Modern Day Sophistry in Popular Men’s and Women’s Magazines

The ancient Sophists argued for a diverse range of human possibilities and felt that all humans were capable of learning how to be a functioning and influential part of society. This threatened elitists who were afraid that the common citizens would gain more power. The same held true for high society when popular magazines started to have a stronger influence on American society as a whole. By following the advice of these magazines, the middle and lower classes now had the potential to elevate themselves through material means to the levels of the traditional upper-class families. We argue that this trend continues today and can be interpreted as a form of modern day sophistry. For a small fee, readers of all classes can buy a popular magazine and essentially purchase instructions or tips on prevailing issues in their lives, including dating, body image, and lifestyle. Like the Sophists, the publishers of these “manuals” have ulterior economic motives that can create harmful situations to the reader that takes the advice at face value. Citizens today, like the citizens of ancient Greece, fear the negative impact these magazines can have on society as a whole and the magnitude of impact on the values of the readers.

In the fifth century B.C., elitists like Plato were afraid of the societal effects of average citizens gaining power. The same held true for high society when popular magazines started to
have a stronger influence on American society. This trend began in the 1960’s, and began to disturb members of higher social statuses in the country.

“The author of the 1960’s Ladies Home Journal article on society is not dismayed by the fact that money rather than birth can afford entry into the highest social ranks. She provides a virtual how-to manual of the proper schools, dancing classes, and wardrobes. ‘In the past fifteen years,’ she concludes, ‘the desire for status has reached new proportions.’”

The upper-classes during this era feared this new trend and were threatened by the increasing power of the lower classes. By following the advice of these magazines, both the middle and lower classes now had the potential to elevate themselves through material means to the levels of the traditional high class, wealthy families. Like the oligarchy class during the times of Plato and Aristotle, the growing popularity of these magazines aimed at the general public were starting to create great changes in society. Advertisers learned that the middle classes were big spending classes and that the women of the families were the ones who controlled the family incomes.

As Walker mentions in her book about the marketing sentiment in the 1940’s, “U.S. Housekeeping is today Big Business, indeed- all in the hands of 28,581,680 housewives who, in order to keep their homes in apple-pie running order, spend a total of $5,285,000,000 yearly” (117). Advertisers wanted to reach this audience and for the first time began launching multi-million dollar campaigns. Since these companies wanted to target the middle-class housewives, the content of the magazines became focused on helping these women to meet their fashion, beauty, and housekeeping needs. This trend continued on through the 50’s and still continues today. Today, men of the middle class are included in the target audience of marketing companies, and hence also have a huge influence over the content of magazines such as Playboy and Maxim. Women’s magazines such as Good Housekeeping, Cosmopolitan, Elle, as well as
the men’s magazines mentioned, have helped the middle class become dominant in our society and have provided instructions on how to elevate to advanced social status. They have taught both men and women how to emulate the behavior of the upper-class through proper manners, fashion, beauty regimens, house decoration, and social activities.

While Sophists may have sold unreflective advice to their students without considering how the advice would be utilized or the potential negative consequences it could have on society, they were also concentrating “on the power of language in shaping human group behavior explicitly within the limits of time and space” (Jarratt 11). The article content and advertisements in popular contemporary men’s and women’s magazines work in the exact same way; the direct and indirect messages implied in these publications may communicate unreflective advice on issues such as body image and relationship/dating advice, but they also utilize the power of language to target, influence, and inform their primary audiences of popular societal issues. In “Boxing Helena and Corseting Eunice: Sexual Rhetoric in Cosmopolitan and Playboy Magazines,” Nicole Krassas reports that these publications “tell us how we should look and how we should act” (1). Our research analyzed feature articles and some advertisements that focused on or influenced the two popular issues of body image and relationship/dating advice in five popular magazines: Playboy, Maxim, Details, Cosmopolitan, and Glamour. We argue that these publications serve as a form of modern day sophistry in a number of ways (flattery, homonoia, arête vs. nomos), but more specifically by selling advice on these two topics just as the Sophists sold their instruction on the art of rhetoric.

**Body Image Messages**

Body image is probably one of the most popular and controversial subjects addressed/implied by magazines today. One could argue these publications serve as both the
Mother Theresa and the devil’s advocate in their address and depiction of body image; articles that warn against the dangers of breast enhancement surgeries ("The Boob Job Epidemic") project a positive message regarding acceptance of all body types, while fashion magazines advertising the latest clothing styles only show clothes tailored for thin women. Surprisingly, we found that all magazines addressed and/or influenced the topic, regardless of the primary audience’s gender. As April Brinkley states in her article, “The Politics of Aesthetics: A Comparative Analysis of Men’s and Women’s Fashion Magazine Covers,” “While a preoccupation with female beauty has been long considered our societal norm, there is evidence that emphasis on men’s appearances is on the rise (Mishkind et al., 1986; Gross, 1985). For the first time, a quantifiable increase in the explicitness of male images is shown; now, male images showing more skin are being added to the media’s long-time reliance on women’s bodies (Reichert et al., 1999)” (3). Men are beginning to feel the pressures of measuring up to ideals portrayed in magazines that women have been feeling for decades.

