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Should Good Girls Like Bad Sex: Depictions of Kink in Cosmo

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SHOULD GOOD GIRLS LIKE BAD SEX?: REPRESENTATIONS OF KINK IN COSMO

by

KIERSTEN KUMMEROW BROWN

Under the Direction of Wendy Simonds, PhD

ABSTRACT

Kink has become a more widely discussed sexual practice over time. Recent pop culture releases like the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* have increased this discussion.

Cosmopolitan magazine (Cosmo) is one of the most well-known women's magazines in the world and its sexual advice is one of its defining characteristics. Using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, I examine *Cosmo's* depictions of kink from 1996 to 2014. *Cosmo* was more likely to mention kink in later years than in earlier ones, and its mentions of kink in later years were more likely to be positive. These mentions were most common the year after *Fifty Shades of Grey* was published. However, though the magazine bills itself as edgy and boundary pushing, *Cosmo's* sexual advice over the study period tended to reinforce the existing status quo that prioritizes male sexuality and tasked women with fulfilling their partner's sexual needs.

INDEX WORDS: Kink, BDSM, Content analysis, Lifestyle magazine, Popular media, Gender

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KIERSTEN KUMMEROW BROWN

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DEDICATION

I'd like to thank Frances and Kimberly for years of wonderful girl's nights involving *Cosmo* and laughter, and Random, for reminding me that our relationship was solid and we didn't need to follow *Cosmo*'s advice.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	viii
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	5
2.1 Deviance	5
2.2 Depicting sex in public spaces	9
2.3 Feminist debates on pornography	12
2.4 Kink in popular culture	14
<i>2.4.1 Advertising.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>2.4.2 Fifty Shades of Grey</i>	<i>16</i>
2.5 Kink Community.....	19
2.6 Why use <i>Cosmo</i>.....	21
3 METHODS.....	26
3.1 Year selection.....	27
3.2 Selecting articles and developing indicators for kink	28
<i>3.2.1 Positive or negative</i>	<i>31</i>
3.3 Qualitative analysis	32
3.4 Covers.....	33
3.5 Advantages and limitations	34

4	QUANTITATIVE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	35
4.1	Overall picture.....	35
4.2	Positive or negative mentions.....	42
4.3	Covers.....	48
5	QUALITATIVE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	50
5.1	It's good to be bad	50
5.2	You need a partner.....	54
5.3	Kinky but not too kinky.....	58
5.4	Guys are kinkier than girls.....	67
6	CONCLUSION	71
	REFERENCES.....	79

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Term Frequencies	36
Table 2: Average Number of Mentions of Kink Per Issue	36
Table 3: T-tests for Differences in Mean Mentions Per Issue	39
Table 4: T-tests for Differences in Mean Mentions of General Descriptors Per Issue	40
Table 5: T-tests for Differences in Mean Mentions of Specific Behaviors	41
Table 6: Proportion of Positive Mentions	42
Table 7: Proportion Tests for Positive Descriptors Overall	45
Table 8: Proportion Tests for Positive General Descriptors	46
Table 9: Proportion Tests for Positive Specific Behaviors	47
Table 10: Counts from Cosmo Covers	48
Table 11: T-tests for Differences in Mean Cover Mentions	49
Table 12: Proportion Tests for Positive Cover Descriptors	50

1 INTRODUCTION

Every culture has different rules about what constitutes appropriate behavior and each one creates boundaries around which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. Encouraging people to follow these rules and punishing those who do not is a way for communities to define themselves and to create a sense of belonging among their members (Erickson 2005). Exploring these cultural boundaries and the ways they shift provides an interesting perspective on a given culture. However, identifying the location of these boundaries is not always easy as they change from group to group, and over time (Erickson 2005, Matza 1969). One way to explore some of a culture's explicit boundaries is to examine the media it produces.

Media are significant influences on the ways in which people make sense of their world. Media outlets present information, but that information does not reach the consumer in a pure state. Each media outlet puts its own spin on stories, and these pre-spun stories are how many people receive their information. Media consumption, in turn, shapes the way consumers view external events and how those consumers construct their personal realities (Dotter 2002). The media also frequently try to paint a picture of the world that clearly identifies certain groups or behaviors as either legitimate or illegitimate (McLeod 1995). While this is a highly subjective task, and different media will present the same stories in a variety of ways, these are the stories that people use to shape their ideas of what is normal and what is not. As a broad range of people consume media, analyzing media content serves as a way of identifying boundaries within the culture, how the culture maintains those boundaries, and how those boundaries change over time.

In the United States, institutions such as governments and various religious institutions place many boundaries around sexual behavior. These boundaries regulate what types of sexual behaviors are appropriate, for whom they are appropriate, and the context in which they are

appropriate. For the most part, discussions about and representations of sex are restricted and highly controlled. People use formal and informal regulations to limit these discussions or to silence them entirely (Irvine 2002). However, despite this interest in curtailing and controlling talk about sex, sexual content saturates popular culture in the United States (Levy 2005, Sarracino and Scott 2008, Wilkinson 2009). Because people use media to shape their worldviews (Dotter 2002), and because many young people use it as a source of information about sex (Bleakley et al. 2009), analyzing popular media can provide insights into the cultural norms and values attached to sex and its presentation.

Cosmopolitan Magazine (Cosmo) is one media source that has not shied away from depictions of sexual behavior ever since Helen Gurley Brown took over as the editor-in-chief in 1967. Shortly after Gurley Brown's tenure at the magazine began, *Cosmo* became the first magazine to publish a nude male centerfold (Landers 2010). Printing this nude photo of Burt Reynolds and other content designed both to appeal to women and to inform them about sexual behavior challenged the commonly held ideas that women are not interested in sex and that any women who are interested in sex must be deviant.

Cosmo's official mission statement declares that the magazine wants to "drive the conversations that matter most to young women and make their interests and voices heard" (2015a:1). The fact that *Cosmo* finds this particular mission necessary suggests that the creators of this magazine still believe women need a space to engage with ideas about sexuality that are not typically seen as socially acceptable. *Cosmo* reaches a large number of women: according to the magazine's self-reported reader demographics it reaches nearly seventeen million people every month, eighty-six percent of whom are women (2015b). Though most of its readers are women, and it targets its marketing at them (Ouellette 1999), *Cosmo* is well known among other

demographic groups both in the United States and in many other countries (2015b). These factors make it a useful source for examining the boundaries around public representations of sex and exploring which sexual behaviors are considered deviant but are moving towards wider acceptability.

Rubin (1984) argues that sex that occurs in monogamous, heterosexual marriages sits atop the sexual hierarchy. As such, this kind of sex is considered the least deviant of sexual behaviors in the United States. Rubin claims that the most deviant and most stigmatized sexual practices include sadomasochists and fetishists. While many of the behaviors encompassed by these terms remain taboo (Lindemann 2012, Newmahr 2011, Rubin 1984, Stiles and Clark 2011), they are becoming more mainstream (Wilkinson 2009). In a more modern setting, the terms sadomasochist and fetishist indicate a broad range of behaviors, including bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism as well as fetishes and activities such as role-playing. These practices are currently most commonly referred to as SM/S&M, BDSM, and kink (Lindemann 2012, Moser and Madeson 1996, Stiles and Clark 2011, Weiss 2006). While some people use these terms interchangeably, others prefer to make distinctions. Many long-term practitioners prefer to use the term SM (Moser and Madeson 1996, Newmahr 2011). Others prefer to use BDSM because it implies a larger range of activities. The “B” indicates bondage and the “D” indicates both discipline and dominance (Newmahr 2011, Weiss 2006). Nichols (2011) provides a comprehensive list of behaviors commonly considered kinky:

- A hierarchical power structure, i.e., by mutual agreement, one person dominates and the other(s) submits. It is important to note that these roles are negotiated for sexual play in much the same way that kids agree on the roles of cops and robbers for the duration of the game;
- Intense stimulation usually associated with physical or emotional discomfort or pain, e.g., slapping, humiliation;

- Forms of sexual stimulation involving mild sensory deprivation or sensory confusion (similar to that experienced on some amusement park rides) and/or the use of restraints, e.g., bondage, use of blindfolds;
- Role-playing of fantasy sexual scenarios, e.g., doctor-patient roles, abduction fantasies. The roles usually incorporate a dominant/subordinate theme, often mirroring roles commonly found in life such as teacher-student and boss-worker;
- Use of certain preferred objects and materials as sexual enhancers, e.g., leather, latex, stiletto heels;
- Other unusual sexual objects or practices often classified as a fetish, e.g., fixation with feet. (Nichols 2011:26)

I use the terms “kink” or “kinky” throughout this study to describe this collection of behaviors. I prefer the term “kink” since it is more inclusive than the terms BDSM or S&M (Newmahr 2011).

