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**Hanging Up the Smoking Jacket:
Productive Oppression and *Playboy's* Impacts on Mediated Sexualization**

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Hugh Hefner, the revered and reviled publisher of *Playboy* magazine, died at home in his Los Angeles mansion on Sept. 27, 2017. He was 91.

Hefner's death triggered a tsunami of think pieces. A polarizing figure in the magazine industry, journalists and feminists have been quick to chastise the mogul's exploitation of women and his contributions to the mainstreaming of commercial pornography. Rightly so. On the flipside, First Amendment advocates and LGBTQ magazines have praised Hefner for sparking debates about sexual orientation and obscenity decades before George Carlin's seven dirty words set precedents for media law. Reactions to Hefner's death have exposed a rift among leading thinkers on media and sexuality. Given the vastly different ways that people approach Hefner's legacy, how can we analyze this deeply problematic figure whose work has simultaneously oppressed women and liberated sexual expression?

Like countless latchkey kids in the 1990s, my relationship with pornography started young. At nine years old, a childhood friend pulled me into her father's bedroom closet, pointing to a stack of glossy skin mags. *Playboy*. We thumbed through the issues together, wide-eyed at the shocks of pubic hair and augmented breasts. It was a formative experience. The models seemed proud of their bodies, which instilled in me a curiosity about women's sexual agency that has, in part, driven my career. Importantly, those stolen glances also informed my naïve understanding of my own bisexuality. Rather than disgust, I felt arousal. But it was not all positive. Men's magazines and a misogynistic porn industry also incubated in my young mind an expectation that women's bodies should be used for men's entertainment.

This is the troublesome reality. Reflecting on Hefner's life requires us to navigate some uncomfortable truths about sexual media content and hegemony in general. Mediated sexuality and sexual subjectivity are both repressive and productive forces in culture.¹ And reactions to the *Playboy* founder's passing remind us that power can both restrain and embolden, create and destroy.

We must be careful not to reduce our critiques of *Playboy* to its function as an apparatus of anti-womanist rhetoric. We must be careful not to extol *Playboy* as the single great emancipator of men's sexual desire. We must remind ourselves of the myriad and often contradictory roles sexual media play in society. It is crucial that our field contextualizes and

historicizes *Playboy's* impact on mediated sexuality.

From Pin-Ups to Camgirls

Playboy began as an homage to a lifestyle Hefner aspired to.

Young and heartbroken by his first wife's confessions of infidelity, Hefner launched *Playboy* from his Chicago apartment in 1953.² "I had literally saved myself for my wife, but after we had sex she told me that she'd had an affair. That was the most devastating moment in my life,"³ Hefner once said. Though they had two children, his marriage to college sweetheart Millie Williams eventually dissolved. Hefner, a former *Esquire* copywriter, started to envision a cultural awakening in which (hetero)sexual liberation and autonomy guided men's aspirations, rather than memories of war or dreams of white picket fences and corporate promotions.

Explicit consent wasn't yet a part of public discourse about sex, nor was it apparently a concern for the young magazine publisher. Hefner purchased a set of boudoir photos of up-and-coming actress Marilyn Monroe from a Chicago-area advertising firm. A photo of the grinning actress ran on the cover of *Playboy's* first issue. Hefner never compensated Monroe or acquired her permission to publish the photos, which were shot by a friend and not intended for circulation.⁴ *Playboy's* first issue sold just shy of 54,000 copies.⁵ Despite its ethically questionable start, the magazine became a publishing powerhouse during the subsequent decade, and eventually was recognized as a flagship for free speech. Hefner published not only high-gloss centerfolds featuring buxom co-eds, but highly controversial writers and political figures such as Margaret Atwood, Fidel Castro, Miles Davis, Joseph Heller, Norman Mailer, and Malcolm X.⁶