*Playboy* has long been known for advocating a fun-loving bachelor lifestyle, but through analyzing the feature articles on fashion and celebrities, one can easily see how a certain body image is being projected. The magazine’s primary audience of men probably does not realize or recognize the many ways in which a particular body image is being projected onto them while reading the magazine. In our analysis of this publication, we observed that most of the male figures depicted throughout the pages were stylishly dressed and extremely hygienic.

The fashion feature “Time for Topcoats” uses all dark-haired, dark-skinned men to model topcoats. The fashion item itself implies success, while the models reify the “tall, dark, and handsome” body image. Besides reading the fashion features, readers can also be indirectly
influenced through the famous interviews *Playboy* conducts. In most cases, those interviewed were attractive, successful men distinguished in their fields.

Interviews are not the only means for projecting a specific body image. Upon opening the magazine, the reader is faced with an advertisement portraying Donald Trump with his beautiful fiancée on his arm. Once again, if the reader buys the product Mr. Trump is endorsing, and more importantly, if the reader buys the magazine that contains this advertisement and endorses this lifestyle, the reader will also be successful and attractive—a particular body image.

*Details* magazine did not differ much in the article content and advertisements regarding body image. Many of the advertisements were the same, and the magazine’s interview was with successful men’s fashion designer Kenneth Cole. The models pictured in the fashion article were similar to those featured in *Playboy*—dark-haired, dark-skinned attractive and slender men. Upon opening this particular magazine, the reader is introduced to a four-page clothing label advertisement featuring an athletic and attractive young man. Both *Details* and *Playboy* contained many of these indirect body image projections.

The third men’s magazine analyzed, *Maxim*, has a strong influence on men’s body images. While the models and advertisements do not stress hygiene as strongly as *Playboy* or *Details*, a fashionable appearance is strongly suggested through feature articles and advertisements. The reader must flip through nine clothing advertisements all showcasing an attractive young male model before reaching the Table of Contents. Once the reader reaches the Table of Contents he can flip to the magazine’s main article, a 22-page layout entitled “Fall Style Guide.” This “guide” showcases attractive and successful male celebrities and famous politicians dressed in the latest fashions. Through articles such as the one noted above and various fashion advertisements such as the nine in the front of the magazine this publication is
projecting an attractive body image through the main message implied throughout—the reader must buy the clothes to attain the magazine’s particular projected body image, but how else would they know what clothes to buy unless they bought the magazine to find out?

But how are the messages regarding body image communicated in these publications harmful to the reader? If a reader drank as much alcohol as is advertised in these magazines (21 alcohol advertisements alone in *Playboy*), he would probably have serious drinking and health problems. If a reader bought the clothing and other various gadgets showcased in the feature articles in order to gain a “positive” body image, he would probably be broke because all the items are expensive and unaffordable to the average reader.

More popular than men’s magazines when analyzing body image messages, women’s magazines are infamous for communicating certain ideal (and unrealistic) body images to their female readers. In her article “Beauty and Body Image in the Media,” Robin Gerber reports that “women’s magazines have ten and one-half more times more ads and articles promoting weight loss than men’s magazines, and over three quarters of the covers of women’s magazines include at least one message about how to change a woman’s bodily appearance—by diet, exercise, or cosmetic surgery” (2). We found severely hypocritical messages regarding body image in both women’s magazines analyzed in this study.

*Cosmopolitan* has long been known for its sexually themed content, so it would only be natural to find an article discussing the pros and cons of breast enhancement surgery in such a magazine (“The Boob Job Epidemic”). However, while this article may appear to promote a healthy natural body image initially, if a reader were to flip to the back of the magazine she would be faced with a plastic surgery advertisement selling discounted breast enhancement and liposuction surgeries. Besides this blatant display of hypocrisy at its worst (best?), this
publication also included articles on “getting gorgeous” (beauty tips) (“40 Get Gorgeous Tips”) and perfecting your body’s trouble zones (“Fab Abs-Fast”). The models featured in the magazine’s fashion layout were all bone thin and had some part of their cleavage exposed.

Equally disturbing and hypocritical are the messages pertaining to body image contained in *Glamour* magazine. The magazine included articles on demystifying weight loss myths (“It’s a Lie!”) and on overcoming body obsessions and accepting your body shape (“How to Stop Being a Good Girl—and Start Being a Great Woman”), but then bombarded the reader with images of thin models and messages on obsessive calorie counting (“Go ahead—Eat!”).