It is clear that kink is still somewhere on the border between acceptable and unacceptable sexual practice; what Rubin (1984) calls an area of contestation. Practices in areas of contestation remain lower on the sexual hierarchy than monogamous, heterosexual, married sex, but people do not universally problematize or pathologize them. Kink received a publicity boost in 2011 when E.L. James published her now bestselling “erotic” novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The book and its sequels *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed* depict a relationship between college student/graduate Anastasia Steel (Ana) and billionaire Christian Grey. Ana and Christian’s sexual relationship involves many practices common in kink, and there is no denying that many readers found Ana and Christian’s story appealing. The popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* suggests that attitudes about kinky sexual practices are shifting. If kink were considered completely socially unacceptable, the book would not have sold nearly as many copies, nor would it have received as much media attention.

In this study I explore how the representations of kink in *Cosmo* change over time and to what extent this change may help drive kink’s transition from taboo to socially acceptable behavior. Examining how the boundaries around “appropriate” sexual behavior change is useful

for those who seek to change the way that sexual behavior is depicted, discussed, practiced, and controlled by society. Depictions of kink in popular media are much more common today than they have been in the past (Weiss 2006), so it seems likely that the more recent issues of the magazine will encourage a wider variety of sexual behaviors than the earlier issues. The presence of kink in other forms of mainstream media such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* or Rhianna's 2010 hit song S&M may also influence the magazine's depictions of kink.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Below, I examine the literature on deviant behavior. I first explore what makes a behavior deviant, what sexual behaviors are considered deviant, and how sexual behavior is regulated. Next, I investigate the public discourse about sex in the United States. This section discusses the presence of sexual imagery in the media in general and then the depictions of sex which are explicitly kinky. To address the accuracy of the depictions of kink in the media, I also investigate the literature that discusses the concerns and behaviors of members of the kink community. Finally, I discuss the suitability of using Cosmo as a resource for evaluating cultural boundaries and present an overview of the previous research that has used Cosmo as a data source.

2.1 Deviance

Communities create boundaries around the behaviors they consider to be appropriate. These limits help to define communities and to establish a sense of belonging among community members (Erickson 2005). Labeling certain behaviors as deviant strengthens community cohesion. When individuals or groups violate the norms of the community by engaging in deviant behavior, the rest of the community can bond over excluding the violators (Erickson 2005). The community can also bond over their shared experiences with the consequences of the deviant behavior (Durkheim [1893] 1984, Hawdon, Ryan and Agnich 2010). No behaviors are

inherently deviant (Matza 1969), so these types of boundaries are incredibly varied, differ from culture to culture, and almost always change over time. Some acts shift from deviant to normal, and communities identify new practices to mark as deviant and exclude from the bounds of propriety (Erickson 2005, Matza 1969). The fact that the boundaries are fluid can make it difficult to identify acceptable behaviors in a culture at any given time. The proliferation of media and mass communication makes it easier to explore the boundaries of what is acceptable to talk about in public space. Because open discussions about sex have long been considered taboo (Irvine 2002, Luker 2006, Rubin 1984) even as depictions of sex have become pervasive in advertising and other media (Levy 2005, Sarracino and Scott 2008, Wilkinson 2009), it is important to explore these boundaries in greater detail.

In the United States, the boundaries around sexual behavior are particularly rigid and impermissive (Williams 2006). Though morality and legality are not necessarily the same thing in any particular society, politicians in the United States frequently legislate against sexual practices. For example, policy makers have created restrictive legislation surrounding any sexual behavior involving children and adolescents. The current social narrative states that both children and adolescents are inherently asexual or are sexually vulnerable and in need of protection from adult desire (Hayes and Carpenter 2012). The United States imposes particularly severe penalties for sexual offenses (Rubin 1984), and the penalties for violating the laws that regulate sexual behavior of and with adolescents are especially harsh (Hayes and Carpenter 2012, Quinn, Forsyth and Mullen-Quinn 2004, Rubin 1984).

Legislation regulating sexual behavior is not always based on facts and is frequently based on feelings generated during moral panics. The moral panics regarding sex allow the government to pass legislation controlling behaviors it would never otherwise have been able to

pass (Garland 2008). For example, much of the legislation designed to control sex offenders assumes that this is a homogenous group and all members have similar motivations and practices (Quinn, Forsyth and Mullen-Quinn 2004, Williams, Thomas and Prior 2015). This faulty assumption leads to legislation based on the myths that policy makers believe about offenders, and on extreme cases rather than common ones (Meloy, Boatwright and Curtis 2013). For example, restricting sex offenders from living within a certain distance from a school or park will not necessarily reduce recidivism because most sex offenders have a close relationship with their victims and do not find their victims in schools or parks (Maguire and Singer 2011). However, restricting sex offenders' living situations creates the image that something is being done to protect people's safety and this reduces people's fear about sex offenders.

Media play a significant role in the spread of moral panics and the resulting outcomes (Cohen 1972, Garland 2008). The sensationalism associated with moral panics benefits the media by increasing media consumption (Garland 2008). In addition to their contributions to moral panics, media often shape public opinion in less dramatic ways. For example, media can be used to influence communities to either restrict or sanction certain behaviors (Johnson and Dalton 2012, Maguire and Singer 2011, Robinson 2011). Sensationalizing and exaggerating the impact of deviant behaviors can lead to poor policy decisions, as in the case of sex offenders (Maguire and Singer 2011, Meloy, Boatwright and Curtis 2013, Quinn, Forsyth and Mullen-Quinn 2004, Williams, Thomas and Prior 2015); so it is important to evaluate the messages that the media are sending.

Behaviors are not considered deviant in a vacuum. When determining whether or not sexual practices meet the standards of the community, a person must consider the cultural context. Western culture tends to place various sexual practices into a hierarchical value system.

Though this culture typically views sex negatively (Rubin 1984, Widmer, Treas and Newcomb 1998, Williams, Thomas and Prior 2015), it frames certain behaviors and practices as less negative than others. Western culture frames certain behaviors at the top of the hierarchy as “good,” “natural,” or “normal.” Sexual acts performed by a heterosexual married couple for the purpose of procreating sit at the top of the hierarchy and all other practices fall below it. The farther away from this ideal the deviant behavior is, the less acceptable people find it (Rubin 1984).

However, as with any deviant behavior, the boundaries around appropriate sexual behavior are flexible. There is a considerable amount of disagreement regarding where to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable sexual practices, and different groups draw the line in different places. An increasing number of people are accepting certain practices, such as unmarried couples cohabiting, or monogamous homosexual relationships (Rubin 1984). Historically, various kink practices like sadism, masochism, and fetishes have been considered paraphilias (pathologies) in need of correction. However, the diagnoses of these behaviors as pathological have changed over time, usually in relation to the prevailing social and moral ideas of the period (Nichols 2011). While kink is still pathologized (Lindemann 2012, Newmahr 2011, Nichols 2006, Nichols 2011, Weiss 2006, Williams 2006), more people are accepting it as normal sexual variation. There has been a movement in the psychiatric community to better address the needs of clients who practice kink in a consensual way, rather than just diagnosing them with a problem (Nichols 2006, Nichols 2011, Williams 2006). Investigating how and why these behaviors gradually come to be accepted is critical for understanding how the culture maintains its boundaries.

Communities may classify certain practices as acceptable or deviant depending on who participates in them and why. Much of this decision-making hinges on the relative social statuses of those involved. Groups perceive participants who have unequal amounts of power, different races, or different sexual orientations in disparate ways (Giuffre and Williams 1994). People with higher statuses have a “protective cloak” that insulates them from the potential consequences of engaging in behavior that differs from social norms. These individuals are more likely to get away with deviant behaviors than those with lower statuses. In order to develop a protective cloak, individuals must have a high social status, be perceived as trustworthy, and have professional autonomy (Liederbach 2006). Higher status organizations that people see as trustworthy, like higher status individuals, may benefit from similar protection.

Popular media outlets like *Cosmo* may be more capable of pushing social boundaries around sexual behaviors without facing serious repercussions for the transgression because they are well-known and well-liked. *Cosmo* is an incredibly popular magazine (2012c, 2015b). The largest text on the page displaying its mission statement declares that the magazine is “The Bible for young women” (2015a:1), and readers report that they read the sexual advice articles more than anything else in the magazine (McCleneghan 2003). Readers may be more likely to accept ideas about sexual behavior that initially shock them because they see *Cosmo* as an authority on the topic of sex and relationships (McCleneghan 2003). Because of its focus on sex and its popularity among readers, *Cosmo* is a useful site for examining how people depict sex in public spaces.

