

## Selling the Male Consumer the *Playboy* Way

### Abstract

Under the direction of Hugh Hefner, *Playboy* magazine's early success was predicated upon the unique marketing strategies of forging the persona of an idealized, imaginary reader called the playboy, with particular lifestyles and taste preferences. At the same time it sold the value of men's participation in the hedonistic pleasures of accessible connoisseurship of the postwar marketplace by aligning consumer desires with sexual desires as innate components of modern masculinity. This purpose of this paper is to illustrate how this persona is visually and discursively articulated throughout the entire Playboy empire, from the content of the magazines including the dewy centerfolds and the What Sort of Man Reads Playboy? campaigns, to the brand's clubs and television shows. The persona undertook the dual tasks of attracting a lucrative male readership and its corresponding advertisers, while simultaneously redefining male consumer culture.

**Keywords:** Playboy, masculinity, consumer culture, market segmentation, commercial personae

In 1953, *Playboy* magazine began on a shoestring budget and subsequently grew to become one of the most successful magazine franchises in history, due in part to the genius of its enigmatic founder, Hugh Hefner. Under Hefner's direction *Playboy* sold over one million copies a month by 1959 and, eventually, over seven million copies a month at its zenith in 1972 (Grunelius, 2009; Watts, 2008). The magazine also spawned a cultural empire with a series of books including the *Playboy Gourmet*, two syndicated TV shows 'Playboy Penthouse' and 'Playboy After Dark', 17 international Playboy clubs and resorts, along with innumerable licensed products ranging from cufflinks to garter belts. *Playboy* magazine flourished due to its edgy content of reprinted fiction, intellectual articles, sexually charged cartoons and dewy photographs of all-American girls that came to typify the magazine. Buttressed between these were glossy images of attractive young men living the high-life.

With these images, *Playboy* cultivated a narrative of male consumer who happily participated in the hedonistic materialism of the postwar era. While this has been well documented by scholars such as Elizabeth Fraterrigo (2009), Bill Osgerby (2001) and Carrie Pitzulo (2011), there is little analysis of the specific marketing strategies employed by Hefner and his company in legitimizing male consumer practices during this era. This is part of a larger omission in advertising history as a whole which has largely overlooked how market segments have been visually and discursively presented to both consumers and the synergistic industries of the media marketplace that trade them, such as; market researchers, the media, advertisers, manufacturers, retailers etc. This oversight even

extends to the present day despite the current concerns of big data in which there is much critical attention paid to the processes of market segmentation and data mining yet there is little analysis of how market data itself is manipulated and reified to legitimate particular practices of consumption.

This paper will begin to fill in these gaps by exploring the unique marketing strategies that Hefner and his company employed in visually articulating an illusionary market segment embodied as a persona of an idealized reader of the magazine. In doing so Hefner sold the fantasy of hedonistic male consumer to advertisers, retailers, product designers and, perhaps most importantly, to male readers themselves. By moving market research into the content of the magazine, *Playboy* was able to strategically construct an illusion of a quintessential *Playboy* reader who could offer middle class men a resource of subjectivity. Hefner aptly named this persona ‘the playboy’. [1]

The commercial persona of the playboy legitimated middle-class American men’s participation in the new postwar marketplace of luxury and excess by aligning consumption with sexual desire. This paper argues that during the first 15 years of its run *Playboy* strategically cultivated a persona of an idealized male consumer who could be relied upon to open up new areas of commodity consumption in the postwar era of material abundance by reassuring men that their desires, both sexual and consumer, could be justified as innate components of modern masculinity. The company integrated this persona into the entire content of the magazine, from the editorial content and the advertisements including the ubiquitous What Sort of Man Reads Playboy? campaigns, to the seductive photos of the Playboy playmates and the saucy cartoons the reified the

innateness of men's desires. With the playboy persona, Hefner generated an illusion of a discrete community of male consumers with particular lifestyles and taste preferences who could be called upon by advertisers to participate in new forms of hedonistic consumption in the postwar era.

## **Methods**

*Playboy* magazine presents a rich visual and textual history of the narratives of male consumer culture. The data for this paper were culled from a discursive analysis of the visual and textual spaces where the magazine defined itself to its customers (both the readers and the advertisers) during the first 15 years of the magazine's run (from December 1953 to December 1968). The evaluation of these visual and textual spaces is based on a political economic approach that conceptualizes media content as a social process that produces audiences as a commodity form (Ang, 1985; Meehan, 2007; Mosco, 2009; Smythe, 1994). Such an approach appreciates that audiences are not naturally constituted but are interpellated by the medium into the subject position of an audience. The audience's labour of reading media content is then sold to advertisers. Magazines are "calculated packages of meaning whose aim is to transform the reader into an imaginary subject" (Breazeale 1994, p. 9) whose labour time is commodified and sold to advertisers.