Just as the Sophists were driven to sell their teachings for a profit without considering the ill effects of such teachings, these magazines and others like it are driven by profits without considering the negative aspects of advice on issues such as body image and how these issues are projected. Both types of magazines pushed unrealistic body images that are unattainable to some men and women. Gerber also notes that “by presenting an ideal difficult to achieve and maintain, the cosmetic and diet industries are assured of growth and profits” (1). Readers sometimes view these body images and are convinced to attempt to attain them in harmful and unhealthy ways.

**Relationship/Dating Advice**

Just as common as advice on body image is the advice given on relationships and dating. Four out of the five magazines analyzed in this study gave some sort of direct advice regarding this issue, and it was interesting to see which magazines tailored their advice to reflect both participants in relationships. Similar to Krassas’s article, we attempted to “analyze the rhetorics of popular magazines to demonstrate how sexuality [relationships/dating] is constructed in similar ways by sources directed to men and women” (1). *Playboy* gave its advice on this
subject in three forms: feature articles, advice columns, and Playmate interviews; Details offers advice, but it is strictly structured to get the man what he wants without considering the woman in the relationship. Maxim offered practically no relationship/dating advice, but seemed to encourage its readers to “hit on” or “pick up” women in various ways, none of which went beyond a one night stand.

Cosmopolitan and Glamour appeared to take a more scientific approach when advising on relationships, dating, and sex. Glamour conducted interviews, while Cosmopolitan included a “Man Manual.” But behind the scientific approach in both of these magazines lay the overriding theme of sexuality and its importance in improving relationships. Cosmopolitan may have included a “Man Manual,” but this article along with the others all focused on sexual issues, while excluding other relationship matters, such as friendship, trust, and honesty. Glamour included a “Relationship Report” to reveal real-life relationship dilemmas, but each dilemma revolved around a sexual issue.

Surprisingly enough, Playboy persevered in offering relationship/dating advice addressed to both men and women, but failed in offering any topics beyond sexual advice. Krassas contends that “both Cosmopolitan and Playboy reflect the male gaze” and “even when the audience is women and the sex is presumed to be heterosexual” the “focus of the sexual gaze is still the woman” (7). The Playboy advice column “The Playboy Advisor” attempted to formulate its advice to appeal to both the man’s and woman’s sexual needs, while the Playmate interviews strongly expressed the woman’s sexual needs and wants (“Centerfolds on Sex: Nicole Wood”). Articles explaining how to create the perfect night with her in mind (“The Perfect Night”) gave three rules in creating a perfect night, but it was really the perfect night for him in that the article
guaranteed if the reader followed the rules contained therein he would have her “eating out of the palm of your hand” (Baime 3).

*Details* was perhaps the most disturbing in its advice offered to its readers on this topic. Articles such as “Daddy’s First Affair” encourage new fathers to cheat on their wives as a release of stress from a new baby. Not only did we find this advice to be completely disgraceful and disgusting, the article obviously does not consider the woman’s feelings, needs, or wants in the relationship. More importantly, if taken at face value, the advice offered in this article could permanently damage or end a marriage and break up a family.

All the magazines analyzed in this study that offered relationship/dating advice failed to consider the harmful effects of their advice. Some advice offered could potentially do more harm than good to the relationship, and the sexual promiscuity underlying all these magazines is dangerous to readers’ health and self-esteem. This topic is one of the most popular societal issues facing men and women today, much like the art of rhetoric was appealing to young men in ancient times. And just as readers will pay a price to read and possibly take advice on this issue, students of the Sophists paid a fee to obtain instruction on the art of rhetoric.

Sophists were known for implementing flattery to obtain and sustain business, much like these magazines flatter their readers by making them believe that they can look like, act like, and basically live like the people featured in its pages. Similar to flattery was the like-mindedness, or homonoia, that Sophists helped cultivate amongst their students. Through their lessons, Sophists helped foster unified perceptions of ideal styles of living; popular contemporary men’s and women’s magazines also help foster unified perceptions of topics ranging from body image and relationship advice to fashion trends and self-improvement. Readers from all economic classes in all cities throughout the nation read and analyze the same information contained in these
magazines, albeit retaining what information they choose, but nonetheless, readers are taking the same love quizzes, reading the same advice columns, and analyzing the same fashion trends—gaining unified perceptions.

Further comparisons between the Sophists and modern magazines can be drawn by examining the terms *arête* and *nomos*. Sophists claimed to teach arete, meaning excellence, “in the management of one’s own affairs,” and it was Protagoras who challenged popular belief that arête was innate by claiming that it was something that could only be attained through training. Protagoras would probably argue today that the magazines analyzed in this study are prime examples of trainers of arête. Just as the Sophists claimed to help their students improve themselves through the acquisition of certain skills, magazines claim to help improve the lives of their readers through instruction on topics such as body image and relationship matters.