2.2 Depicting sex in public spaces

Depicting or discussing sex in public spaces remains relatively taboo in the United States. The general discomfort with realistic or varied depictions of sex is likely due to the sex-

negativity that pervades western culture. One part of this discomfort includes the belief that talking about sex leads to sex (Irvine 2002, Luker 2006). The U.S. population is one of the least approving of premarital and extramarital sex compared to other industrialized nations (Widmer, Treas and Newcomb 1998). However, overall acceptance for these behaviors appears to be increasing as younger people are more likely to have permissive attitudes about premarital sex than older people (Elias, Fullerton and Simpson 2013). Many people see sex as an inherently sinful activity in need of a justification, like marriage, to be considered valid moral behavior; people view sex as suspicious at best, and immoral, if not outright dangerous, at worst (Rubin 1984). Rubin (1984) argues that the regulations surrounding sex are more stringent than most people would allow in any other aspect of their private lives.

Furthermore, some practices are allowed under these rules and others are not. Rubin describes a “charmed circle” of sexuality in which sex is considered normal, natural, and good. The sex that falls into the charmed circle “should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography” (Rubin 1984:13). Any behaviors that do not fall within the charmed circle are seen as “abnormal,” “unnatural,” and “bad.” Most of the social institutions interested in controlling sexual behavior maintain a division between good, normal, or natural sex, and bad, unnatural, or abnormal sex. Similarly, most discussions about appropriate behavior center on where to draw this line (Rubin 1984). Because most discussions about sex focus on where to draw the line separating “good” and “bad” sex, the places where people draw the line are worth exploring.

Both formal and informal systems control the discourse surrounding sex in the United States. Laws against obscenity serve as important formal institutions that control public

representations of sexuality. However, the legal definition of obscenity is broad and will not apply to the same behaviors in all circumstances. The guidelines for determining whether or not something is obscene as set forth by the Supreme Court in *Miller v. California* (1973:24-25) are:

(a) Whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest, (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law, and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.

Whether or not something is considered obscene depends on the community standards. Thus, the informal controls around the appropriate depictions of sexuality in the US are also important.

People have strong opinions about what kinds of sex are appropriate to display, when and where it is appropriate to display them, and with whom sexual topics may or may not be presented (Irvine 2002, Luker 2006, Rubin 1984). In U.S. culture, many people and institutions attempt to limit the representations of sexual practices and even discussions about sex to adults only. Many find talking about sex around children alarming (Robinson 2011). Additionally, depictions of same-sex sexual behavior, including discussions of it, are more highly restricted by the rules of society than are depictions or discussions of heterosexual sex (Johnson and Dalton 2012, Robinson 2011). This overall climate means that the culture limits candid discussions about sex to certain contexts. The climate can also make it dangerous to challenge the accepted norms and try to expand the boundaries around what kinds of sex are appropriate to depict.

Mainstream media presents a great deal of sexual imagery, primarily through advertising (Sarracino and Scott 2008, Wilkinson 2009), even though the culture as a whole tries to control the dissemination of sexual information. The representations of sex in the media are growing more explicit (Levy 2005, Sarracino and Scott 2008, Wilkinson 2009). The increase in explicit imagery is likely a result of pornography's growing influence on other forms of media (Levy

2005, Sarracino and Scott 2008). Sarracino and Scott (2008) argue that advertising does not just look more like porn, it promotes and normalizes porn by linking sex and consumerism. People in the United States are comfortable with consumption, and seeing sexualized bodies and sexuality in that framework makes sexual content appear more normal (Sarracino and Scott 2008). Not only do advertisers use sex to sell, the increase in sexual imagery indicates that they use it as the primary way to sell.

The pervasiveness of sexual content in the media has influenced the beliefs and discussions people have about sex in the United States. Popular media, television in particular, are one of the four main sources of information young people utilize when trying to obtain information about sex (Bleakley et al. 2009). Teens who use media as their primary source of information about sex are more likely to believe that sex will lead to positive personal outcomes when compared to those who got their information from a family member or a religious leader (Bleakley et al. 2009). Additionally, teens who are exposed to more sexual content are more likely to be sexually active (Pardun, L'Engle and Brown 2005), and more likely to believe they will engage in sexual activity in the future (Bleakley et al. 2009, Pardun, L'Engle and Brown 2005). The fact that media consumption is related to different sexual behavior and different beliefs about sex suggests that the media strongly influence the overall discourse surrounding sex.

2.3 Feminist debates on pornography

Whether this proliferation of sexual imagery is positive or negative is an ongoing discussion in feminist scholarship (Boyle 2010, Dines 2010, Dodson 2013, Ellis, O'Dair and Abby 1990, Taormino et al. 2013). While much of this debate focuses on pornography, many of the arguments can be applied to less explicit depictions of sexuality in the media. The radical

feminist perspective posits that pornography is not merely a harmless fantasy, but is coercive and harmful to women (Boyle 2010, Dines 2010, MacKinnon 1986, Smith and Attwood 2013). Porn typically presents sexuality in a limited way. The mainstream porn narrative centers male sexuality and frequently includes acts that degrade women (Dines 2010, Naughty 2013). This narrative reinforces the existing power differential between men and women because men are the ones creating and presenting it (Dines et al. 2010, Dworkin 1974). As porn becomes more ubiquitous, people's expressions of sexuality become limited to that one specific narrative (Boyle 2010, Dines 2010, Dines et al. 2010).

Another feminist perspective takes a more positive view of pornography. Those with this point of view frame consensual sexual behavior and depictions of sex as sexually liberating (Dodson 2013, Ellis, O'Dair and Abby 1990, McElroy 1995). For these feminists, there is little to no distinction between erotic and pornographic, and eroticism is inherently good for women (Dodson 2013). Those with this perspective argue that freedom of sexual expression in a society is critical in the fight for equal rights and that censorship of any kind is harmful (Dodson 2013, Ellis, O'Dair and Abby 1990, McElroy 1995, Taormino et al. 2013). Feminists with this perspective typically frame the matter as one of choice. They argue that people should not tell women what to do in any aspect of their lives (McElroy 1995, Queen and Comella 2008). As long as people consensually participate in depictions of sexuality, this perspective views these depictions as beneficial for the culture.

A third perspective combines elements of the other two. Rather than simply condemning or accepting pornography, these feminists are critical of the narratives presented by most mainstream porn but also believe that there is a space for feminist porn (Comella 2013, Naughty 2013, Royalle 2013, Smith and Attwood 2013, Taormino 2013). They describe feminist porn as

porn that is more inclusive, realistic, sex positive, and that provides better working conditions for the performers (Comella 2013, Naughty 2013, Royalle 2013, Taormino 2013, Taormino et al. 2013). Additionally, feminist porn frequently tries to challenge the mainstream porn narrative (Naughty 2013, Taormino 2013, Taormino et al. 2013) as well as the sex-negative perspective of the mainstream culture (Taormino 2013). Feminist porn is, according to feminists with this perspective, a tool women can use in their own empowerment (Royalle 2013).

All of these perspectives contribute useful insights to the examination of mainstream media. Not all depictions of sexuality are necessarily beneficial for society just because they present sexuality in a public space. The majority of depictions of sexuality in the mainstream media are similar to those in mainstream porn. These narratives reinforce the idea that men are sexual subjects and that women are merely sexual objects (Levy 2005). When this story is the only one presented it is hard to make a case that people are freely choosing to participate in these depictions. To be considered sexually liberating, the media would have to provide more diversity in the behaviors and practices it portrays. Presenting images of sexual behavior that fall outside of this narrative, or outside of Rubin's charmed circle, may be a way of challenging the accepted norms.

2.4 Kink in popular culture

2.4.1 Advertising

As sexual content in the media becomes more ubiquitous it begins to lose its impact; people become accustomed to encountering it in their everyday lives (Levy 2005). This reduced effect means that advertisers need to add interesting and distinctive images to their advertisements to continue attracting new consumers. Designers who cause a scandal because they choose taboo imagery ensure that people will be talking about their ad. Popular media are

increasingly including imagery depicting or suggesting kink (Lindemann 2012, Weiss 2006). Advertising, in particular, contains a significant number of portrayals of kink (Wilkinson 2009). Certain portrayals of kink, like spanking, have become more mainstream (Weiss 2006) and thus more acceptable, while others -- like branding, asphyxiation, or extreme violence -- have not (Weiss 2006, Wilkinson 2009). Portraying behaviors that differ too much from established norms would be a risky proposition for the advertisers since society continues to pathologize more extreme forms of kink.