Magazines function as a narrowcast medium, where it was not simply about amassing a large audience, but instead survive by convincing advertisers that the audience it is selling is lucrative and could easily be persuaded by the advertisements to

buy the advertiser's products (Preston and White, 2004 p. 115). The visual and textual content of the magazine functions to produce an imaginary subject who is so intimately connected with the media property that they will be motivated by the advertisements (Turow 1997, 55-56).

A discursive analysis of the visual and textual spaces of the magazine allows for a reading of how the magazine defines and produces an imaginary subject position who becomes the commodity form of the magazine. While such a perspective does not assume that readers actually take up these positions, or use them as a resource of their identity, for that is another research project all together, the magazine produced an illusion of a *Playboy* reader who could be sold to advertisers and audiences alike.

While the focus of this research was on the promotional spaces of the magazine, it does consider the entire content of the magazine in the analysis. Magazines, as Breazeale notes, are "devised and experienced as a whole" then they must be studied in their entirety (1994, p. 9). All of the content of the magazine functions together, the ads, the editorial content, the promotional material, the centrefolds and the cartoons, are understood together as part of the positioning of this imaginary subject. The analysis of *Playboy* conducted for this paper focuses specifically on how the entire content of the magazine worked to frame an illusionary persona of the male reader of the magazine.

## **In the Beginning**

In order to understand the origins of the playboy persona, it is important to appreciate the historical context of the genesis of *Playboy* magazine. Playboy began in an era when marketers and advertisers started to move away from trying to appeal to large mass markets and instead targeted narrower, more discrete groups of consumers who made similar lifestyles choices and shared similar taste preferences. Prior to these shifts, in the early 1950s, an era of expansive consumerism, manufacturers and retailers were still predominantly focussed on selling to large mass market on the assumption that consumers shared the same tastes and desires. The average white middle class consumer was the focus of most retail campaigns (Cohen 2003, p. 295). But by the mid-1950s, marketers began to worry that they would not be able to ensure continued profits. They became fearful that mass markets would become too saturated with goods and consumers would not continue to buy at the same rate. In this scenario, manufacturers and retailers, competing for the same homogenous mass markets could potentially put each other out of business (Cohen 2003, p. 293). A solution was proposed by marketing expert, Wendell Smith, in a 1956 article in the *Journal of Marketing*. Smith suggested that greater profits could be made if markets were understood as segmented and different products (or at least the same product but highlighting different qualities) could meet the unique needs and tastes of a smaller group of homogenous consumers (Smith, 1956).

Smith's ideas held great weight in the 1950s, particularly for older media forms such as magazines that were nervous that they might lose their national advertising accounts to television. In response, magazines began to move beyond considering consumers strictly based on basic demographics and instead contemplated other social

and cultural factors that may impact their choices of products (Cohen 2003, p. 296). Instead of one aspect of subjectivity providing a focus, magazines cross-referenced multiple features of their audiences to hone in on specific tastes and lifestyle groupings, to privilege them with an advertising base (Leiss, Kline, Jhally & Botterill, 2005, p. 107). It is of no surprise that this era saw the growth of the lifestyle magazines as readers began to use them essentially as shopping guides

Hefner had similarly employed the tactic outlined by Smith. While Smith's article was written after *Playboy* was launched in December 1953, Hefner's cultivation of a specific form of male readership was part of an industry shift to reach out to narrower, more defined, audiences. Instead of catering to homogenous mass audiences of white middle class males, *Playboy* narrowed the white, middle class male consumer into a specific and unique target market.<sup>2</sup> The *Playboy* reader Hefner was targeting was not an average American male he was just the opposite. He was a sophisticated, hedonistic, young consumer who was ready to experience both the commercial pleasures and sexual pleasures offered in the postwar era. He was more interested in bread buying than breadwinning, and as these roles moved in the sexual arena, he was more interested in casual sex than being the bread winner in monogamous marriage. And he was anything but average; he was a man of refined taste and sexual sophistication.

Of course, *Playboy* was not the only media outlet that positioned the male consumer in such a way. As Bill Osgerby (2001) has illustrated in *Playboys in Paradise*, other men's magazines such as *Esquire*, *True* and *Modern Man* had begun to develop new images of masculinity based on a more luxurious lifestyle (see also Fraterrigo 2009;

Breazeale 1994). *Esquire* validated male desire in the commercial culture of the 1930s and 1940s with a misogynistic premise that women have no legitimate social role to play in modern consumer culture, often taking the form of “housewife bashing” to quote Breazeale (1994, p. 18). While, as Breazeale rightly points out, Hefner built *Playboy* out of *Esquire*’s validation of men’s rightful place as participants in marketplace as consumers, *Playboy* was different. Right from its inception *Playboy* positioned itself as more refined and urbane than other men’s magazines, but it is important to note, that this urbanity did not extend to including the non-white urban males. Instead of its readers buying the accoutrements of suburban domesticity, the *Playboy* reader was “the man about town who was concerned with clothes, cars, food and drink, and the rest of the good things of life”, which of course alluded the overt heteronormativity of the magazine (*Playboy*, 1955, p. 5).