Nomos, defined as custom or convention, was thought by the Sophists to be a product of society and civilization, and while man was a product of nature, he was also a member of society. We contend that nomos is enforced through articles and advertisements on various topics in men’s and women’s magazines today.

**Economics**

In ancient Greece, the Sophists were notorious for charging high fees for services with no guarantees. Gorgias was rumored to have a sold gold statue himself made at his death, showing off his extravagant wealth and success as a rhetorician. (Jarratt 2). This was the first era in Greek history that, for a fee affordable to the middle, and in a few cases, the lower classes, citizens could be schooled on how to argue, and in a sense elevate themselves in society. First and foremost the Sophists were running a business selling knowledge—that was their bottom-line.
Today’s popular magazines sell on average for a fee between $3.50 and $4.50, and offer advice on how to become a high class citizen through fashion, cars, etiquette, dating, and grooming. The over-riding motive behind the magazines is to make money and maintain successful corporations. Playboy, for example, makes an estimated twenty-five million dollars a year in operating profits. (Barrett 1). Each magazine has huge marketing contracts with other companies that are out to sell their products primarily to middle class Americans, especially women. Studies have shown that women have emotional impulses that influence their purchases, and corporations are out to exploit this weakness. (Walker 107). They want to make a profit in order to stay in the popular magazine market. As Ellen McCracken notes in her book Decoding Women’s Magazines, “A magazine’s concern for upholding the dominant ideology is less important than its desire to attain commercial ends” (214).

When considering popular magazines from a business perspective, it is important to analyze elements beyond just marketing. Another key factor in high magazine sales is the provocative nature of model poses and the shock factor of the article titles advertised on the cover. Studies show that magazines sell significantly more magazines if the covers of the magazines contain provocative article titles and more riskay model poses. (Brinkley 4) The content of the magazines is designed more to sell than to really reach out and help women.

In magazines today, the trend of marketing the idea of an elevation in social status continues. Looking through women’s magazines such as Glamour and Cosmopolitan, one comes across countless style guides, persuading women to buy clothing that is extravagantly expensive. For example, in the December 2004 issue of Cosmopolitan, there is the monthly fashion guide which features a Gucci dress in the $500-$1000 dollar range on the first page, a ruffled lace blouse on the second page that runs $275.00, a choker necklace that is $185.00, a
velvet and lace corset on the third page that sells for $264.00, and a silk dress on the fourth page that is $450.00 (200-207). These are not sponsored advertisements, but part of a regular fashion feature. In the monthly beauty article, the magazine features a title “40 Get-Gorgeous Tips”, which includes buying Dior DiorKiss lipstick for $19.00 a tube, Chanel eye color for $46.00, Bobbi Brown Eye Palette for $37.00, Cargo Blush for $22.00, Victoria’s Secret All that Shimmers Body Powder for $27.00, and Lucky Chick Spaermet Foot Fetish Foot Cream for $20.00, among over twenty products (219). In the Living section there is the recipe for the Kir Royale cocktail, which consists of 8 ounces of crème de cassis liquor, and 2 bottles of champagne, and a recipe for Gauncho Snacks, which calls for New York strip steaks and a fancy Chimichurri sauce, which should be served alongside salmon and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese appetizers (232). This issue then goes onto recommend the sexiest resorts in the world and suggests staying at the hotel Guanahani in St. Barthelemy, which starts at $390 a night, Hotel la Banane which starts at $380, and Hotel Monanco and Grand Canal which starts at $210 (250). For most of the products, clothing, or hotels mentioned, the magazine also includes the celebrity or celebrities that use the product or wear the clothing to build its credibility on why the product is a “must have.” There is also an article titled “Could you Ever be a Millionaire?” giving advice to women on how to make exorbitant amounts of money (164).

The same trend holds true for the men’s magazines. In the November 2004 issue of Details magazines there is advice on spending money on items such as a Stan-Craft wooden speedboat for $90,000, Chateau Rieussec dessert wine for $37.00, leather book binding of favorite novels which starts at $1200, and a safari vacation in South Africa for $6,000, to name a few (112-114). These items are suggested in order to lead a luxurious and comfortable lifestyle in a high class manner. This same issue also provides style advice on putting together formal
wear attire and suggests a Prada $2320 wool-mohair suit, $490 Helmut Lang shoes, a $115 Giorgio Armani tie, as well as other alternatives all within the same price range (141-156). This is just one of three different style sections all advising men to buy very expensive name-brand attire.