Hefner famously labeled himself a feminist. But in 1963, Gloria Steinem's undercover reporting for *Show* magazine spotlighted *Playboy's* workplace treatment of women. Steinem's story about "the glamorous and exciting world" of Playboy Club Bunnies found that the New York City lounge's curvaceous cocktail servers—hired for their looks and peppy attitudes—were discriminated against on the job. Bunnies were even fired for sneezing, which ripped their expensive, too-tight satin rabbit costumes.⁷ But Playboy-brand nightclubs continued to open across the country, and the magazine boomed. The buzz around *Playboy* was catalyzed by two social movements in publishing: Consumer feminism (à la *Cosmopolitan*) had embraced the free love movement, and *Playboy* celebrated women as sexual agents. As for the Baby Boomer generation: Hefner's sexy spreads became synonymous with luxurious, childless, urban masculinity. It was forward thinking for the time. By 1973, the magazine's circulation topped 7 million.⁸

In more recent years, circulation has plummeted. Cable television and the VCR brought live action pornography into private homes and hotel rooms across the country. Sheila Gibbons, longtime editor of *Media Report to Women*, wrote that the 1980s marked

an especially dark time for *Playboy's* socially progressive agenda—and sectors of the women's movement were partially to blame. Hefner told *Fortune Small Business* that feminists “embraced a kind of anti-sexual, anti-*Playboy* attitude.”⁹ But radical feminists were not the only problem for *Playboy*. Stocks fell through the '80s and many of the iconic *Playboy* clubs closed their doors for good. Charles Leerhsen wrote in *Newsweek* in 1986: “To survive in the late '80s, Hefner must find a home somewhere between the anti-smut activists and the outright pornographers, if indeed such a state exists.”¹⁰ Of course the '90s ushered in the internet, and with it a Pandora's Box of digital pornography. In an era of instant-access camgirls and chatbots, how could *Playboy* sell centerfolds? To some feminists' delight, bad business only got worse. *Playboy* has fewer than 600,000 subscribers today.¹¹

Troubling Discourse About Sexuality

Despite *Playboy's* tame reputation compared with hardcore pornographers, the magazine remains a paragon for smut and Hugh Hefner its poster child. News of his death revived feminists' lingering resentments, even hatred. Although Gloria Steinem opined recently that “Obit time is not the time for truth-telling”—referring to journalists' scramble for criticism of Hefner following his death—other feminist thinkers disagreed. In an essay for the U.K. newspaper *The Independent*, feminist activist Julie Bindel declared: “On hearing that the pimp and pornographer Hugh Hefner had died this morning, I wished I believed in hell.”¹² Her tone was reflected by other second-wave thinkers. It wasn't so much the sexual content that upset these feminists, “but the idea that he would make women into little bunnies, rabbits, with those ears... That was the horror of it,” said feminist journalist Susan Brownmiller in an interview with the *Washington Post*.¹³

Feminists' antagonism toward Hefner and his brand did not necessarily define mainstream reactions to *Playboy*, however. In 1967, three short years after Steinem published her *Playboy* Club expose, *Time* magazine lauded Hefner for being “modern, trustworthy, clean, respectable.”¹⁴ From its launch, *Playboy* earned a reputation for pushing magazine discourse beyond the cautious content of the era, during which *Life* magazine and *The Saturday Evening Post* set the public agenda. Further, Hefner appeared to empower women—both as sexual agents and businesspeople. “He launched the careers of scores of now-powerful women, and sometimes—Joan Collins on the cover of *Playboy* at the age of 50—his choices were innovative and progressive,” opined Monica Hesse for the *Washington Post*.¹⁵

In *Playboy's* first issue, Hefner infamously wrote that “We enjoy mixing up cocktails and an hors d'oeuvre or two, putting a little mood music on the phonograph, and inviting in a female acquaintance for a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex.”¹⁶ Indeed, Hefner believed that the sexual and intellectual revolutions of the mid-20th century were one and the same. Reporting the news of his death, *The New York Times* praised Hefner's brand for being years ahead of the Sexual Liberation movement and for ushering in civil rights initiatives. “His causes—abortion rights, decriminalization of marijuana and, most

important, the repeal of 19th-century sex laws—were daring at the time,” wrote reporter Laura Mansnerus. “... He supported progressive social causes and lost some sponsors by inviting black guests to his televised parties at a time when much of the nation still had Jim Crow laws.”¹⁷

In 1955, Hefner purchased and ran a short fiction piece that was rejected by *Esquire*, where he had been a copywriter as a 20-something. The story was Charles Beaumont’s “The Crooked Man,” a fantasy fiction in which most men were gay, and heterosexual men were persecuted.¹⁸ At the time, publishing about homosexuality was decidedly avant-garde. As the *Playboy* brand exploded and fizzled, rebranded and digitized, Hefner continued to represent voices on the fringes of sexual discourse. In 1991, years before LGBTQ representation became trendy, *Playboy* featured transgender model Caroline “Tula” Cossey by a waterfall in a leopard print monokini.¹⁹ It was a turning point in transgender media coverage. A quarter century later, *Playboy*’s pivot away from nudity marked another turning point in sexual representation.