Despite being present in the media, kink continues to carry serious stigma (Newmahr 2011, Nichols 2011, Stiles and Clark 2011, Weiss 2006). Kink has not yet transitioned from the outer limits to the charmed circle. Media still frequently portray it either as very porn-like or pathological. Kinky images tend to reinforce heterosexuality and the objectification of women. Women who appear in kinky advertisements are typically conventionally attractive and posed suggestively. Even when taking on the role of the dominatrix, a dominant role, the women are not actually in a dominant position; instead, they appear as objects for the male gaze (Wilkinson 2009). Wilkinson (2009) argues that while advertisements are depicting kink, they will not convince people to either accept it or try it for themselves. These limited depictions do not seem to indicate a wider acceptance of kink (Wilkinson 2009). Instead, they suggest that advertisers look for images that will shock and titillate the audience in order to sell their products (Beckmann 2001, Wilkinson 2009). The very fact that people still consider it shocking or inappropriate suggests that it remains on the “bad” side of the line (Rubin 1984). However, the fact that these depictions exist is worth noting, as they indicate that there has been a change in how the media represent sexuality (Wilkinson 2009). As the presence of kink in the media increases, it will gradually become less shocking, and people may begin to accept it.

However, the media tend to show only particular kinds of images. The most common depiction of kink in advertising is that of female domination and male submission. The glamorous dominatrix represents the deviant or “naughty” side of sex (Wilkinson 2009). Other forms of media portray kink from a different perspective. Rather than presenting it as deviant, yet sexy, it is frequently depicted as sleazy, unglamorous, and criminal (Wilkinson 2009). Because the representations of kink are so limited, and the range of behaviors associated with kink is so large, it seems likely that only certain aspects of kink will become accepted.

The existing representations tend to offer “*acceptance via normalization*, and *understanding via pathologizing*” (Weiss 2006:105). People will tolerate kink when it follows the normative patterns of sexuality or will view it as a symptom of a deviant and sick individual when it does not. Media are unlikely to radically change their portrayals of sex. Instead, they will likely incorporate some forms of kink into the existing framework of acceptable sexuality. For example, people may consider kink acceptable if it looks like the stereotypical images they are used to seeing in the media (Weiss 2006, Wilkinson 2009), or as long as people engage in kink in monogamous, partnered, and private spheres (Weiss 2006). In other words, if many other aspects of a kinky behavior fall within the existing charmed circle. However, if kink looks drastically different from these norms, the media will probably continue to pathologize it. If a kink contains too many elements which fall outside of the charmed circle (non-monogamous, involving intimidating props, between people of vastly different ages, in public, etc.), people will be less accepting of it.

2.4.2 *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Recently, E.L. James’ bestselling erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* has influenced public perception and media depictions of kink. The novel and its sequels, *Fifty Shades Darker* and

Fifty Shades Freed, have been one of the most notable pop cultural representations of kink in recent years (Barker 2013). While the series pushes some cultural boundaries by depicting deviant sexual activities, it tends to fit kink into the existing cultural scripts and does not necessarily portray the relationship between the characters in a positive way. Rather than breaking new ground, it fits into Weiss's (2006) argument that kink will only be accepted if the depictions of it are normalized. Ana and Christian's relationship follows a fairly typical narrative about courtship. The story ends with marriage and procreation and places kinky practices in tension with that narrative (Bonomi, Altenburger and Walton 2013, Downing 2013). While there are points at which Ana finds the kink both enjoyable and arousing, she remains very resistant to engaging in kink and views it with apprehension, if not outrage and disgust for most of the series. She spends much of the narrative trying to "fix" Christian and have a "normal" relationship. When Christian proposes a kink-based relationship, Ana tells him that she needs "more" (James 2011). The narrative fits neatly into the cultural norm that states that kink is a less acceptable, less desirable form of sexual expression than non-kinky, heterosexual, monogamous, and married sex.

The depictions of kink in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy also fit into Weiss's (2006) claim that kink is understood if the depictions pathologize it. Christian has a bad childhood; he lives in poverty with his mother and her abusive pimp until the Grey family adopts him at age four. When he is fifteen, he begins a sexual relationship with Elena, one of his mother's friends, where she introduces him to kink. Ana is horrified by this relationship. She accurately sees it as statutory rape, but also as evidence that Christian is only into kink because bad things happened to him (James 2011). This part of the novel neatly fits into the conventional narrative that people who engage in kink are deviant, sick, and dangerous.

Bonomi, Altenburger and Walton (2013) argue that throughout the series, Christian is abusive toward Ana. It is important to point out that the emotional abuse takes place even in situations where there is no kink at all. Christian routinely stalks, isolates, and threatens Ana without her consent (Barker 2013, Bonomi, Altenburger and Walton 2013). Christian controls nearly everything about their interactions, and they routinely do whatever Christian wants to do even when Ana explicitly says that she doesn't want to (Barker 2013, Bonomi, Altenburger and Walton 2013). The prioritization of Christian's desires fits into the cultural script about sexuality that prioritizes male desire and depicts women as acquiescing to male desire (Barker 2013, Bonomi, Altenburger and Walton 2013). It also runs strongly against the kink community's focus on consent as an integral part of its practices (Barker 2013). So although *Fifty Shades of Grey* includes kinky practices, they are not portrayed in an unproblematic way and are frequently conflated with abuse.

The *Fifty Shades* series has spent more than 50 weeks on the *New York Times* Best Sellers List, and the film version of *Fifty Shades of Grey* was a big box office hit. It has successfully entered the cultural consciousness in the United States. Though the story fits in with many of the existing ways the mass media depict kink, the book and film have increased the number of depictions of kink in popular culture. Furthermore, the popularity of *Fifty Shades* has made kink extremely marketable. There is a line of *Fifty Shades of Grey* sex toys, and there has been an increased interest in acquiring kink paraphernalia since its publication. Sex toy stores are capitalizing on its popularity and displaying both the novel and related toys openly (Martin 2013). What was once purely taboo and marginalized is becoming more socially acceptable (Martin 2013). While it is unlikely that the common perceptions of BDSM have completely changed as a result of this book, there have been some changes. The fact that these changes

occurred highlights that the boundaries surrounding appropriate sexual practices and behaviors can and do shift as a result of the messages in popular culture.

2.5 Kink Community

U.S. culture views sex negatively in general (Rubin 1984, Widmer, Treas and Newcomb 1998, Williams, Thomas and Prior 2015) and kink is near the bottom of the sexual hierarchy (Rubin 1984). The psychiatric community has historically pathologized people expressing interest in kink (Moser and Madeson 1996, Newmahr 2011, Nichols 2006, Nichols 2011, Richters et al. 2008, Weiss 2006, Williams 2006). Rather than simply falling outside the charmed circle and being considered deviant, kink is often labeled as dangerous (Nichols 2006, Nichols 2011, Williams 2006). Many individuals who participate in kink disagree with this assessment and argue that it can be practiced safely (Barker 2013, Newmahr 2011, Stiles and Clark 2011, Weiss 2011, Williams 2006). They also firmly believe that, as long as all participants are consenting adults, their sexual expressions should be no more stigmatized than any other sexual behavior (Barker 2013, Newmahr 2011). As a way of creating safer spaces to express and explore their desires, many people interested in kink have developed communities (Moser and Madeson 1996, Newmahr 2011, Stiles and Clark 2011).

Typically referred to as the kink or BDSM community, these spaces encompass both local (Lindemann 2012, Moser and Madeson 1996, Newmahr 2011, Weiss 2011, Williams 2006) and online communities. Online communities include spaces like online message boards, chatrooms (Williams 2006), listservs (Newmahr 2011, Stiles and Clark 2011, Weiss 2011), and blogs (Barker 2013). These groups serve a variety of purposes. People join them to find sexual or play partners (people to engage in kinky activities with which may be sexual or nonsexual in nature e.g. spanking, bondage), socialize, learn new skills and information (Moser and Madeson

1996, Newmahr 2011), and participate in activism (Newmahr 2011). While not everyone in the community is an activist, many community members advocate for social change (Lindemann 2012, Newmahr 2011). Many individuals who engage in kink practice selective disclosure and divulge their practice to their trusted acquaintances. Many also agree to participate in academic research because they are interested in clearing up misconceptions about kink (Lindemann 2012). In other words, they want to demystify what they do and change the perception that they are mentally ill.