One of the key differences that separated *Playboy* from the other magazines, was that *Playboy* overtly articulated its target reader, right from the inauguration of the magazine. Hefner was keenly aware that the success of his magazine lay in presenting an image of the ideal readership that could both attract advertisers and a potential audience. *Playboy* articulated that it appealed to a young (or at least young-at-heart) male customer who was willing to enthusiastically partake in the new material abundance and sexual freedoms of the 1950s. This was overtly stated in the inaugural issue of the magazine. On page three, before the reader even turned to the nude photos of Marilyn Monroe that were the feature of the issue, *Playboy* introduced itself as a new kind of magazine for a new kind of male reader:



Most of today's "magazines for men" spend all of their time out-of-doors – thrashing through thorny tickets or splashing about in fast flowing streams.

We'll be out there too, occasionally, but we don't mind telling you in advance – we plan on spending most of our time inside.

We like our apartment. 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. We believe too, that we are filling a publishing need only slightly less important than the one just taken care of by the Kinsey Report. (*Playboy*, 1953, p. 3).

By placing such a bold statement on the third page of the inaugural issue, Hefner announced to potential readers, and potential advertisers what exactly they could expect from the magazine.

Since the inaugural issue in December 1953, *Playboy* has dedicated vast resources to framing and circulating an image of its readership as a lucrative consumer market. The magazine worked hard to convince advertisers that its readers had a value that the readers of other men's magazines did not have. In its second issue, the magazine attempted to reach potential advertisers by informing them that *Playboy* was "the best possible medium for advertisers interested in reaching the urban male market" (*Playboy*, Jan 1954, p. 3). By 1955, the magazine began to be more specific and actually quantified its audience. One of the first instances of this was in the September 1955 issue in which

*Playboy* presented a two-page article entitled “About the man who buys the magazine: The *Playboy* Reader” (*Playboy*, 1955, pp. 36-37). The article presented the findings of a questionnaire that had been bound into every 37<sup>th</sup> copy of the April 1955 edition of the magazine. The article was overt about its intentions stating that while “we’ve always edited *Playboy* for a particular guy: sophisticated, intelligent, urban – a young man-about-town, who enjoys good gracious living. Potential advertisers are interested in a more specific picture of the magazine’s audience, however” (*Playboy*, 1955, pp. 36-37).

By September 1955 *Playboy* was able to be more specific. The magazine was able to report such demographic data as age (the average age of the *Playboy* reader was 29), education (over 70% attended collage) marital status (49.8% were not married, the other half were “free only in spirit”), occupation, favourite hobbies, amount of money spent on cars and clothing, smoking habits, drinking habits, mode of transportation on vacations and finally what other magazines readers bought regularly (*Playboy*, Sept. 1955, pp. 36-37). But instead of simply relying on statistics to parlay the value of the *Playboy* reader to advertisers, the company worked to produce a more literal image of a composite *Playboy* reader. During the same year, in an advertisement appearing in the trade publication *Advertising Age*, *Playboy* actually imagined a quote by the composite *Playboy* reader:

Don't get me wrong. I'm a hard working guy and I'm well on my way to the top in business. But I like to have fun. I like nice clothes, good food and drink, women. No, I'm only 29. I'm college educated, I earn a good living and I expect to earn a good deal more. I have faith

in myself and the future. I'm not worried about tomorrow, I'm living now (quoted in Watts, 2008, p. 77).

The magazine also produced an advertising campaign in its own magazine that visually articulated this composite reader. The campaign consisted of a series of images of young men reading the magazine in a variety of settings. Each setting highlighted a specific aspect of the playboy persona. For example, one ad from August 1956 showed a glamorous couple enjoying a meal at an elegant restaurant. The man in the ad reads a copy of *Playboy* magazine while his companion vies for his attention.

This design became pretty formulaic and a whole series of ads were produced that followed this model; a debonair man always accompanied by a sexy woman, reading *Playboy* in a setting where one usually does not read magazines, with witty text connecting the image to the *Playboy* readership and information on advertising opportunities.