Since its inception, the Playboy Foundation has donated generously to organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Coalition Against Censorship, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and Associates for Breast and Prostate Cancer Studies, to name a few beneficiaries of Hefner’s fortune.²⁰ Those philanthropic efforts are not without feminist criticism. “I think it’s safe to say that anything progressive that Hugh Hefner was for, he was for because it also benefited white men,” Bitch Media founder Andi Zeisler said in an interview with the Associated Press following Hefner’s death.²¹ Among feminist thinkers, the link between a liberal social agenda and sexually explicit content is a matter of brand consistency. “Ideologically, the hedonism central to the *Playboy* lifestyle would not have been possible without women free to live and love as they liked,” wrote historian Carrie Pitzulo.²²

Consumer Magazines and the Objectification of Women

Scholars have waxed philosophical for decades about *Playboy*’s objectification of women and its responsibility for unachievable ideals of feminine beauty and sexuality. Certainly this fueled much of the feminist rage against Hefner. According to Pitzulo’s essay in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, leading scholars have referred to *Playboy* as “a pantheon to the sexual exploitation of women” and a purveyor of “casual misogyny.”²³ Much theoretical work has critiqued Hefner’s assertions that his Bunnies and Playmates were sexually liberated free agents. Research on representations of models in *Playboy* at the height of its popularity in the 1970s found that *Playboy* represented women “as versions of the ‘girl next door’ despite the dissonance created by the obvious fact that they were posing nude”²⁴—questioning and contributing to the Madonna-vs.-whore archetype of women’s sexuality.

Although *Playboy* featured co-eds, “girl next door” types, and popular celebrities rather than porn stars, its pages represented anything but the average American woman. Like most consumer magazine content, *Playboy* sold men an aspirational version of women’s beauty. Longitudinal studies have shown that *Playboy* models consistently have lower-than-average body mass indexes, even if models have been slightly heavier women in recent years.²⁵ But it’s not as if women’s magazines aren’t also significantly to blame. With their conversational tone and the authority of a trusted friend, beauty and fashion magazines explicitly advocate for weight loss and self-objectification. An article published in the journal *Sex Roles* in 2003 problematized the male gaze in *Playboy* and its relationship to women’s sexual scripts in *Cosmopolitan*. “Both magazines converge on a single construction of sexuality for women,” the authors argued: a sex role focused on male pleasure and female beauty.²⁶ The authors identified a culturally prevalent sexual normativity in the magazines’ pages, but they failed to critique the forces that allowed *Playboy* to simultaneously objectify women and push a neoliberal worldview.

Beyond its centerfolds, *Playboy* encouraged the capitalist consumption of women’s bodies as objects and sexual experience as conquest. “Animalized and objectified, the club waitresses were forced to endure the male gaze,” wrote Miglena Sternadori in a review of *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* by the historian Elizabeth Fraterrigo.²⁷ “Indeed, *Playboy* promoted a hedonistic, fun, glamorous lifestyle characterized by sexual abandon, albeit couched in rather traditional representations of feminine beauty and masculine desire” read another review of Carrie Pitzulo’s book *Bachelors and Bunnies*.²⁸

The lifestyle promoted by *Playboy* is an aspirational type of sexual luxury. (Consumer magazines are called consumer magazines for a reason, after all.) Hefner coalesced the definitions of sexuality and free market capitalism. In the pages of *Playboy*, women were necessarily portrayed as both objects and agents. Men were scripted as financially independent, and they were encouraged to adopt a narcissistic worldview: nicer suits, fancier cars, and more beautiful women. These messages not only equated female “arm candy” with a Rolex, but they also produced a new type of masculine identity rooted in responsibility-free financial and sexual satisfaction.