Both the men’s and women’s magazines create ideals of fine living and layout a framework for individuals to achieve this status in life through the straightforward advice of making specific purchases. Like the Sophists, they provide the individuals with the information they need to know in order to elevate themselves, but they do not focus on guiding individuals in regards to how that advice actually plays out. Teachers like Gorgias and Protagoras provided students with techniques to argue and win legal debates, but they did not guide them along the way after preaching their methods. It was up to the students to decide how they would carry out the methods taught. Popular magazines also merely provide the necessities for the high-class lifestyle, but do not guide readers towards earning the money or maintaining the items purchased. They just provide a long list of suggested items, and it is up to the individuals to use their own judgment to decide which is most appropriate for their lifestyle. The flattery employed when presenting these items can manipulate individuals to purchase items which might not be best suited to their particular lifestyles. Similarly, the argumentative methods outlined by the sophists were not always the best methods for individual situations, and could create heightened problems for some individuals that applied the methods in the wrong situations.

Ethics

In the fifth century B.C., the ruling classes of Greek society were concerned about the growing popularity of the Sophists and the effect their teachings would have on the middle and lower classes. They felt that sophists like Gorgias and Protagoras were corrupt and that they
were teaching citizens how to lie and manipulate their way out of lawsuits and public affairs. Elite citizens like Socrates criticized Sophists like Gorgias for, “teaching a form of flattery and for their ignorance of the subjects of which they spoke” (Kennedy 7). For a small fee, regular Greek citizens had the ability to hire a sophist to teach them how to advance in society. Similarly, the predominately Christian society of the 1940’s, 50’s, and 60’s were skeptical about the effects that popular magazines would have on the moral values of women. In her book *Shaping Our Mothers’ World*, Nancy Walker discusses the concern women began having about the values the magazines were beginning to instill in the culture. One woman mentioned in the book wrote, “It never occurred to us that advice on how to look and dress and cook better, how to make a home lovelier to live in, was less important than a polemic on the Christian ethic” (59). Values were beginning to shift and some women were trying to fight back. One woman from Connecticut wrote to the editor of *McCall’s* magazine in 1960, “With your advice on make-up and clothes, you are not appealing to the average American women but to the eccentric, egocentric woman who has nothing on her mind but money and how best to put it on her back. Why must you show the glamorous and surface things in life? I don’t think women really want this” (137). Another woman from Idaho wrote about advice given in *McCall’s* in regards to suggestions on consumption given to newlyweds, “I was much upset with a recent column of ‘The First Year.’ A reader was actually advised to buy both a Hi-Fi set and some furniture on time payments rather than to make a choice of one. I consider this very poor advice in any case extremely poor for many people. Some of the answers in that column appear to be flippant rather than of help to people” (137). People were beginning to recognize the negative effects that magazines could have on mass numbers of women who read these popular publications. The values of women were beginning to focus on material items that were worn or purchased for
the house. If women did not possess these things or strive to own them, then they were not considered valued, fashionable, or with the times. The problem only got worse over the next few years. “By the early 1950s, the spending of money had become not merely the implicit message of magazine advertising, but also a topic to be dealt with in an editorial content. A January 1952 Redbook article advised readers ‘Don’t be Afraid of Credit.’ The author chided those who resisted borrowing money and buying items on credit” (Walker 134). Magazines encouraged women to start using credit in order to obtain the items that they needed to be admired in society like expensive appliances, home décor, and fashion accessories. It became common for magazines to run articles telling women to resist spending on one page, but encouraging them to buy an expensive designer dress on the next. Women at this time were not familiar with credit and were often led into disastrous and dangerous credit and financial situations because of the misleading advice of the magazines in order to promote spending for their advertising partners. Advertisers knew that “women often made purchases for emotional reasons but at the same time were apt to exert rational control over the family budget,” and they came up with clever methods to exploit women’s emotions in order to get them to buy products (Walker 107). Women were shifting their values from family and education and moving ahead in the world through their personal achievements to owning material items and wearing certain labels in order to fit in. In magazines today the same articles are being run and the same values are being implied. As discussed in our Economics section, women are told in Cosmopolitan and Glamour to save money and create a budget, yet they are bombarded with advice suggesting that they purchase thousand dollar dresses and luxury vacations.

The authors of articles in magazines and their intentions in writing also pose ethical concerns for the audience. Sophists were viewed as dangerous and unethical for spouting
knowledge on anything without having real grounding in the subject matter they were preaching about. They were unreflective about the consequences of the advice they were giving. The same holds true for authors today. Joan Barrall and Brian Braithwaite note in their book, The Business of Women’s Magazines, that citizens in the 1950’s were concerned about who was offering serious advice in regards to relationships. “Didion, who wrote articles on saving marriages, focused on the simplistic and blithely optimistic nature of Popenoe’s (the marriage counselor) advice, which usually required the woman of the couple to do most of the adjusting. One wife whose husband was about to abandon her for another woman was encouraged to engage in what Didion describes as “a cool battle involving her losing 8 pounds, learning to choose smarter clothes in more becoming colors, and joining the League of Women Voters” (Barrall 53).

