

Women's Magazines. Editorial Practices and Cultural Recommendations¹

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Abstract: *This article aims to analyze the relationship between the internal philosophy of two successful Romanian cultural products aimed at the female public – the magazines Unica and Avantaje – and their perception of said public, reflected in the cultural recommendations and news sections. These magazines are analyzed from the perspective of critical feminist theories in their capacity as media culture products but also that of indicators for the tastes and lifestyles of their readership. The conclusion drawn is that Avantaje magazine oscillates between recommendations of personal enrichment literature and casual, rainy day, cinnamon scented evening literature as well as gift-worthy books, concerts (including children's concerts), reality TV shows. Movie and theatre recommendations are, however, almost entirely absent. These are the elements comprising the practical guide of the "Avantaj woman", a superwoman who manages to handle her family life, her career and, why not, her personal development. Unica's recommendations section is, on*

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the other hand, much more diversified in all fields, aiming for a readership of strong women, eager to succeed in all endeavors, looking for a new way of life. The magazine becomes the feminine readership's counselor in this undertaking, proposing a new model of consumption-sanctioned femininity, this time through the consumption of cultural products.

Keywords: *media culture, women's magazines, cultural practices, lifestyle, Romania.*

Introduction

Inspired by the Hollywood movie *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), Romanian researcher Romina Surugiu states that "choosing an unimportant garment is more than a personal decision, it's a cultural gesture" (Surugiu 2012, p. 18) encouraged and guided by women's magazines. Reflecting on this observation, one comes to question the nature of the decisions regarding the choice of literature, movies, concerts and other cultural activities that we engage in. Therefore, this paper deals with the issues of glossy women's magazines' cultural recommendations and news found in "Lifestyle" or permanent sections.

The author of this study has chosen to analyze women's press as part of the media culture (Kellner 2001), capable of offering insight into contemporary society and, more specifically, female consumers which make up the readership of this particular press category. For the purpose of this analysis, women's magazines are considered an indicator of taste and lifestyle choice of their readers and also one of the cultural identities of said public.

Even from their beginnings, women's magazines have been conceived as advice handbooks for survival in a patriarchal culture (Storey 2009, p. 153). They keep this function to this day as they represent a merger of entertainment and useful advice reflecting the aspirations, yearnings and interests of women while the cultural sections are the monthly cultural allowance dedicated to their readers. The points to be clarified in this analysis are: 1) Who composes the readership of the two publications chosen in this paper?, 2) What sort of cultural news and recommendations do Romanian glossy magazines offer their readers? 3) How are these offered?, 4) What are the differences between the two magazines on this point in relation to their assumed vision of their readership?

In order to answer these questions, the author has chosen two glossy women's magazines with quite a history in Romania. On the one hand, there is *Avantaj* magazine, the first western-model magazine to appear in post-communist Romania in 1995. It is an IPC Media (Essentialis, UK) franchise edited by The Romanian Publishing Group which has been very successful on the local market

and continues to be one of the main players in this media sector (Surugiu 2012, p. 32). On the other hand, we have *Unica* magazine, a local, successful title, launched two years after *Avantaje*, in 1997. Today both magazines are owned by the same media corporation – Ringier Romania – disputing with other local and international competitors a young, well educated and well off audience with high expectations (Surugiu 2012, p. 32).

Women's magazines – a product of media culture

In the view of Douglas Kellner (2001), media culture contributes to the creation of a common culture intrinsic to a majority of individuals in many parts of the world, as it delivers materials needed to create identities through which individuals become a part of the techno-capitalist society. This form of culture is defined as an industrial culture, organized along the lines of mass production and intended for a large audience, divided by genre, which follows conventional formulas, codes and lines (Kellner 2001, p. 13). Media culture needs to resonate with current themes and preoccupations as this type of culture is of high actuality, offering hieroglyphs of contemporary social life (Kellner 2001, p. 13). The same author subsumes to this culture the radio, television, cinematography, newspapers and magazines and other cultural industry products which have a role in modeling our perception of the world and its fundamental values. As previously stated, focus will now be shifted towards a special category of media culture aimed at the female public - glossy magazines.