Eventually these ads dropped the running gag of a man reading the magazine at inappropriate times, and transformed them into a campaign titled "What is a *Playboy*?" which 1958 morphed into the renowned campaign, "What Sort of Man Reads *Playboy*?" (WSMRP?) that continued well into the late 1970s. The ads for this campaign followed a standard layout: an image of usually one, but sometimes two or three, young men with beautiful women in various leisure contexts - horseback riding in Central Park, buying cigars in an elegant shop, playing records in a sophisticated apartment, driving a high-end convertible, travelling in Paris, or lying on a beach in an exotic locale. All of these ads answered the question of what sort of man a *Playboy* reader was with a series of

statistics covering such things as how the *Playboy* reader spends his leisure time, what his smoking habits are, what kind of hi-fi stereo equipment he might purchase, the number of cars he might own, or his choice in travel destinations.

These ads appeared in almost every issue, often on the back page. The overt purpose of these ads was to sell the value of the *Playboy* reader to potential advertisers. Some of these ads simply stressed the overall status of the typical *Playboy* reader, while others were designed to garner the attention of a particular type of advertiser.

Clearly the underlying logic behind the *WSMRP?* advertisements was to emphasize that the *Playboy* reader was sophisticated and financially successful. He enjoyed the finer things in life, and was committed to what Hefner called the “pursuit of pleasure”. The fact that the ads always concluded with how to contact *Playboy*’s advertising department reveals the intended audience of the ads. By mobilizing a visual and textual presentation of a composite *Playboy* reader, Hefner was able to explicitly sell the value of the *Playboy* audience to potential advertisers. But, as I will argue in the next section, this carefully crafted playboy persona is manufactured illusion of an imagined audience, designed to sell a somewhat attainable fantasy of masculine decadence. It is not a visual amalgam of an actual readership.

### **Defining Personae**

While *Playboy*’s persona is a commercial persona, the word ‘persona’, itself is etymologically derived from the Latin word for mask or character. It has been used in literature to refer to a social role in a script played by an actor. At the root of the word

persona is a concept of being a simpler, external representation of a more complex self or personality. Carl Jung has used the term to signify an outward social performance of a personality (Jung, 1999). The concept of a commercial persona builds out of these etymological roots. A commercial persona, like “the playboy” is not a representation of real person but is instead a portrait of selected attributes of an ideal consumer. It is a symbolic representation of a thoughtful selection of demographic and psychographic data of a market segment often produced and legitimated in the synergistic relations of the media marketplace. A commercial persona is much more than a construct referring to a social group. It is a corporate construct, forged in the matrices of the media marketplace, according to its logics. It is a commodified form of an abstract set of data that illustrates the idealized social identity, motives and psychology of a particular group of consumers. In Daniel Cook’s analysis of the toddler persona in the 1930s, he defines commercial personae as:

... assemblages of characteristics - known or conjectured, ‘real’ or imagined, - constructed by and traded among interested parties in the service of their industry. They are the negotiable currency of a merchant-class ideology which seeks to comprehend its subject, “the consumer”, in the abstract, with the goal of opening new markets or of maintaining and expanding old ones (Cook 2004, p. 19).

Cook provides a robust definition that positions persona as a means of ‘constructing’ and characterizing clusters of consumers within the synergistic logics of the media marketplace.

In the marketplace, commercial personae operate as a quick way to sell the value of an audience to the advertisers. A persona is an illusionary articulation of an intimately known cohesive market segment embodying a whole range of consumer and lifestyle habits. A persona is not to be confused with a character in advertising such as the Hathaway Man, the Jolly Green Giant, or even the Marlboro Man. The persona functions as a means to articulate and sell the value of an audience/consumer to the invested stakeholders; advertisers and readers.

### **Selling the *Playboy* Personae to Advertisers**

Right from the early beginnings of the magazine *Playboy* dedicated prime advertising space in its magazine to articulate an image of the ideal *Playboy* reader to advertisers. *Playboy* precisely outlined what the magazine was about to its readers, and as the magazine started to grow it launched aggressive campaigns with the principal aim of articulating and defining an ideal *Playboy* reader.

The political economist Dallas Smythe tells us that the media exist to sell audiences to advertisers (1994). Smythe argues that the audience's leisure time becomes a commodity that is sold to advertisers. The purpose of the media is to produce content that gathers the type of audiences who are valuable to advertisers (Meehan, 2007). Magazines produce content to gather a specific market segment but in order to be successful they must articulate the value of this market segment to potential advertisers. The media, like any other commodity, have to convince the buyer of the value of the consumer good.

The power of these *Playboy* campaigns were that they sold the potential value of the *Playboy* readership. The ads honed an image of a pure audience that could be sold to advertisers. In order to compete in a crowded arena of magazines, *Playboy* had to set itself apart from other advertising venues. [3] It not only had to lure an attractive audience with the right type of spending power, it also had to minimize the existence of the wrong type of readers; those readers without much of a disposable income, or readers who would not spend their money on the consumer goods advertised in the magazine (Preston & White, 2004). The ads worked as a means of convincing advertisers that the *Playboy* audience was “pure” and committed to a particular lifestyle of hedonistic consumerism.