Historically, the medical and psychological establishments have pathologized people who engage in kinky behaviors. Psychology has frequently been used to marginalize sexual minorities (Nichols 2006). However, recent psychological literature challenges this perception that engaging in kinky behavior is an indicator of a psychological disorder (Nichols 2006, Nichols 2011, Williams 2006). Current research reframes participation in kink from signaling mental illness or depravity, to simply a sexual activity in which people choose to participate (Nichols 2006, Nichols 2011, Richters et al. 2008). The fact that the discussion has moved from pathology to normalcy in the academic community suggests that the boundaries around appropriate sexuality have already begun shifting. If this is indicative of a larger cultural shift, there will be other indicators. Examining the narratives in the media may help indicate whether or not kink is becoming more acceptable in the larger culture.

Despite these initial shifts, kink is still highly stigmatized. Practitioners have ways of challenging the idea that their sexual interests are deviant. Many practitioners see their behaviors as simply a variation in sexual expression (Nichols 2006, Nichols 2011, Williams 2006). However, others actively set themselves apart from existing sexual norms (Newmahr 2011, Weiss 2011). They embrace the idea that kink is transgressive and position it in opposition to

normative sexual practices, but at the same time, they do not think their sexual practices should be marginalized (Weiss 2011). These concerns about marginalization and stigma mean that many kinky individuals have an active interest in challenging the boundaries around acceptable sexual behavior.

Kinky individuals' desire to make a change in how the media depict their practices is more personal and less profit-driven than the desires of advertisers. Many practitioners do not necessarily view the increasing number of depictions of kink in the media positively (Wilkinson 2009). Because advertisers use these images to attract attention by being shocking, these depictions do not necessarily represent the reality of kinky practices. The advertisements frequently portray kink in a negative light (Moser and Madeson 1996, Wilkinson 2009). Depictions of kink in the media must be positive or at least realistic before we can claim that there is a cultural shift toward acceptance of these practices. Evaluating different forms of media and media published in different time periods will aid in the understanding of how these changes occur.

2.6 Why use *Cosmo*

Cosmopolitan Magazine is no stranger to change. It has been in print since 1886 and has undergone multiple transformations during the past 129 years. *Cosmo* started as a literary magazine, transformed into a sensationalist magazine, and changed into a fiction magazine before settling in its current incarnation as a guide for work, fashion, beauty, relationships and sex in 1965. The owners and contributors to *Cosmo* transform the magazine based on what they think is popular at the time. These changes enable the magazine to remain relevant and to draw in both advertisers and readers (Landers 2010).

During its most recent major transformation, Helen Gurley Brown, the editor-in-chief responsible for shifting the magazine's focus to sex and relationships, specifically targeted single girls and gave advice on how to act and what to buy. Through the content of the magazine Gurley Brown created a picture of the idealized reader, known as a "Cosmo Girl," and encouraged readers to aspire to this ideal, primarily through consumption (Ouellette 1999). The Cosmo Girl was "white, heterosexual, and upper middle class" (Ouellette 1999:367). The magazine did not show women of color as models that the readers should aspire to emulate, and presented working-class culture as a starting point for improvement (Ouellette 1999). The work, fashion, and relationship advice in *Cosmo* served to encourage its readers to achieve or at least attempt to achieve this ideal through gender and class performance and cultural consumption (Ouellette 1999). Though the content has changed to stay relevant to the women reading the magazine, the idea of the Cosmo Girl persists in the more recent issues of *Cosmo*. The magazine still presents the Cosmo Girl as an aspirational figure and encourages women to achieve Cosmo Girl status.

In addition to providing an image to which women could aspire, Gurley Brown often published material that other mainstream media outlets considered taboo (Landers 2010). Because of this history of taking risks and testing the limits of acceptable discourse, *Cosmo* provides a valuable resource for examining where society places the boundaries around acceptable representations of sexuality. This magazine contains a detailed history of the messages about gender, sexual behavior, and relationships presented in popular culture. However, until this study, no one has used *Cosmo* to examine how depictions of sex in the mainstream media have changed over time.

Previous research using *Cosmo* as data can be categorized into several key themes: the construction of gender, the construction of relationships, and the construction of sexuality. Most researchers have analyzed the gendered messages present in *Cosmo*. Most of the messages that the magazine sends about gender tend to encourage stereotypical gender roles (Ménard and Kleinplatz 2008, Saraceno and Tambling 2013). Ménard and Kleinplatz (2008) explore how a variety of magazines frame “great sex” and how the readers of those magazines can achieve it. Sexual and gender-role stereotypes are common in both women’s and men’s contemporary magazines. Ménard and Kleinplatz find that the magazines frequently depict men as “wild, aggressive, and animalistic in their sexuality” (Ménard and Kleinplatz 2008:13). Women, on the other hand, are expected to make themselves appealing to their male partners; to desire romance and love; and to be on the lookout for a man who will be a good father (Ménard and Kleinplatz 2008). Saraceno and Tambling (2013), who look only at images from *Cosmo*, also find that the magazine depicts women as relationship oriented. Men are more likely to be shown as financially secure and engaging in chores or paid work. The fact that *Cosmo* perpetuates these stereotypes suggests that while it will push against some boundaries, there are others that it will not necessarily address.

Researchers have also used *Cosmo* and other women’s magazines to explore the messages the magazines send about how women’s bodies should look. Unsurprisingly, *Cosmo* sends the message that women should be concerned about their weight, but it also contains conflicting messages about weight and weight loss (Malkin, Wornian and Chrisler 1999). The majority of the covers of women’s magazines show thin female celebrities and include weight loss messages. However, Malkin, Wornian and Chrisler (1999) find that the covers also contain messages about eating fattening foods alongside the weight loss messages. Another key finding

from this study is that the magazines often place weight loss messages relatively close to messages about improving a person's life. The researchers argue that this implies that physically altering a person's body will lead to a better or happier life (Malkin, Wornian and Chrisler 1999). These messages are also somewhat stereotypical, so *Cosmo* is not necessarily pushing boundaries in this area either.

Researchers using *Cosmo* as data have also commonly explored the way the magazine constructs relationships. *Cosmo* sends similar messages about relationships as it does about gender. The magazine tends to stick with normative conceptions of what a relationship should look like and how one should function. Gupta, Zimmerman, and Fruhauf (2008) find that *Cosmo* advises women to take sole responsibility for maintaining and strengthening the relationship. It encourages women to change themselves so they can become good partners and tells women to teach men how to be good partners as well. In addition to encouraging women to take responsibility for maintaining relationships, *Cosmo* also suggests that women are responsible for both the man's sexual pleasure and their own (Gupta, Zimmerman and Fruhauf 2008). These messages about relationships reflect the common cultural expectations for women to engage in the bulk of emotional labor in relationships and also to concentrate on pleasing men.

The final major theme researchers have explored in *Cosmo* relates to the construction of sexual behavior. In addition to maintaining gender norms and reinforcing stereotypical beliefs about gender differences, *Cosmo* also constructs sexual behavior in stereotypical ways. It portrays heterosexual sex as the norm, and for sex to be considered "real," penetration needs to occur (Farvid and Braun 2006). Despite being a magazine for women and ostensibly also about female pleasure, the magazine frames men's sexual experiences as a woman's primary concern, and women's desires and pleasures as secondary to men's desires and pleasures.

Many of the articles in *Cosmo* and other women's magazines are designed to teach women how to be "good" at sex so they can acquire and keep male attention (Farvid and Braun 2006, Ménard and Kleinplatz 2008). To teach readers how to become "good" at sex, the magazine provides tips to teach them technical skills which can, theoretically, improve sexual experiences (Ménard and Kleinplatz 2008). However, the technical skills required to be "good" at sex are likely to change over time and being skilled will probably require knowledge of a wider range of behaviors as time goes on. Further exploration of the messages in *Cosmo* can increase our knowledge of the ways in which the boundaries around appropriate sexual behavior in the United States change over time.

This study examines the magazine over a longer time span than the majority of the previous research. I include 120 issues of *Cosmo* published from 1996-2014. This enabled me to examine the longer term changes in the magazine's depictions of kink. The majority of scholars who have used *Cosmo* as data examined a period covering twelve months or less and used a range of only 4-12 issues in that time frame (Baker 2005, Farvid and Braun 2006, Gupta, Zimmerman and Fruhauf 2008, Malkin, Wornian and Chrisler 1999, McCleneghan 2003, Ménard and Kleinplatz 2008, Saraceno and Tambling 2013). Chang (2004) examined a span of six years, but only included one issue from each year. Any cyclical changes that might occur during a single year would be left out using this strategy. Only Hasinoff (2009) looked at a longer period than this study. She included issues from 1965-2007 but only examined one issue per year. By looking at all of the magazines issued in a particular year rather than taking a random sample or even examining a consecutive six month period, I avoid potential anomalies based on monthly or seasonal cycles in the magazine's publication.