Barrall and Braithwaite go on to give more background of these authors describing their approach to writing as comical, and without real concern for the plights of these women. These women were at fragile and difficult stages in their lives and they are turning to popular magazines for advice. Society was concerned about the intentions of the authors and editors at this time and the lack of reflection on the true effect their writings had on a huge part of the American population. This still holds true in articles today, as we can see in the Details article about the cheating new fathers that was discussed in the relationship section of this paper. The article was written partly in jest, but to some that take the advice seriously, it can pose life-shattering repercussions.

Another ethical concern in regards to popular magazines is the conflicting advice that occurs on serious issues affecting the majority of the audience. Sophists in Greece would present information merely to win arguments. Both Hippias and Gorgias bragged they could talk impromptu on any topic. (Jarratt 2). The strategies employed were more important than the
actual information presented. In turn, they were heavily criticized for the conflicting nature of their advice. There are conflicting messages in regards to serious issues in magazines today. For example, in the latest issue of \textit{Cosmopolitan} there is an article about the dangers of breast implants, and then an advertisement expressing the benefits of them a few pages down (not to mention most of the girls featured have large breasts). This reveals the unethical nature that exists in these magazines. Breast implants can lead to life-threatening and life-altering complications and giving conflicting advice can have dire consequences on young women.

Again, as mentioned in previous sections of this paper, the \textit{Details} article gives advice to new fathers on cheating, which can lead to divorce, and have severe emotional consequences on the man, the woman, and the child involved in this situation.

Many people in society say these magazines are only for fun, and that the dangers they pose are misrepresented. As David Buckingham and Margaret Scanlon say in their presentation on Media, Pedagogy, and the Marketplace at the International Forum of researchers, “This may be a matter of superficial rhetoric. An outward appearance of ‘fun’ and informality often appears to serve as a veneer for material that is highly prescriptive and didactic” (Buckingham 1). While some of the authors write these articles with a comical twist and some of the advice is meant to be humorous, some individuals mistake the articles content as serious and apply the methods discuss directly to their lives. Studies show that these magazines are a very important element in women’s mass culture, and they truly change the reality of women’s lives and are used as a measurement standard against individuals’ lives. “Festinger’s theory of social comparison holds that people seek to satisfy their need for self-evaluation through use of social-standards- by comparing themselves with other people (Festinger, 1954). Often, the other “person” may be an image obtained through media exposure” (Brinkley 2). Women who turn to
these magazines are often times at fragile and difficult stages in their lives and they are turning to these exaggerated ideals presented in magazines for advice. The authors of the articles are sometimes reported to “think they know more about the subject than the old woman who lived in the shoe,” which is similar to what was said about the sophists, but in reality have absolutely no expertise in the area. Sometimes the articles are even written in group situations with advertisement executives, clearly not reflecting on the effect their writings had on a huge part of the American population.

Overall, the role of both the sophists in ancient Greece and the role of popular magazines in the United States promote the growth of homonoia among citizens, which is bound to raise ethical concerns. When advice is generated for a vast audience, there are always going to be ethical concerns involved, especially when the advice is fueled by economic motives. It is important that the ethical implications and effects of the advice are analyzed so that the information disseminated is ultimately used in the majority of cases in order to promote positive effects in the lives of individuals.

**Popular Magazines as Modern Day Paideias/Pedagogies**

The sophists are most famous for their popularity in their era as instructors of rhetoric. They were practical teachers that taught very applicable methods of persuasion and argument in short teaching sessions. For the first time in history, this group of individuals claimed that they could teach individuals *arête* or “excellence,” as described in the relationship section of this paper, in making decisions for their own affairs, or the affairs of the state.

Up to the fifth century B.C. it was the common belief that *arete* was inborn and that aristocratic birth alone qualified a person for politics, but Protagoras taught that *arete* is the result of training and not innate. The Sophists claimed to be able to help their students better themselves through the acquisition of certain practical skills, especially rhetoric. Advancement in politics was almost entirely dependent upon rhetorical skills (Philosophical Background 1).
The sophists developed an effective pedagogy that was actively sought after and that proved to be extremely profitable. Though their teaching methods were criticized for being unreflective and hazardous to some individuals, the citizens of the time were eager to quickly learn ways to better their own personal affairs. They wanted to learn easy, practical skills that would improve their rhetorical abilities and their effectiveness as citizens in the polis.