The ads sold the *Playboy* reader as a market segment. Essentially, market segments are socially constructed categories of meaning. They are a way of making sense of a population for the purposes of selling products and maximizing profits. According to business rhetoric, market segmentation is seen as a rational, straightforward exercise in coming to know a group of potential consumers (Croft, 1994, p. 1).

But this rational and straightforward exercise of knowing a market segment is much more complex. Market segmentation is a means of apprehending human activity. It is a form of social organization in which the consumer becomes the object of the “market research gaze” (Cook, 2004, p. 19)[4]. This objectification of the consumer by market research is really a relationship of power. To use the term “gaze” is to imply that the act of looking awards power to the observer (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001; Mulvey, 1989). Observation then becomes a political act in which the object is looked upon through the lens of the observer’s values and preferences. The gaze functions as an organizational

tool in which the object is understood and defined in ways that privilege the preferences of the observer.

Following such logic, under the gaze of market research the audience/consumer (the object) is scrutinized according to the logics and needs of the market (the observer). Market research is deeply ideological since marketing is essentially a “body of expertise that simultaneously describes and constructs its subject matter” (Cochoy as quoted in Marion, 2006, p. 247). Audiences as a whole are abstract constructions formulated by the media industries. Building on Raymond Williams’ notion that “masses are illusory totalities,” Ien Ang states that an “audience only exists as an imaginary entity, an abstraction constructed from the vantage point of the institution in the interest of the institution” (1991, p. 2). An audience is not “an ontological given but a socially constituted and institutionally produced category” (Ang, 1991, p.3).

Just as the television audience did not exist prior to television, the *Playboy* reader did not exist prior to *Playboy*. The *Playboy* ads functioned as a critical component of the magazines constant work to constitute, produce and represent the institutional category of the *Playboy* reader who is, to rephrase Ang, “an imaginary entity” and an “abstraction constructed from the vantage point” of *Playboy* in the interest of *Playboy*.

The ads were more than just descriptions of selected data; they were visual representations of the demographic and psychographic data unearthed by the *Playboy* reader surveys and consumer reports. In order to get industry stakeholders such as advertisers and marketers, as well as retailers and product designers, to invest in this new image of masculine consumption Hefner had to sell them on the unique value of this



segment. Instead of relying on bland, lifeless demographic data to do so, Hefner utilized the power of forging a clear archetype of the market segment as a commercial persona. With the WSMRP? ads *Playboy* turned dry demographic data into a robust image of an urbane, sophisticated male consumer.

Hefner's magazine articulated a clear image of the quintessential *Playboy* reader, or what simply became the playboy. The WSMRP? ads along with the content of the entire magazine provided a visual and textual imagery that articulated the playboy persona; a persona that Hefner himself began to embody by the mid-1960s when he stated that he "literally came out from behind the desk and started living the life" (as quoted in Watts 2008, p. 222). Ever since, the image of Hefner of working all day in his silk pyjamas and throwing lavish parties at night at the Playboy Mansion while surrounded by a bevy of buxom women, added to his embodiment of the playboy persona. Together Hefner and the magazine honed a persona of a male market segment whom advertisers could count on to participate in the new economy of the postwar era.

The persona of the playboy was not the actual reader, and Hefner knew it. In a 1955 interview he admitted that *Playboy* was "an escapist magazine" projecting "the kind of life the reader would like to live". It offered men an "imaginary escape into the world of wine, women and song" while "the other part of him says he has to go back to his family responsibilities and his work" (as quoted in Watts 2008, p. 78). As Hefner stated, he believed that people sensed "right away, very early, it wasn't just a magazine. It was a projection of people's fantasy life" (as quoted in Watt 2008, p. 104). Not everyone was a playboy, some were only playboys at heart.

But it was not completely an escapist fantasy for readers. If the entire magazine was purely a fantasy of an inaccessible lifestyle then readers would not be enticed by the ads. The Dress Right campaign (discussed in the next section), the television shows and the WSMRP? ads all indicated to the reader that they could access the playboy persona and could participate in the fantasy of escape, even if it was only for a brief time. This strategy would be critical in making sure that the readers of the magazine, actually contemplated buying the products advertised. Without selling a story of an accessible lifestyle, readers might never have bought the goods that were advertised in the magazine.