Overall, the literature suggests that the boundaries around appropriate behavior continuously change. Many social institutions are invested in maintaining particular lines around sexual behavior. The variety of influences on these boundaries makes them somewhat fluid. The overall cultural narrative in the United States presents sex negatively and makes allowances only for very particular kinds of sex. Despite the strength of this narrative, the public discourse about sexual behavior has changed, and will likely continue to do so. Popular media are at least partially responsible for these changes in the way sex is represented, and exploring these changes can provide potential insights into how to deliberately change them in the future. Though the media increasingly depict kink, it is important to critically evaluate these depictions. Rather than just focusing on the existence of depictions of kink in the media, I examine the messages *Cosmo* is sending about kink. I address questions including: Are the depictions necessarily positive? Have they become increasingly positive over time? Are these depictions challenging the existing sexual hierarchy or are they reinforcing it?

3 METHODS

To examine how *Cosmo* represents kinky sexual behaviors, I performed a content analysis of articles in the magazine. I accessed the issues available through the electronic archives at Georgia State University and analyzed articles from those issues. This archive contains the full text of the magazine from 1996 to 2014, so I limited the study to a sample of years from this period. Using the online archive as a data source had several advantages. The *Cosmo* articles were already available online and were in an easily searchable format. This format enabled me to scan the data using computer searches instead of having to read every single article to see if it was relevant to my research questions.

One limitation of the electronic archive was that it contained only the text of the articles and the photo captions or brief descriptions of the photos associated with each article. Images comprise a significant portion of *Cosmo* and having only simple descriptions of the photographs was quite limiting. To supplement this text, I accessed an archive of old *Cosmo* covers from 2002 to 2014. While not a perfect solution, since it included a smaller sample of years and was only a small subset of the images in *Cosmo*, analyzing the images and headlines on the cover of the magazine provided information about how the magazine marketed itself and what kind of language was acceptable to display in public spaces such as grocery stores and bookstores.

3.1 Year selection

The earliest issues available in the archive were from 1996 and the most recent complete year was 2014 at the time of this writing. I examined every other year starting with 1996 and ending with 2014. Each issue of *Cosmo* was at least 200 pages long; even without photos, this was a considerable amount of content through which to sort. I believed that using data from every other year was frequent enough to capture any small changes in the twenty-year time span. I paid extra attention to the changes that occurred between 2010 and 2014 because of the release of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in 2011. *Cosmo* made multiple references to the novel in the years following its publication, so the book clearly had at least a minor impact on the content of the magazine.

One potential pitfall in looking at the changes over this period was that *Cosmo* had four different editors-in-chief, Helen Gurley Brown (1967-1997), Bonnie Fuller (1997-1998), Kate White (1998-2012), and Joanna Coles (2012-current) (1998a, 2012a, 2012b). The changes in the representations of sex and kink may have been more related to editorial variation than time. To explore this matter, I paid particular attention to whether or not *Cosmo*'s content changed

dramatically at the time points where the editors-in-chief changed. This concern was valid as I did find evidence that that the change from Helen Gurley Brown to Bonnie Fuller and Kate White had an influence on the content of the magazine.

3.2 Selecting articles and developing indicators for kink

Cosmo, as a monthly magazine, publishes 12 issues every year. I studied the magazines published in 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014, for a total of 120 issues. Each issue contained between 40 and 107 total articles (a mean of 65.91 and a median of 65). Using the selection process described below I determined which of the collected 7909 articles were relevant to this study. I selected a total of 1056 articles. Each issue contained between 3 and 19 relevant articles (a mean of 8.8 articles and a median of 8.5 articles).

To select the relevant articles, I employed two strategies involving different descriptors. The first strategy examined the behaviors that the magazine indicated might be deviant. I searched for a variety of descriptors including *Kink, kinky, deviant, deviance, freak, freaky, naughty, naughtier, naughtiest, taboo, bad girl, bad-girl, bad boy, bad-boy, wild, sin, sinful, pervert, perverse, twisted, fetish, S&M, S and M, S/M, S-and-M, and BDSM*. I selected these terms based on my experience reading the magazine and picking up on the terms it commonly uses in addition to terms that media frequently associate with kink. I examined the articles from resulting searches and added additional search terms based on the behaviors that these articles described as deviant in some way. Using this method, I identified several specific behaviors that the magazine mentioned and added them to my pre-existing list. These new terms included *porn, butt plug, bondage tape, spreader bar, Ben Wa balls, and kegel balls*. Once identified, I searched for these terms in previous articles to see if *Cosmo* had mentioned them.

The second strategy I used concentrated on specific behaviors commonly practiced in the kink community. I included many of the terms found on the preference forms Lindemann (2012) included in her study on dominatrices, such as: *tie, tied, tying, bondage, handcuffs, blindfold, pull hair, pulling hair, tug hair, tugging hair, spank, spanking, slap, bite, biting, sex toy, vibrator, dildo, prop, dominatrix, role play costume, French maid, librarian, schoolgirl, nurse, policewomen, clip, clamp, whip, whipped, chain, flog, flogger, cane, paddle, collar, submission, dominance, and discipline*. I also included the terms *Secretary* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* in these searches since they are both titles of other popular media which included portrayals of kink and might have served as markers for content about kink in *Cosmo*. Once I used these search terms to find articles, I checked to make sure that *Cosmo* was using the words as descriptions of sexual behavior. For example, some articles used the term *kinky* to refer to hair texture, the word *tie* to refer to neckties or ties on clothing, and the term *discipline*, to refer to self-discipline. If the articles did not actually discuss sexual behavior, I excluded them from the final analysis. I used this information to explore how the magazine's language use changed over time, whether the types of behaviors considered deviant changed over time, whether mentions of kinky behavior became more frequent, and whether the mentions of kink were more likely to be positive or negative.

I first used t-tests to compare the average number of times the combined count of search terms appeared in each issue of the magazine. Because *Cosmo* was not consistent about the number of times it mentioned kink in each year, it was necessary for me to determine the variances for each year and compare them to see whether they were the same or different. In order to determine whether the averages from year to year had different variances, I conducted a series of F-tests between each combination of years. I used this information to decide whether to

use a t-test assuming equal variances or a t-test assuming unequal variances. I then conducted the appropriate t-test for each pair of years with a null hypothesis that there was no change and an alternative hypothesis that the counts were higher in later years.

Because I collected such a large number of search terms and because it was common for one or more of these terms to appear only a few times per issue I collapsed the search categories into two groups rather than running tests for each term individually. In the first group I included terms that were general descriptors of potentially deviant sexual behaviors including: *kink, deviant, freaky, naughty, taboo, bad-girl/bad-boy, wild, sinful, pervert, twisted, fetish, S&M, and BDSM*. In the second group I collected terms that described specific behaviors or specific objects used for sex including: *tie, bondage, handcuffs, blindfold, pull hair, spank, slap, bite, sex toy, vibrator, dildo, prop, dominatrix, role-play, costume, clip, clamp, whip, chain, flogger, cane, paddle, collar, dominance/submission/discipline, Secretary, and Fifty Shades of Grey*.

In order to determine whether there was a significant increase in the average number of times these groups of terms were used from year to year, I used t-tests to compare the mean number of general descriptors or specific behaviors in an issue per year. As with the full counts of terms, I conducted a series of F-tests between each combination of years to determine whether the variances were the same or different from year to year. I used this information to decide whether to use a t-test assuming equal variances or a t-test assuming unequal variances. I then conducted the appropriate t-test for the category “general descriptors” and the category “specific behaviors” for each pair of years with a null hypothesis that there was no change and an alternative hypothesis that the counts were higher in later years.

3.2.1 Positive or negative

The next step was to determine whether the magazine presented kink in a positive or negative way. I read each article and looked for indicators that the magazine had a positive or negative position on the behavior. Indicators of a positive depiction included saying that a behavior was fun, would improve a reader's sex life; was an exciting act that a man had enjoyed; was an exciting act that a woman had enjoyed; was recommended by an expert; was actively breaking taboos and therefore sexy; was becoming more common; provided inspiration; strengthened a relationship; or depicted something a reader should aspire to be. Indicators of a negative depiction included saying that a behavior was undesirable or strange; should be avoided; would scare a partner off if you tried it; was actively breaking taboos and therefore should be avoided; connected with criminal behavior; connected with mental illness; could negatively impact your relationship; was something a man just didn't want to do; was something a woman just didn't want to do; led to injury or embarrassment; was too extreme; or could cause future negative consequences.