Women's press is composed of publications which claim to be "dedicated to a female clientele and whose surveys indicate that their faithful readers are in fact women". (Cayrol 1991, p. 232) It is a press with tradition, a large and somewhat stable readership base whose origins date back to the 18th century and the audience that this type of press manages to mobilize places it in a solid position in both international and national markets. A definition of women's magazines is that they are a consumer publication with monthly, bimonthly or weekly issues, a high quality of their printed material and a strong focus on traditional women's interests: beauty, fashion, health, psychology, relationships, children's education, cooking; however, the way in which these themes are dealt with and presented varies between publications in accordance to their target audience (Surugiu 2012, p. 20).

Douglas Kellner (2001) considers that cultural studies are best undertaken within the context of critical social theory, an opinion shared by the author of the present study as in the following pages she will opt for contributions of critical feminism in regards to the study of women's magazines. Romina Surugiu (2012) points out that women's magazines were the first periodicals which sparked researchers' interest, while Anna Gough-Yates (2003) in her book *How can we*

understand women's magazines? attempts to answer her title's question with a review of the types of analysis undertaken in regards to women's magazines, mentioning critical feminist analysis of the media. We therefore discover that in the '60s most researchers argued that mass media contribute to the entrenchment of differences and gender inequality in contemporary society. From this perspective, the representations offered through mass media appear as instruments creating an oppressive female identity. Feminist critique has branded the media industry as a system of domination, of manipulation through ideology. From this perspective, the industry of women's magazines is seen as a monolithic producer of meaning which creates magazines containing messages and signs relating to the nature of femininity, whose goals are to promote and legitimize dominating interests (Gough-Yates 2003, p. 7). Early feminist analysis of this type of publications reveals distorted representations of women (van Zoonen 1994). This is the case of Betty Friedan (1963) and Gaye Tuchman (1978) who have presented women's magazines as dangerous and estranging, as texts which work to separate women from one another and from themselves (Gough-Yates 2003, p. 8). In the '70s-'90s, more sophisticated critiques emerged, ones which integrate the analysis of cultural and social context, but also the interest for readerships and their perspectives. The contributions of Neo-Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1970) on ideology and that of Italian Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci (1971) on cultural hegemony (S. Hebron 1983, M. Ferguson 1983, J. Winship 1987) were essential to the development of said critiques. In the mid '80s, postmodern and poststructuralist theories had important implications for the study of women's magazines. To these one adds the contribution of Foucault (1997) who argues that meaning, in the case of women's magazines, is not pre-existent, waiting to be discovered by the researcher, rather, it is produced by discursive forms. In this context, certain authors opt for interpretative approaches and ethnographic methodologies, which signify the exploration of the cultural phenomenon from the perspective of the study's subject (Gough-Yates 2003, p. 12).

In the following period research focused on production and consumption, including interviews with editors but also publishers, participant and non-participant observers and also analysis of the economic situation of the women's magazine industry (Surugiu 2012, p. 43). Therefore, some researchers who have dealt with the study of women's press conclude that the magazines can be best analyzed by taking into account production conditions (Angela McRobbie 1991 and 1999, Pamela J. Creedon 1993, Margaret Beetham 1996, Liesbet van Zoonen 1998, Anna Gough-Yates 2003, David Gauntlet 2002, Tim Holmes 2008 and Liz Nice 2012).

Anna Gough-Yates (2003) considers that the magazine industry should be seen as a cultural domain and M. Ferguson (1983) views soap operas, romantic novels

and women's magazines as cultural products which can be easily attacked from a critical feminist standpoint. As they address almost exclusively a female audience, they institute a cult of femininity and, as van Zoonen (1994) suggests by reiterating Ferguson's (1983) idea, they "set the agenda for the female world," (van Zoonen 1994, p. 35) an undertaking which the feminist researcher equates with patriarchal attitudes: "Such a strong conviction about the value (or rather lack of it) of these media for women's lives, is remarkably similar to patriarchal attitudes of men who claim to know what is best for women" (van Zoonen 1994, p. 35).