As Barbara Ehrenreich has so eloquently illustrated in *Hearts of Men*, the philosophy of *Playboy* was a hedonistic response of men to the confining life of postwar suburbia and the stifling pressures of the breadwinner ethic imposed on men (1983). The playboy persona provided men with a symbolic reference of masculinity that could be used to help them make sense of their place within the shifting cultural landscape of the late 1950s and 1960s. But in doing so, the persona provided new references of masculinity that met the needs of the postwar economy to expand into new markets

### **Selling the *Playboy* Persona to Readers**

While the Playboy campaigns obviously appealed to advertisers, they had another benefit of interpellating the readers by incorporating the “you”. This was the real brilliance in Hefner’s marketing strategy as it sold the value of being a reader to the

*Playboy* reader himself. While many other magazines also gathered data on the habits of their readership, this data mostly appeared in the trade publications such as *Advertising Age*. With the campaigns *Playboy* moved selling the value of the audience out from the confines of the trade press and placed it directly in the magazine. This is where Hefner's genius really shone. Instead of simply telling potential advertisers who the *Playboy* reader was, he told readers who they were and, more importantly, what type of consumers they were. Hefner used the persona to do more than sell the magazine to advertisers, he sold men on the value of being a *Playboy* reader and by extension sold the fantasy of living the life of the playboy persona to readers themselves.

In forming a persona of a quintessential playboy, the magazine sold the fantasy of an entire lifestyle. *Playboy* created opportunities for men to immerse themselves in the playboy lifestyle. *Playboy* readers could ensconce themselves in the playboy lifestyle by buying the lavish accoutrements advertised in the '*Playboy Bazaar*' section of the magazine (my favourite, the fur-lined ice bucket) while advertisements in the magazine told readers what to drink, wear or buy to be sophisticated and suave, and the columns told them how to appreciate jazz or make gourmet dinners.

In the summer of 1956, *Playboy* launched a campaign that promoted particular clothing retailers as those worthy of *Playboy's* approval. The campaign was called "Dress Right" and for a price of \$9 retailers would receive a *Playboy* window display and have their stores location listed on a long list of "top retail stores". This allowed small local clothing shops to align themselves with the *Playboy* brand without having purchase an entire advertisement in a national magazine.

What is important about the Dress Right campaign is that it illustrates how *Playboy* extended the commercial through its synergistic relations with other businesses (in this case men's retail).[<sup>5</sup>] Both the men's clothing stores and the magazine were invested in honing a particular vision of the *Playboy* consumer as a man of fine fashion and taste. But the Dress Right campaign did something more, it allowed for actual men to engage in the branded experience of being a playboy.

Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s *Playboy* continued to create opportunities for men to immerse themselves in the playboy lifestyle. In 1959, Hefner launched a syndicated television program called 'Playboy's Penthouse,' a variety show hosted by Hefner himself that took place during a cocktail party in a chic penthouse apartment. Guests of the show included Tony Bennett, Lenny Bruce, Ella Fitzgerald and Phyllis Diller. Opportunities for the immersion into the Playboy brand went beyond watching the show from the comfort of one's own living room; men could actually experience the swinging lifestyle of the playboy. In 1959, the first Playboy Club opened in Chicago. For \$50 the club gave its members (called keyholders) "the gentlemanly privileges and pleasures of relaxing in [their] very own club" where they could be served by "The Playboy Club Bunnies, each selected for her beauty" (*Playboy*, October 1963, p. 175). Following the success of the Chicago club, franchises soon opened up in New Orleans, Miami, New York, Phoenix, Boston and Los Angeles along with international locales such as London and Manila. The magazine jokingly referred to these clubs as "Disneyland for Adults". For *Playboy* these clubs offered plenty of synergistic opportunities as they provided content for the magazine; advertisements for the clubs

appeared regularly in the magazine and often various *Playboy* clubs were highlighted as feature articles.

### **Playboy and the Playmates Sell Accessible Connoisseurship**

While all of these endeavours from the Dress Right campaign, to the television show, to the clubs, illustrate the synergies of the *Playboy* brand, they also contributed to a wider narrative that legitimized middle-class men's right to participate in the hedonistic pleasures offered by the postwar marketplace. The fantasy of the playboy lifestyle was not completely beyond the reach of the middle-class man (Osgerby, 2001, p. 166). The magazine gave real access to the fantasy lifestyle that men could actually experience, even if just for a moment; readers who subscribed to the magazine for over a year were called by a real Playmate, the retailers and products in the magazine were within the means of many of the middle-class men who read the magazine. And the clubs, while \$50 may have been a bit extravagant at the time, were still feasible for middle-class men. In September 1960 the magazine introduced the *Playboy* Advisor to answer "questions on a wide variety of topics of interest to the urban male – from fashion, food, and drink, hi-fi and sports cars, to dating dilemmas, taste and etiquette" (as quoted in Beggan, 2000). The column functioned as an extension of the playboy persona and operated as a space to field questions from readers on how to incorporate aspects of the playboy consumer ethic into their own life.