There are many distinct parallels between the pedagogical aspects of the ancient sophists and the pedagogical qualities of popular magazines today. Popular magazines are purchased by individuals who are anxious for advice on how to quickly fix faltering aspects of their lives, particularly in regards to relationships and body image. They are affordable “manuals” promising on the covers to provide “how-to’s” on “Buying Sexy Clothes for Real Bodies,” obtaining “The Best Going-Out Hair and Makeup of All Time,” and buying “America’s 10 Tastiest Sandwiches.” These magazines, like the sophists, seemingly believe that individuals can be “trained” to better themselves and that through practicing the advice laid out, their individual lives can be advanced.

The sophists were criticized by elitists like Plato for being hazardous to society and unreflective of the effects that their teaching styles could have on the lives of their students. They provided the service of teaching knowledge, but did not spend time with their pupils to teach them about how to use their skills for moral purposes. Because their main motive was monetary success, they presented their knowledge in a very applicable way and it was up to the students to take it or leave it. Like the sophists, magazine writers today often make their ultimate goal bringing in good business rather than actually helping the individuals paying for their services. Magazines provide the same “take it or leave it” sort of advice on everything from fashion to dating. For example, in the December issue of Glamour magazine, there is an article
titled “The New Beauty Etiquette: The Dos and Don’ts of Public Primping.” There are five “rules” that are presented, including “Do squeeze on the tiniest bit of hand cream. Don’t slather body lotion all over your body,” and “Do gloss your lips-quickly-at the table. Don’t spend agonizing minutes carefully applying lip pencil and color” (57). Some women might alter their usual mode of primping based on this advice, but when this advice is reflected upon, it proves to be pretty case dependent. Nine times out of ten, it probably does not matter if an individual carefully applies lotion to his or her arms in full sight of other people. Overall, the writing in the magazines is very formulaic, usually written in manual style, and, in some cases, can be very dangerous for some individuals if taken at face-value, as can be seen in Appendix A.

Another parallel between the teaching methods of the sophists and popular magazines today is the question and answer style organization of instructions. The sophists were known for introducing a question and answer style of teaching into their pedagogy, a popular technique in magazines today. It is common for magazines to have questions posed by readers answered in a monthly question and answer column. Readers will pose a question and the magazines will respond with formulaic advice on how to deal with the issue presented. For example, in the December 2004 issue of *Glamour* a reader wrote in, “My husband killed himself a year ago, and I just cannot get past it. How can I move on with my life?” (150). *Glamour* goes onto suggest that she realizes that she is not to blame for this situation, that she “commemorate her loved one by leading an active life of charity and love,” and by talking to a counselor about the tragedy in a way to be a living “memorial” to her late husband (150). This question and answer sort of approach is a useful way for specific questions to be addressed in a general way that is helpful for a wide range of readers from different backgrounds.
Sophists would often bring their students to watch oratory performances and would after hold a discussion session, where pupils would pose questions and analyze some of the techniques implemented or presented by the speaker. Today, the target audience of the magazines often times reads the magazines alone, and then converses with friends about the advice presented. It is extremely common for both girls and guys to read excerpts from magazines together and discuss the advice presented. Oftentimes, groups of friends will all have subscriptions to magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim*, and will discuss the latest articles, and the effectiveness of the advice over lunch or while watching television. They respond to questions posed in the magazines and discuss even more specific ways to implement the advice into their individual lives.

It is evident that both the sophists and popular magazines are interested in teaching the cultural development of man as a participating member of society. As discussed in the article, “Philosophical Background of the Fifth Century B.C.,”

The Sophists saw man himself as a product of nature, but society and civilization as artificial human products. On one hand, man is a natural creature subject to certain laws of nature which he cannot help but obey. On the other hand, he lives in a society, the rules and structure of which have no roots in nature and are based only on custom. The distinction here apparent is one between nature (*physis*) and custom or convention (*nomos*), a commonplace antithesis in fifth century literature popularized by the Sophist (Philosophical Background 1).

Both the teachings of the sophists and popular magazines in today’s society serve as paideias in order to teach men and women how to be elevated and respected members in society. They are both important factors in the development of effective citizens in the polis and modern day democracy.

**Conclusion**

Our research has led us to conclude that there are strong and significant parallels between the way Sophists were perceived in society during their time and the way popular magazines are
perceived in society today. Sophists experienced varying cultures with different notions of truth and adapted a pragmatic paideia to their changing society. Magazines, like the ones discussed in this paper, are distributed across our nation, with readers varying from men and women living in small towns to individuals working in the big cities. They have different work environments, family units, dating norms, fashion trends, and overall lifestyles, and the magazine is imposing singular views on all these issues for a widely diverse audience. The effects of these magazines have the power to influence readers and to create changes in their perceptions of how they should live their lives. In many ways, women use these magazines as a measuring tool to compare their lives with the magnified lives portrayed in the articles. They in turn refer to the magazines as instruction manuals and adapt the changes recommended or implied to alter their lives.