On the other hand, Angela McRobbie (1999) considers that nowadays women's magazines are not only read by young women, but also written and edited by young women who have interesting lives and no interest in perpetuating the patriarchal order in the magazine's pages (Gauntlett 2002, p. 189).

In her paper, *Reading Women's Magazines*, Joke Hermes (1995) attempts to reconstruct several repertoires identified in her interviews concerning the consumption of women's magazines. She identifies four repertoires: "Easily put down", "Relaxation", "Practical knowledge" and "Emotional learning and connected knowing". The first of these identifies women's magazines as a genre that does not demand much of its readers – it can be easily picked up and put down, therefore easily integrated into daily routine. The second repertoire identifies women's magazines as a form of entertainment – more so, a method of isolating oneself from others in social context – when reading a magazine a person signals that they are not available to be engaged in other activities. The third repertoire may contain advice ranging from cooking tips to movie reviews. Readers may utilize this practical advice to imagine an ideal self, pragmatic and most importantly, in complete control. The last repertoire is also about knowledge but instead of focusing on practical advice, it details learning through the understanding of oneself, of one's lifestyle and possible problems as well as the problems of others represented in the pages of the magazines (Hermes 1995, pp. 31-39).

Following practical advice available in this type of publication, women attempt to reproduce the model of femininity which is socially and culturally sanctioned. The problem that this search of femininity through consumption raises is – as explained by John Storey (2009) – that it is constructed around the *mythical individual woman*, which resides beyond the constraints imposed by powerful social and cultural structures (Storey 2009, p. 154). Angela McRobbie (2008) observes that in this day and age young women avoid traditional communities in which gender roles were fixed, therefore they must make choices regarding their lifestyle (McRobbie 2008, p. 19) and women's magazines take the role of counselors regarding women's life choices. For this reason, McRobbie emphasizes the normative dimension of the popular discourse of personal choice and self-

improvement. On the same note, Nicolas Rose (1999) sees this model of individual self-determination as a manner of *shaping of being* and, therefore, a way of instilling a new way of life (McRobbie 2008, p. 18).

In Romania, glossy women's magazines are in the category of theme press – press which has become diversified following the interests of the public. The two publications, *Unica* and *Avantaje*, can be included through the classification put forward by M. Coman in the entertainment and public interest categories (Coman 2003, p. 79) and by those of Claude-Jean Bertrand, in the category of publications specialized according to dominant themes or the age of their target audience (Bertrand 2001, p. 43).

Cultural practices recommended by women's magazines: an indicator of their public's lifestyle

Cultural practices represent behaviors, attitudes, actions, tendencies of individuals or social agents with regard to literature, cinema, music, theatre, dance, press, television, etc. Philippe Coulageon (2005) defines them as a type of consumption activity involving intellectual and artistic life, which in their turn involve the use of aesthetic devices and take part in defining lifestyles (Coulangeon 2005, pp. 3-4). Research in the field of cultural sociology has emphasized the importance of the "sex" variable in the subject of cultural practices and for two good reasons: on the one hand, it influences all cultural practices and on the other hand, the differentiation between consumers' gender is a cornerstone in sociological inquiry.

With regard to the cultural practices of Romanians, a study conducted by IRES in 2010 concludes that men (30%) go to shows more often than women (16.6%). Also, the former listen to radio more (82% vs. 76.8%) and going to the cinema tends to be a dying cultural practice in present day Romania as only 8.7% of interviewees go to the cinema at least once a year – while 34.5% of Romanians buy at least one book per year. Moreover, a recent study by BRAT, whose results were presented during the conference entitled *Marketing for Women*, identified some very interesting details regarding urban Romanian women's media consumption. These results were summarized by Ionut Maxim in an online article published in 2013. One finds out that, although interest for classic media channels has dropped, magazines occupy the runner up position after television and 51% of women identify themselves as part of their readership. Also, following this study, one can observe the mutations which have taken place in recent years in the socio-economic standing of the women of Romania. For example, in 2012 (30%) the number of university graduates doubled as opposed to 2002 (15%) and the percentage of women which have a monthly income between 215 € and 501€ increased from 2% in 2002 to 18% in 2012. The relevance of these observations is increased when

linking them with Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) observations which correlate the level of education with the will for cultural participation.