Emerging Modes of Heterosexual Masculinity

“Hefner’s brand of sexual pleasure wouldn’t turn men into layabouts or communists because it required a steady paycheck and a commitment to consumer capitalism,” wrote porn scholars Carolyn Bronstein and Whitney Strub for *The Washington Post*.²⁹ While some well-cited definitions of heterosexual masculinity rest on exhibitions of homophobia,³⁰ others consider heterosexual masculinity to be a male social identity rooted in “success and status, toughness and independence, aggressiveness and dominance,”³¹ and by the absence of feminine gender performance or homosexual partner preference. Certainly *Playboy* promoted success and status. However, the glossy also championed a metrosexual manhood—one that more closely mimicked dandyism than machismo. We can trace

Playboy's contributions to the socialization of young men within a heterosexual, cisgender, patriarchal, and capitalist paradigm.

Young men looked to *Playboy* for advice on many aspects of masculinity, including the sexual roles they should play with women and the way they should enact sexuality within groups of other men. Although feminists have called out *Playboy's* dehumanization of women, social science research has challenged those sentiments. Interviews with readers showed that *Playboy* was a socializing agent for boys exploring their sexuality and that *Playboy* helped boys learn how to act manly. But respondents reported no violent or combative feelings toward the *Playboy* centerfolds; rather the interviewees “conveyed a great deal of respect, even awe” for them, according to an article published in the *Journal of Men's Studies* in 2003. “Contrary to what might have been expected on the basis of radical feminist arguments (e.g., Dworkin, 1988; [Russell, D.E.H.], 1998), no comment could be viewed as ‘woman bashing’ or the result of misogynistic elements of fraternal bonding,”³² wrote study authors James Beggan and Scott Allison.

But other analyses have found similar contradictions in *Playboy's* masculinist rhetoric and its lifestyle content. In her essay called “The Bachelor Dinner: Masculinity, Class and Cooking in *Playboy*, 1953–1961,” scholar Joanne Hollows argued that *Playboy* brought the man's world into the domestic sphere. Hollows points out that the *Playboy* archetype was that of “a glamorized ‘bum’ who personified some of the most deeply felt anxieties about male sexuality, anxieties which the era's domestic ideology tried to mask in its representations of the breadwinner as the norm of masculinity (Cohan, 1997, p. 267).”³³ The magazine both catalyzed and challenged normative expressions of heterosexual desire.

Playboy embraced women outside of the homemaker role, while men were visualized within the domestic sphere. Hefner's own marriage had dissolved, and with it, his opportunity to embrace the American dream as it had been defined in the wake of World War II. As Hollows argued, *Playboy's* content was as much a symptom of masculine anxiety as it was a haughty attempt to subvert burgeoning feminist movements. Through its objectification of women and its neoliberal agenda, *Playboy* produced a unique sexual subjectivity among its male readership. Casual sex was transformed into a marker of affluence rather than degeneracy.

Criticisms of Second-Wave Feminism

In his obituary, *The New York Times* quoted a well-known internal *Playboy* memo in which Hefner wrote to his editors: “These chicks are our natural enemy,” referring to second-wave activists. “What I want is a devastating piece that takes the militant feminists apart. They are unalterably opposed to the romantic boy-girl society that *Playboy* promotes.”³⁴ On the surface, Hefner's statement evidences the obvious ideological tensions between heteronormative objectification of women and Second Wave goals for wage

equality, birth control, and lesbian rights. But it also points to the fragile nature of white masculinity, and to the true threat Hefner felt feminism posed to his media empire.

Although the mainstreaming of feminism likely contributed to women's suspicions about *Playboy's* reputation, content analyses have provided compelling evidence to complicate feminist critiques of *Playboy's* messaging. A research team from Western Ontario and Brock universities found that although *Playboy's* photographic explicitness increased over time between 1955 and 1990, its objectification of women vacillated across decades and remained consistently low throughout the sample.³⁵ Similarly, a 30-year-long content analysis of violent images in *Playboy* found that violent imagery decreased in the early 1980s and was rare in editorial content overall. On average, each editorial calendar (one year) contained less than one image that was violent toward women. "The ratio of sexually violent pictorials to all pictorials is 3.8 per 1,000, and, to total pages, is 0.37 per 1,000 pages" wrote authors Joseph Scott and Steven Cuvelier.³⁶ It seems that feminists used Hefner as a sort of straw man for the pornography industry as a whole. Hefner's popularity and *Playboy's* brand prominence overshadowed more destructive publishers and magazines, such as Larry Flynn's *Hustler* and countless pornographers selling degradation porn or snuff films. Sure, *Playboy* was bad. But it wasn't *that* bad.