In order to determine whether there was a significant change in the proportion of the search terms that were positive, I conducted two proportion z-tests for each pair of years in the sample. I took the total number of mentions and divided this number by the number of mentions coded as positive to determine the proportion of positive mentions for each year. I did the same thing for the number of general descriptors and the number of specific behaviors. Once I knew the proportions of positive mentions I was able to find the average proportion for each pair of years as well as the difference between the proportions for each pair of years. I used these numbers to determine the z-score for whether the difference in the proportions was significantly different from 0. While conducting these tests I used a null hypothesis that there was no

difference in the proportion of positive mentions and an alternative hypothesis that the proportion of positive mentions was higher in later years.

3.3 Qualitative analysis

After coding the descriptions as positive or negative, I examined them in greater detail to determine if there were common themes throughout the magazine. I chiefly used a condensed version of grounded theory methods (LaRossa 2005). LaRossa (2005) suggests three phases of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. As I was not entirely sure what themes would be present in the magazine, I looked for as many different ideas as possible during the open coding phase. Lofland et al. (2006) suggest considering open-ended questions such as: “What is this?” “What does it represent?” “What is this an example of?” and “What is going on?” (201). Answering these questions was supposed to generate a wide variety of different codes (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011, Lofland et al. 2006) and I found that to be the case in my process as well. As I developed the initial codes, I created a list of additional questions and ideas that I was interested in exploring further. To keep the coding on track, I used a concept-indicator model. In this model, each indicator (or code) is compared with the previous codes to see if they are associated with the same concepts. If the codes are similar, this suggests that they are part of the same concept. If they are different, this suggests that they are parts of different concepts (LaRossa 2005). I used the different codes to build different concepts and explored a variety of themes present in *Cosmo*.

After the open coding phase, I moved my attention to axial coding. During this phase, I conducted a more focused analysis on each of the different concepts developed during open coding (LaRossa 2005). I utilized a diagramming strategy to clarify the concepts. I used concept charts as a way of connecting the different codes and developing more complex variables

(Lofland et al. 2006). Using concept charts enabled me to connect the various codes to each other and use these connections to develop more complex concepts that describe *Cosmo*'s depictions of kinky behavior. After creating these concept charts, I developed a rough outline that served as a more fully developed structure of analysis. Having my initial ideas and connections laid out made it easier to revisit the selected articles, determine better ways of structuring the variables, and analyze the themes that emerged from the data.

3.4 Covers

Because I was only able to access the text of the magazines, I also analyzed the available covers of *Cosmo* to get a better picture of the magazine as a whole. Unfortunately, the magazine had only posted online images of the covers from 2002-2014 at the time of this writing, so I was limited to the covers in that time span. Exploring the covers of the magazines provided some additional information about what kinds of language were considered acceptable when they were published. Magazine publishers select their headlines based on what will capture a reader's attention, and the headlines tend to be dramatic (Davalos, Davalos and Layton 2007). Previous work examining magazine covers and headlines focused on the content of the titles but also considered the relative size of the headlines (Aubrey 2010, Bazzini et al. 2015).

I conducted an analysis of the text of the covers using the same process described above. However, because there were so few mentions on the covers I only looked at the total number of mentions and did not separate it into the two categories "general descriptors" and "specific behaviors." I also compared the relative font size of headlines advertising kinky behavior to the other headlines on that cover and used this as an indicator of how prominent these articles were. I also identified where on the page the headlines were located. I coded headlines that were in smaller fonts or located in less prominent areas including the bottom of the page or the area

around the address label as less prominent. If the headlines were large and located in more eye-catching areas, like the top of the page, close to or over the top of the cover photo I coded them as more prominent.

3.5 Advantages and limitations

Content analysis of archival materials is well suited for understanding social change over time (Singleton Jr. and Straits 2010). I was able to examine exactly what *Cosmo* printed during the period of interest and observe how the messages changed over time. The *Cosmo* archive was also a useful data source because I was interested in looking at the public representations of kink. Because *Cosmo* is a well-known and widely read magazine, examining the articles provided information about what the editors thought would be accepted, at least by the magazine's audience. Analyzing *Cosmo*'s covers also provided information about what kind of content people found acceptable. More people will see the covers than will read the magazine, so the covers have to be both enticing and not too objectionable. Including the covers provided information about what was more generally considered publicly acceptable and not just what was acceptable to the typical *Cosmo* audience.

One of the primary limitations of using archival data is that the analysis is limited to the available information. I was unable to communicate with the authors of the articles and thus have no knowledge of their motivations, beliefs, and feelings about the articles they wrote. However, because my research questions focus on the representations that they selected, their motivations for writing the article and their feelings about the topics on which they wrote were less relevant to the analysis than the information they actually provided.

Another potential limitation of this project was that I restricted the study to one source of information. While the data provided a detailed picture of what was going on in *Cosmo*, the

findings will not necessarily generalize to the rest of popular media, or even to the content of other similar magazines. *Cosmo* tailors its messages for a very specific audience. This audience is primarily white, middle-class, and female (Ouellette 1999); this is a fairly small part of the population so the messages sent to this audience may not be an accurate reflection of broader cultural attitudes about kink.

4 QUANTITATIVE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Overall picture

Table 1 shows the frequencies in which the different types of terms appeared and Table 2 shows the average number of times descriptions of kink appeared per issue. Though the increase was not consistent from year to year, *Cosmo* increasingly mentioned kink through the study period as a whole. The number of times *Cosmo* mentioned kink in 1996 appears to be anomalous. Despite being the earliest year in the study period, it contains the fifth highest number of total mentions and the third highest number of specific behaviors. Several factors may have contributed to why the issues from 1996 have a greater number of mentions. The first is that 1996 was the last year that Editor-in-Chief Gurley Brown ran the magazine. She had been editor-in-chief since 1965 and may have felt more comfortable running more risqué material than her successor. Additionally, the February issue of that year ran an article entitled “Interview with a Dominatrix” in which the author recounts her experience meeting and working with a dominatrix. This article contains terminology that *Cosmo* does not use again until much later in the study period and contains 104 of the year’s 258 specific behaviors. The issues from 2006 also appear to be anomalous though the source of their differences is less clear. 2006 falls near the center of the study period, and Kate White had been the editor-in-chief for nine years at that point. This discrepancy may be a result of cyclical variation in the number of terms used from

year to year. Whatever the cause, 2006 contains the fourth lowest number of total mentions of kink.

Table 1: Term Frequencies

Year	General Descriptors	Specific Behaviors	Total
1996	101	258	359
1998	108	158	266
2000	191	116	307
2002	205	210	415
2004	182	216	398
2006	142	222	364
2008	168	208	376
2010	218	265	483
2012	223	255	478
2014	138	344	482

Table 2: Average Number of Mentions of Kink Per Issue

Year	General Descriptors ^a	Specific Behaviors ^a	Combined Total ^a
1996	8.42(6.20)	21.50(30.47)	29.92(34.32)
1998	9.00 (5.80)	13.17(11.26)	22.17(15.35)
2000	15.92 (22.17)	9.67(6.43)	25.58(25.51)
2002	17.08(8.24)	17.50(9.65)	34.58(15.44)
2004	15.17(5.10)	18.00(11.97)	33.17(12.73)
2006	11.83(3.59)	18.50(13.57)	30.33(14.18)
2008	14.00(4.75)	17.33(5.79)	31.33(8.88)
2010	18.17(6.99)	22.08(10.82)	40.25(14.98)
2012	18.58(17.59)	21.25(10.52)	39.83(25.60)
2014	11.50(7.70)	28.67(20.66)	40.17(25.97)

N=12 for each year a. Written as Mean(SD)

In order to explore this trend further, I used t-tests to see whether the average number of overall mentions per issue changed from year to year. Table 3 shows the results of the t-tests for each pair of years. As expected, based on the relatively high number of kinky terms in 1996, that year does not have a significantly different number of mentions per issue than any other year in the sample. The average number of mentions from 1998 looks more like what I was expecting to find in 1996. On average, issues from 1998 have significantly fewer mentions than those from 2004, 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014. The counts in 2006 are not significantly different from the

counts in 1998 which indicates just how much lower the counts are compared to the other years. The only other years which have significantly different numbers of mentions are 2008 and 2010. 2010 contains significantly more mentions of kink than 2008. I suspect that the reason for this difference is related to the release of Rihanna's hit song "S&M" in 2010. There were multiple references to Rihanna being a bad-girl which alluded to this song. It was interesting that while most of the issues in later years have significantly more mentions than the issues in 1998 there is only one significantly different pair after that. This suggests that while the average number of mentions has increased slightly over time, the trend is not consistent from year to year.