This presentation of the cultural practices of Romanians and, more specifically, those of Romanian women, has shown them to be important consumers of women's magazines - even though the general trend for consumption for this type of publication is in decline, in favor of consumption of similar material delivered via the Internet. In the following pages, this paper shall be focused on the cultural news and advice sections available in glossy women's magazines. For this analysis the author has chosen two national publications, both monthly issues in print and both at the forefront of Romanian women's preferences: *Unica* (11789 copies sold – BRAT, 2013) and *Avantaje*, (11861 copies sold – BRAT, 2013).

Comparative analysis: *Unica* vs *Avantaje*

Avantaje is the first women's magazine to have appeared in post-communist Romania and defines itself as a practical guide for the contemporary woman, proposing a type of femininity which is both harmonious, balanced, dedicated at the same time to family, career and personal development. The target audience is women aged 25-45, graduates of higher education, married, who want to be well informed and involved in what is going on around them. Also, readers are perceived as espousing strong traditional values, while at the same time remaining open to new ideas, investing time and money in their personal health and development.

Unica defines itself as a glossy magazine dedicated to powerful women, eager to succeed both in their careers and their personal lives, as well as a counselor for its readers since its editorial team adds personal experience to everything that finds its way into the magazine. Without detailing their readership's profile, this magazine targets a female audience which is eager to be well informed regarding everything that is new.

In the pages that follow the author shall address the third repertoire identified by J. Hermes (1995) regarding "practical knowledge", more specifically, the realm of book, movie, TV and concert recommendations as they appear in the May and December issues of the two glossy Romanian magazines. With regard to structural details which differentiate the two publications: in general, two pages are allotted to cultural news and recommendations, always towards the end of the magazines, in which photographs of the advertised cultural products are accompanied by explanatory texts. Also, the categories of cultural products differ: while in the May issue of *Unica* only literature and movie recommendations make an appearance, the December issue's offer is much more diversified as, in addition to the previously mentioned categories, one finds recommendations concerning art exhibitions, dance, opera and music. *Avantaje* also offers literature

and movie recommendations and, on top of that, includes concerts (specifically, two concerts of the National Radio Orchestra, one of which being a Royal concert), TV documentaries (also two: *Dream Vehicles* on History Channel and *Gang World* on Crime & Investigations Network), ballet and children's opera (*Mirandolina* and *Figaro* at the Children's Comical Opera).

In *Unica* magazine, these recommendations are integrated into the *Lifestyle* section - although according to the description available on Ringier's site, they are part of the *Leisure* section which is neither mentioned in the table of contents, nor in the magazine itself, making it difficult to separate from the *Lifestyle* section. The December issue was different in regards to this section as it contained a special article, it was twice the number of pages long and presented an additional novelty: typical recommendations offered by the editorial staff were replaced by the recommendations of so called urban "taste leaders" (Frank Mort 1996) or "beautiful people" as they are called by the author of the article which merges all of these recommendations. They come from different backgrounds, most often involved in some way with cultural production - writers, actors, directors, painters, choreographers, musicians, photographers, but also curators, designers, bloggers and even chefs. Conversely, in *Avantaje* magazine, literature recommendations as well as those regarding concerts, movies or television are permanent sections. Having examined the structural differences between the two publications regarding their cultural products recommendation sections, the following pages deal with the recommendations themselves, emphasizing those for literature and cinematography.