The presence of the Playmates provided three critical aspects to the image of the playboy persona that was sold to both the readers and the advertisers. Firstly, as well

documented by Barbara Ehrenreich, the women confirmed the heterosexuality of the playboy. Staying indoors to listen to jazz, or trying to find the ingredients for a gourmet meal were activities that could potentially be seen as socially deviant in the context of the 1950s. The playboy, as Ehrenreich argues, “didn’t avoid marriage because he was a little bit ‘queer’ but on the contrary, because he was so ebulliently, even compulsively heterosexual” (1983, p. 11-12). The women reassured everyone of the heterosexuality of the playboy persona despite his inclination towards more feminine activities. This was crucial, of course, in acclimatizing the male to the more feminine activity of consumption. In the course of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, consumption, particularly personal and domestic consumption had become reified as largely a feminine activity, as documented by many scholars such as Mica Nava (1992), Angela McRobbie (1997) and Joanne Hollows (2000). Since it was mainly seen as a feminine activity, the Playmates reconfirmed men’s heterosexuality while the magazine simultaneously preached the pleasures of consumption.

The second role of the Playmates was to tie sex to consumption and in doing so naturalize a masculinity of sophisticated connoisseurship. In *Playboy*, Hefner promoted the good life of material abundance and pleasure: “Our readers believe in the good life and so do we,” he explained in a 1954 issue (Watts, 2008, p. 89). Admiring attractive women was as much part of that good life, as fine wines and expensive tailoring. The playboy persona was a heterosexual male as much as he was a sophisticated consumer who sought out new material pleasures. Appreciation of both the female figure and luxurious consumer items were rolled into one. Playmates confirmed that the readers

were men of taste since they enjoyed the finer things in life; fine wine, fine food, and fine women. This mantra of good taste allowed advertisers to imbue those standards onto their products. *Playboy* magazine only had the best; the best women and by extension the best products. *Playboy* even promised its readers that that “advertisers [would] be selected with the same care that the centerfold and editorial content are” (*Playboy*, March 1955, p. 4). As Gail Dines notes “rather than just commodifying sex, *Playboy* also sexualised commodities, a combination that few advertisers could resist” (Dines, 256).

The linking of sex and consumption provided a narrative that naturalized men’s participation in consumer culture. Men’s desire to look at attractive women was confirmed as innate both in the editorial content that accompanied the dewy photo spreads of co-eds and, more overtly, in the saucy cartoons that peppered each issue of the magazine. A typical cartoon depicted a voluptuous woman oblivious to the fact that she is being ogled by a man whose innovation in finding ways to leer at her provided the punch line. In one such cartoon, a man in an apartment below a young woman installs a glass ceiling into bottom of her bathtub, in another a woman hastily steps out of her shower wearing only a small towel, to answer her door exclaiming to a guilty looking older man that she can’t figure out who is sending her telegrams at the same time everyday. The joke is that men cannot help it; they are so driven to find ways to see voluptuous women that they concoct ridiculous schemes. The beautiful women are naively oblivious to these schemes as they do not have such impulses. Of course, the other running gag in the cartoons, are jokes of old and ugly women trying to find ways to trick men into having sex with them. The men have to be tricked as they resist the old and ugly.

This narrative that positions men as naturally driven to ogle beautiful women and reject the unworthy, is ubiquitous in the magazine, and can be extended to justify male consumption. *Playboy* presented a simple formula; if men's desire to look at beautiful women is innate, and if beautiful women are one of the many finer things in life, then men's desire to consume the finer things in life must also be innate. The glossy photo-spreads in the centre of the magazine were more than a gimmick to garner sales, they reified luxurious consumption as a natural component of masculinity.

The *Playboy* Playmates made the fantasy of the persona appear to be accessible. The girls chosen to be Playmate of the Month were what Hefner called "girl next door types". Instead of being an impossible fantasy, the Playmate was supposed to be the girl everywhere. She could be, as the magazine told its readers, "the new secretary at your office, the doe-eyed beauty who sat opposite you at lunch yesterday, the girl who sells you shirts and ties at your favorite store" (*Playboy*, July 1955, p. 5). According to Vince Tajiri, the magazine's photo editor, "(Hefner) liked to create an image of them as natural where the girl was just caught in a moment of her life, when she was doing something, or has just done something and then looks up at the camera" (as quoted in Watts 2008, p. 89).

The *Playboy* Playmate was to look out at the reader and invite him in. Instead of being an unattainable dream, the Playmate was supposed to be a real possibility. Men could find beautiful young women like this everywhere if they just started to pay attention to the possibilities. Such a suggestion provided a perfect foil for middle-class consumption. If the "exquisite beauties" of the magazine were everyday women who



could be found everywhere and if one just had the right appreciation for beauty, then the other accoutrements of the finer things in life were also easily accessible.