Popular men’s and women’s magazines today really do have a major impact on their intended audiences and the negative effects on society should be analyzed, much like the negative effects of the sophists were analyzed by ancient society in Greece. The ethics of the magazines, like the sophists, are questionable and, in turn, present a threat to the well-being of those who follow their advice unreflectively.

On a positive note, Sophists are credited with becoming a human agency for change. They are lauded for producing helpful solutions for problems of pleasure, pain, profit, loss, and providing ways to elevate social status in the Greek polis. Magazines serve this function today. In many cases, the magazines allow the middle and lower classes of American society to purchase ideas on how to improve their lives for a small fee. They provide useful techniques for improving the quality of life for a wide range of individuals. By examining the parallels of the ancient sophists and popular magazines today, we raise awareness of the negative effects of
economic motives, yet learn from the useful aspects of affordable paideias that enable middle class citizens to advance and become prominent in society.
Appendix A

Chart (with explanatory notes) listing forms of paideias/pedagogies in
*Playboy, Maxim, Details, Glamour, Cosmopolitan*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men’s Magazines</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Playboy</em></td>
<td>Advice column, Q&amp;A with playmates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Maxim</em></td>
<td>Doesn’t offer any direct teaching tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Details</em></td>
<td>Offers a variety of “how to’s”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women’s Magazines</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Glamour</em></td>
<td>Include guides, do’s &amp; don’t’s, and Q&amp;A’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cosmopolitan</em></td>
<td>Offers “how to’s,” tips, manuals, checklists</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Playboy*
- Doesn’t have any guides or manuals, but it does suggest “rules” in its articles

*Maxim*
- While it doesn’t offer any direct teaching tools, such as “how to” articles, it does indirectly instruct its readers how to live a certain lifestyle
- A female reader recently wrote in thanking Maxim for article on “Be Her Boy Toy,” stating “As an attractive 36-year-old woman who usually dates men in their twenties, I’ve found that I prefer the zest-for-life, free-spirit, no-nonsense attitude that most twentysomethings possess. That article was a perfect instruction manual on how to score one of us.” (P.36)

*Details*
- Includes article on how to be a landlord, ins-n-outs of real estate market
- “How to Get a Good Hooker in Amsterdam” offers tips on hooker hunting making the most of your mole…gaining confidence

*Glamour*
- “The Do’s & Don’ts of Public Primping”, “Going Out Do’s and Don’ts”

*Cosmopolitan*
- “How to Earn Boyfriend Brownie Points”, “How to Put Sizzle Back into Your Duo”, “How to Supersize Your Sex Life”, “Little Tests that Size Up His Love”
- Includes a crib sheet on decision-making and a style checklist
Works Cited


The magazines you can take to the beach or just have it in your handbag so that you have something to do waiting for your friend in a coffee shopâ€¦ So, here they are, the top 10 womenâ€™s magazines that every fabulous woman would truly enjoy wherever she is: 1. â€œVOGUEâ€œ.Â - by K. M. Winick-Ford VOGUE is undoubtedly the leading modern magazine on womenâ€™s style. The articles are excellent, photography is a sophisticated feast of a great taste, all of its 700 pages are blossoming with fabulous images of the finest clothes, accessories, cosmetics, and everything else a women can dream of. You will find yourself attending the hottest society parties, visiting studios of the best fashion designers, travelling to the most exotic resortsâ€¦ Great read for every woman! Â€œSubscribe to Vogue. Magazines have been a womanâ€™s best friend since times immemorial. Helping her kill the long hours in the beauty parlours and spas, advising her to how to be a better housekeeper or how to handle a new-born child, comforting her when her relationship is on the rocks by telling her that worse has happened to others and that she can pull out of it by keeping a calm head, and also keeping.Â Unlike other magazines that advise their readers on a broad spectrum of issues, Luckyâ€™s consumerist tendencies are not confined to the advertising pages (of which there are many), but fill each issue in articles with titles such as: â€œWhat I Want Nowâ€œ, â€œTrend in the Makingâ€œ, â€œMy Foolproof Outfitâ€œ, and â€œDo Good While You Shopâ€œ. Discuss In the past, men and women generally had their own roles to fulfill. These traditional gender roles were the norm back then and, to a certain extent, are still observed today. Men were seen as the breadwinners of the family, from whom the familyâ€™s main source of income was obtained. Women were in charge of the households.Â The basis of the argument against fixed gender roles is that it is a product of past ideas which cannot apply to modern life. Men and women are created equal, save some physical differences, and hence specific roles for men and women apply. To suggest that men and women having different roles to play in modern society would seem to be challenging this notion of sexual equality. This, I fear, is open to argument.