Literature recommendations

With regard to literature recommendations, the May issue of *Unica* proposes to its readers a historical saga, *Blood and Splendor* which represents the chronicles of the Borgias written by Sarah Dunant, the *Autobiography* of Agatha Christie, 77 *Legends of Prague* by Alena Jenkova, which is a sort of tourist's guide composed of legends of certain places from the Czech capital and *Best of Short Stories of the Years 2000*, which is a collection of short stories by literary critic Marius Chivu, intended to update the magazine's readers on the most recent and most appreciated short stories of the last decade. In December the recommendations come from notable people invited to "share" with the magazine's readers their latest discoveries. Among these there are three books: Florin Piersic Jr. recommends *Room* by Emma Donoghue, which the actor describes as a novel "that you just can't put down"; Otravă, the blogger which works on the *My Romania* project recommends *My Love, Sputnik* by Haruki Murakami, which he describes as "a modern love story" between two women and the musician Dan Byron recommends Sting's autobiography - *Sting. Broken Music*. It is noteworthy that all three recommendations from the

December issue are made by men. Of the eleven people who have undertaken to writing recommendations in this issue, only two are women (the painter Mihaela Trăistaru and artistic director Anda Roman).

Avantaje magazine offers many more recommendations which oscillate between personal development books and casual readings for “rainy days”. In the personal development category there are two titles: *Women who Love too Much. Why We Always Fall in Love with the Wrong Men* by Robin Norwood and *What I Say and What You Hear. Why Men and Women Speak Different Languages* by Deborah Tannen. The former contains the advice of a psychotherapist with regard to a problem considered thoroughly feminine in nature, excessive affection, while the latter comprises the advice of a linguist intent on dousing the smoldering conflict of the sexes brought on by conversational differences. In the casual readings section one finds, in the May issue of *Avantaje* the following titles: *Princess Bari* by Hwang Sok-yong, *Sumki: A Story of Love and Adventure* by Amos Oz, *Goodbye, but I'll Stay a Little Longer* by Nick Hornby and *Dear Life* by Alice Munro. The first is a reinterpretation of a Korean legend, the second is an eleven-year-olds' initiation journey through the world on a bicycle, the third is the basis of a movie of the same name, while the last is a fictional reflection on the meaning of life. All of these recommendations, exotic in terms of their subject, are part of the fiction category and comprise the practical guide of the readers of this magazine. In the December issue, *Avantaje* magazine awards the title of *Book of the Month* to a detective novel which “resonates well with vacation” specifically *Copoiul din Cardiff* by Lucian Ciuchiță. The title of the permanent section is “Readings and Movies – food for thought and soul” and the article is “Your favorite read. Vacation’s up, friends are waiting, books are waiting...”. There is no mention of the section’s editor. After the literature recommendations for “rainy days” of May, the December issue has recommendations “for cinnamon scented evenings” comprising the short story *Sfârșit de sezon* by Marius Chivu, two initiation novels: *The Relentless Passing of Time* by Justin Go, *The Incredible Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* by Rachel Joyce and finally, *America de peste Pogrom* by Cătălin Mihuleac, which is a book on the history of Iași recounting the persecutions of the interwar period up to the pogrom of 1941.

Movie recommendations

In the case of cinema, the situation is reversed; while *Avantaje* offers only one movie recommendation – the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* reinterpreted in true Hollywood style as *Maleficent*, *Unica’s* offer is much more diversified and offers three titles, one being Romanian and deigned “movie of the month”. Therefore, in the case of Movie recommendations, the place of honor is given to *Selfie*, a Romanian comedy combining the major themes of *Liceeni* (first love, friendship, fun, initiation), but in a contemporary approach. The second recommendation is

Fading Gigolo, a romantic comedy with a professional Don Juan, a movie choice which should go well with the magazine's female readership. Finally, the third recommendation is a new movie from the *X-Men* franchise: *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, in which characters of the *X-Men* trilogy meet their alternate selves.

Aside from these sections, *Unica* magazine also offers interviews with actors, for example the one with Olimpia Melinte, one of the protagonists of *Selfie*. The actress offers information and insight into other productions in which she has been involved (*Canibal*, *Setteopere de misericordia*, *Planşa*) and also the awards for which she has been nominated and those she has won. This interview is apparently in complement to the movie recommendation from the *Lifestyle* section of the same publication where *Selfie* was nominated movie of the month.

In December *Avantaje* magazine does not offer any movie recommendation but instead presents four reality-TV shows aired on the History Channel: *Miracles Decoded*, *Duck Dynasty – A Peasant's Christmas*, *Pawn Stars – Christmas Stories*, *The Legend of Shelby the Swamp Man – Shelby's Christmas*. In *Unica* magazine there are two movie recommendations: another suggestion by Florin Piersic Jr., the thriller *Blue Ruin* (2013) directed by Jeremy Saulnier and another by musician Dan Byron, the comedy *Begin Again* directed by John Carnley, both movies with strong dramatic undertones.

