, we like it. 'Speed cameras to be axed' was the latest dream headline at the weekend. So when the pouty Ms Featherstone declares war on skinny models and says she will call in magazine editors and fashion industry executives to address the effects of airbrushed images of physical perfection

on impressionable youngsters, I find myself saying, 'Ah, bless!'

I'm wondering whether Ms Featherstone isn't having a spot of bother with the issue herself. I'm not so sure she doesn't stare agonisingly at herself in the mirror in the mornings trying to ape inappropriate role models and saying, 'If I squint, I do look a bit like Harriet Harman.'