The girl next door was in all of the WSMRP? ads. While she was fully clothed she was part of the consumer experience in the ad. She was the retail clerk at the cigar store, the passenger in the sports car, the diner companion at a fancy restaurant or the waitress at a cocktail bar. Her presence reminded men of the possibilities of her accessibility as she linked consumer desire to sexual desire. Beautiful women and luxury goods were within the means of the sophisticated (yet middle-class) playboy once he acquired the cultural capital to appreciate both and with *Playboy's* assistance he could. It is of no surprise that one of the first advertisers in the magazine was the Diners Club Card, a credit card that could assist men their pursuit of hedonistic material pleasure over the more staid responsible goals of saving money.

## **Conclusion**

Under the direction of Hugh Hefner, *Playboy's* early success was predicated upon defining and building its audience through mobilizing the synergies of the magazine with market research to produce a textual and visual representation of the illusionary market segment embodied as the playboy persona. This persona of the male consumer could be counted on to participate in the new market economy of the postwar era. For advertisers, the playboy persona legitimated new avenues of male consumption and allowed men to justify their desires of luxury consumer goods. For readers, the persona could operate as a

potential site of subjectivity and validate men's participation in the hedonistic pleasures of the postwar marketplace.

Forging a successful persona, like the playboy, was really the articulation of a social identity that cultural industries could mobilize as a potential market as well as providing a resource that individual consumers could use to map out their own sense of their consumer selves. The playboy was not a real person, but a figment of the commercial imagination. He was the personification of a male consumer that crystallized within the pages of *Playboy* magazine as Hefner dedicated vast resources to defining, illustrating and eventually living the life of the playboy. Hefner's key strategy in doing this was in moving market research from the behind the scenes, and incorporating it right upfront into the content of the magazine, either in the form of editorials, marketing campaigns with stores, or more spectacularly the WSMRP? advertisements. But the playboy was also forged in the synergistic relations of the marketplace as *Playboy* expanded beyond being just a magazine to incorporate a wide range of businesses from books, to television shows, to resorts and clubs. Each of these business practices added depth to the carefully crafted persona of a male consumer who could be relied upon to open up new areas of commodity consumption in the postwar era of material abundance by reassuring men that their desires, both sexual and consumer, were innate components of modern masculinity.

*Playboy's* mobilization of a persona is part of a larger history of market segmentation and the media. *Playboy's* development of a playboy persona took place in an era when magazines, in an attempt to keep themselves relevant in the era of television,

were moving to conceptualize their readership in new ways. It is part of a broader history of market segmentation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in where aspects of subjectivity are organized and visualized according to the logics of the marketplace. In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, other successful persona have expanded beyond marketing discourse and have been taken up by popular culture to become discursive resources of subjectivity. Examples include the toddler in the 1930s (Cook, 2004), the teenage girl in 1950s (Schrum, 2004) the yuppie in the 1980s (Leiss, Kline, Jhally & Botterill, 2005) and the tween in the 1990s (Coulter 2014). Successful commercial personae such as these become reified and taken up as legitimate components of subjectivity that transcend the marketplace. Yet, despite the many examples of this, there is a dearth of scholarship that contextualizes this strategy within the broader history of consumer culture and market segmentation.

Tracing the development of the playboy persona allows for insight into how commercial personae function as visual articulations of assemblages of market data that become the negotiable currency of the media marketplace. This study gives insight into the ways that market data have been mobilized to legitimate certain patterns of consumption. Asking questions of the playboy in the past, opens up new questions on how, in a current context with big data, does data get organized, articulated and translated into discursive forms that are recognizable and by extension tradable between the synergistic industries of the media marketplace.

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<sup>1</sup> In order to differentiate between *Playboy* the magazine and the playboy persona, the magazine is capitalized, while the persona is not.



<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that while *Playboy* mainly targeted a white middle class male, the issue of race is not a simple one, and worthy of an article in and of itself. Hefner very much saw himself as part of the Civil Rights movement; the Playboy Clubs had a firm policy of racial integration, the Playboy interviews featured a number of prominent civil rights leaders including Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X and Cassius Clay, and in 1965 the first black Playmate Jennifer Jackson appeared (Watt 2008, 197). *Playboy* suggested that part of being a sophisticated modern American male was to have compassion and racial tolerance.

<sup>3</sup> Based on information from the reader survey in the September issue in 1955, there were over 13 magazines that were bought regularly by at least 5 % of the Playboy audience

<sup>4</sup> This idea is built on Laura Mulvey's (1989) notion of the gaze.

<sup>5</sup> The playboy persona was not just limited to the pages of the magazine, the persona extended beyond the boundaries of the publication and could be seen in many other cultural texts such as James Bond and the Rat Pack of the 1960s. Successful commercial personae have cultural legitimacy when they start to circulate outside of the narrow confines of a singular media text.