Two editorial paradigms: two types of audience

A comparative analysis of the two magazines reveals the two different editorial paradigms which target two different categories of public. As far as literature recommendations are concerned, *Avantaje* magazine oscillates between books for personal development which offer miraculous solutions for couples' harmony or for finding one's other half and relaxing reads for the vacation or for rainy days. With regard to movie recommendations, these are either very few or downright missing, as are theatre recommendations. One does, however, encounter "object-books" which can be offered as a gift for Christmas (together with painting collections such as those of the great masters from the Vatican) and children's shows. This comprises the practical guide of the woman of *Avantaje*, a superwoman which manages to deal at the same time with her family, her career and, why not, her personal development. The readers of this magazine are thus aided to "identify themselves with new values and create a new lifestyle with affordable solutions and prices" as is shown in the publication's description on Ringier's site.

Taking into account the literature recommendations, *Unica* magazine's offer, while less numerous is more diversified, including biographies, short story collections, tour guides and Japanese literature. The same can be said concerning the movie recommendations, which bring together comedies, thrillers, dramas,

science fiction productions as well as blockbusters in a glossy women's magazine in order to complete this mosaic of its readers' cultural interest. Also revealing of *Unica's* view of its public is the way in which it chooses to offer cultural recommendations in December. Drawing in remarkable persons from different domains betray, in my opinion, the readership's desire to assimilate their lifestyle to that of the people asked to share their cultural practices and make those recommendations. The target audience of this publication is the "young professional woman" (Weymouth and Lamizet 1996, p. 53), a new image of femininity, the "new emancipated femininity" (Lazar 2011, p. 38) – a woman who, according to Angela McRobbie (1999) is searching for a new way of life.

In this process, women's magazines present themselves as counselors for the life plans of women, becoming a vector of identity definition and the inspiration for a new way of life. Moreover, the public becomes a space of projection for women's magazines' editors. In the editorial logic of each of the two magazines analyzed here, the readership is invited to play the role of "friend" of the publication. Therefore, following marketing studies aimed at determining the profile of the ideal reader, the reader receives a whole series of advice aimed at guiding their daily choices. This observation prompted Anna Gough-Yates (2003) to remark that "the magazine was keeping its finger on the pulse of young women's cultures." (Gough-Yates 2003, p. 16).

Conclusions

In light of the undertaken analysis the author draws the conclusion that women's magazines are still preoccupied with the functionality of information, as they are guided by the utility that this information may have in the daily lives of its readers. This tendency was called by John Fiske (1989) *popular discrimination*, a category whose dominant characteristic is *relevance*, discovered or produced by the readers (Fiske 1989, p. 129). The other preoccupation of women's magazines is their vision of the readership it counsels in the choice of a lifestyle. Dedicated to the belief that what they consume defines them, women are caught in the process of *cultural recycling* (Baudrillard 2005, p. 126) dictated by the consumer's necessity to update their *operational baggage* (Baudrillard 2005, p. 127), or, to phrase it in Bourdieu's (1984) terms, to consolidate their *cultural capital* necessary in everyday life.

Profoundly despised by some authors (Richard Hoggart, 1958) but applauded by others for the fact that they do not force meanings or strict directives upon their readers, women's magazines remain a resource which women can use at will (John Fiske, 1989). As is the case with other goods of the cultural industry, the ones which one finds advertised in women's magazines' pages offer multiple and diverse uses and pleasures (Fiske 1989, p. 158). Therefore, this type of publication,

as is the case with television, books, newspapers or movies, is popular specifically because of the many uses that it offers its readers. In light of these observations, the author shall endeavor to carry out a future study and continue to analyze women's magazines, focusing on images of fashion available in the fashion and style sections, but also in advertising, seen as images of women published in this press category for a public which is itself under the effects of a certain social imaginary.

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