Further, it is important to identify conflicts of interest among those voices who speak out against *Playboy* and the objectification of women. We must historicize and contextualize not just *Playboy* but the feminist writers who protested against it. For instance, Gloria Steinem used body-shaming and racist rhetoric even in her writing about Playboy Bunnies. She referred to one Bunny as "a very big girl with very long hair" and another as "a very tall, very pale Negro girl." A generous reading may posit that, much like Hefner's misogyny, Steinem's labels were merely markers of the time.³⁷ But on the other hand, stigma against marginalized groups remains pervasive in contemporary white feminist discourse.

Julie Bindel, the feminist author and *Playboy* critic, has herself written articles rife with anti-Muslim sentiments. In an article titled "The Ordeal of Muslim Women: No More Excuses," published in the U.K. magazine *Standpoint*, she acknowledged: "I have often been accused of being racist for speaking out against the full-face veil and other harmful cultural practices, such as forced marriage."³⁸ As a radical second-wave writer, Bindel simultaneously lauds women's autonomy but critiques nude modeling for *Playboy* and religious practices such as wearing Burqa, for instance.

Bindel and Steinem demonstrate that power is produced within dynamic contexts. While *Playboy* oppresses and exploits, certain feminisms do the same. Marginalization is intersectional. And women's disempowerment is amplified by white, upper-middle class neo-colonialism, to which even contemporary feminism is not immune. Third- and fourth-wave feminists may find faults in second-wave logics, which often revoke agency and autonomy from women who wish to self-objectify, seeking economic emancipation through sex work, including posing for *Playboy*.

Directions for Scholarship

Hugh Hefner's death has already provoked renewed engagement with sexual magazine content. But whether the publishing monolith's impact was a catalyst or detriment to feminism seems to be a matter of worldview. Magazine scholars and feminist thinkers should continue to tease out the relationships between patriarchy and self-expression, calling into question whether certain lines of feminist thinking continue to oppress women whose voices have been historically silenced, and whether certain "liberating" self-representations transcend the hegemonic forces of patriarchal culture.

Although feminist scholars have called attention to *Playboy's* objectification of women, little research has been conducted from queer, sex-positive perspectives. Audience studies should examine reader experiences that queer cisgender and hetero-normative accounts of consuming *Playboy*. We should also privilege audience experiences in reading *Playgirl*, which was marketed to women but too enjoyed a gay and bisexual male following. We must ask ourselves: How can we deconstruct normative narratives produced in the second-wave tradition in order to illuminate *Playboy's* productive uses for women and LGBTQ readers?

As magazine researchers, we should also turn our attention to those women who maintained close relationships with Hefner over the years. While studies of *Playboy* content and *Playboy* readership have demonstrated inconclusive links between sexual media consumption and misogynistic thinking, first-hand accounts of Playmates' interactions may tell a different story. Hefner's onetime girlfriend, Holly Madison, published a memoir in 2015 detailing her time living, working, and dating in the Playboy Mansion. She describes being drugged with Quaaludes and being manipulated into performing group sex while intoxicated.³⁹

Sex workers' stories and victims' stories have been curiously omitted from sociology of news research. Scholars and journalists should be careful to represent the stories of voices marginalized by mainstream discourse. Given the dearth of research examining the production of feminist or masculinist rhetoric within *Playboy*, social scientists and feminist scholars alike should conduct interviews that help us to describe the publishing culture and brand management of Playboy Enterprises.

Finally, we must remain committed to class-based critiques that do not disempower women who use their bodies for financial survival. We may simultaneously call out Hefner's exploitation of women while reminding ourselves of women's rights to sexual expression. Broad analyses of capitalist media systems and political economy will prove more meaningful than pointed judgment of *Playboy's* function within those larger neo-liberal contexts.

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