The results of the t-tests comparing the number of general descriptors from year to year are slightly more consistent. These results can be seen in Table 4. Though the results are not significant between each pair of years, overall the issues published in later years have significantly more mentions than do the earlier issues. Issues from 2002, 2004, 2008, 2010, and 2012 all contain significantly more general descriptors than issues from 1996 and issues from 1998. This suggests that part of the reason 1996 has a higher overall count than 1998 is due to the large number of specific behaviors mentioned in "Interview with a Dominatrix." The issues from 2006 still stand out as being abnormally low; issues in both 2002 and 2004 mention general descriptors significantly more often. Perhaps the most unexpected finding from this set of tests is that issues published in 2014 contain significantly fewer general descriptors than 2010. Since issues published in 2010 were obviously written before *Fifty Shades of Grey*'s release in 2011 it seems that either the book did not have as much of an influence on *Cosmo* as I expected, or that other pop cultural influences (like the song S&M) also factored significantly into what *Cosmo* printed. Overall, there is a slight trend for later issues to have more general descriptors than earlier ones, but the pattern is not consistent.

Similar to the results of the total number of mentions, the results of the t-tests comparing the number of specific behaviors also do not match up with the hypothesis that earlier issues would have significantly fewer mentions than later issues. Table 5 shows the results of the t-tests of specific behaviors for each pair of years. Issues published in 1996 do not differ significantly from issues published in any of the later years. This is almost certainly due to the article “Interview with a Dominatrix.” The 1998 issues have significantly fewer mentions than just 2010, 2012, and 2014. Issues from 2000 contain significantly fewer mentions than every year that comes after 2000. Each significant difference does fit into the expected pattern, there are more mentions in later years than in earlier ones; however, there are so few instances of significant differences that the pattern is inconsistent from year to year.

Overall, the data supporting my hypothesis that the later years would have significantly higher numbers of mentions is much weaker than I expected. While the average number of mentions increased slightly over time, the increase is really only significant if you look at the total time span included in this study. The notable exception to this is the low number of general descriptors in 2014. This low number may be an indicator that the magazine is moving away from using these types of words as markers for sex. It may also be a reflection of different editorial choices in the type of content that the magazine publishes. 2014 was the first year in the sample that was completely under the creative control of the current editor-in-chief, Joanna Coles. This editorial change seems to be the most likely explanation for the difference, as the articles published in 2014 were more concerned with social and political issues rather than sex, beauty, and fashion like the articles from previous years.

Table 3: T-tests for Differences in Mean Mentions Per Issue

Year 1	Mean Year 1(SD Year 1)	Year 2	Mean Year 2(SD Year 2)	t	p
1996	29 (34.32)	1998	22 (15.35)	0.71	0.24
1996	29 (34.32)	2000	25 (25.51)	0.35	0.36
1996	29 (34.32)	2002	34 (15.44)	-0.43	0.34
1996	29 (34.32)	2004	32 (12.73)	-0.31	0.38
1996	29 (34.32)	2006	30 (14.18)	-0.04	0.48
1996	29 (34.32)	2008	31 (8.88)	-0.14	0.45
1996	29 (34.32)	2010	40 (14.98)	-0.96	0.18
1996	29 (34.32)	2012	38 (25.60)	-0.80	0.22
1996	29 (34.32)	2014	39 (25.97)	-0.80	0.21
1998	22 (15.35)	2000	25 (25.51)	-0.40	0.35
1998	22 (15.35)	2002	34 (15.44)	1.05	0.15
1998	22 (15.35)	2004	32 (12.73)	-1.91	0.03*
1998	22 (15.35)	2006	30 (14.18)	-1.35	0.09
1998	22 (15.35)	2008	31 (8.88)	-1.79	0.05*
1998	22 (15.35)	2010	40 (14.98)	-2.92	0.00*
1998	22 (15.35)	2012	38 (25.60)	-2.05	0.03*
1998	22 (15.35)	2014	39 (25.97)	-2.04	0.03*
2000	25 (25.51)	2002	34 (15.44)	-1.05	0.15
2000	25 (25.51)	2004	32 (12.73)	-0.92	0.19
2000	25 (25.51)	2006	30 (14.18)	-0.56	0.29
2000	25 (25.51)	2008	31 (8.88)	-0.74	0.24
2000	25 (25.51)	2010	40 (14.98)	-1.72	0.05
2000	25 (25.51)	2012	38 (25.60)	-1.37	0.09
2000	25 (25.51)	2014	39 (25.97)	-1.36	0.09
2002	34 (15.44)	2004	32 (12.73)	0.25	0.40
2002	34 (15.44)	2006	30 (14.18)	0.70	0.24
2002	34 (15.44)	2008	31 (8.88)	0.63	0.27
2002	34 (15.44)	2010	40 (14.98)	-0.91	0.19
2002	34 (15.44)	2012	38 (25.60)	-0.61	0.27
2002	34 (15.44)	2014	39 (25.97)	-0.61	0.27
2004	32 (12.73)	2006	30 (14.18)	0.52	0.31
2004	32 (12.73)	2008	31 (8.88)	0.41	0.34
2004	32 (12.73)	2010	40 (14.98)	-1.25	0.11
2004	32 (12.73)	2012	38 (25.60)	-0.81	0.22
2004	32 (12.73)	2014	39 (25.97)	-0.81	0.22
2006	30 (14.18)	2008	31 (8.88)	-0.21	0.42
2006	30 (14.18)	2010	40 (14.98)	-1.67	0.06
2006	30 (14.18)	2012	38 (25.60)	-1.12	0.14
2006	30 (14.18)	2014	39 (25.97)	-1.12	0.14
2008	31 (8.88)	2010	40 (14.98)	-1.77	0.05*
2008	31 (8.88)	2012	38 (25.60)	-1.09	0.15
2008	31 (8.88)	2014	39 (25.97)	-1.08	0.15
2010	40 (14.98)	2012	38 (25.60)	0.05	0.48
2010	40 (14.98)	2014	39 (25.97)	0.04	0.48
2012	38 (25.60)	2014	39 (25.97)	0.50	1.72
Note: For each t-test N=24		Overall Range= 2-85		p≤ 0.05 * p≤ 0.01** p≤ 0.001***	

Table 4: T-tests for Differences in Mean Mentions of General Descriptors Per Issue

Year 1	Mean Year 1(SD Year 1)	Year 2	Mean Year 2(SD Year 2)	t	p
1996	8.42 (6.20)	1998	9.00 (5.80)	-0.24	0.41
1996	8.42 (6.20)	2000	15.92 (22.17)	-1.13	0.14
1996	8.42 (6.20)	2002	17.08 (8.24)	-2.91	0.00**
1996	8.42 (6.20)	2004	15.17 (5.10)	-2.91	0.00**
1996	8.42 (6.20)	2006	11.83 (3.59)	-1.65	0.06
1996	8.42 (6.20)	2008	14.00 (4.75)	-2.48	0.01*
1996	8.42 (6.20)	2010	18.17 (6.99)	-3.61	0.00***
1996	8.42 (6.20)	2012	18.58 (17.59)	-1.89	0.04*
1996	8.42 (6.20)	2014	11.25 (7.70)	-0.99	0.17
1998	9.00 (5.80)	2000	15.92 (22.17)	-1.05	0.16
1998	9.00 (5.80)	2002	17.08 (8.24)	-2.78	0.01**
1998	9.00 (5.80)	2004	15.17 (5.10)	-2.77	0.01**
1998	9.00 (5.80)	2006	11.83 (3.59)	-1.44	0.08
1998	9.00 (5.80)	2008	14.00 (4.75)	-2.31	0.02*
1998	9.00 (5.80)	2010	18.17 (6.99)	-3.50	0.00**
1998	9.00 (5.80)	2012	18.58 (17.59)	-1.79	0.05*
1998	9.00 (5.80)	2014	11.25 (7.70)	-0.81	0.21
2000	15.92 (22.17)	2002	17.08 (8.24)	-0.17	0.43
2000	15.92 (22.17)	2004	15.17 (5.10)	0.11	0.46
2000	15.92 (22.17)	2006	11.83 (3.59)	0.63	0.27
2000	15.92 (22.17)	2008	14.00 (4.75)	0.29	0.39
2000	15.92 (22.17)	2010	18.17 (6.99)	-0.34	0.37
2000	15.92 (22.17)	2012	18.58 (17.59)	-0.33	0.37
2000	15.92 (22.17)	2014	11.25 (7.70)	0.69	0.25
2002	17.08 (8.24)	2004	15.17 (5.10)	0.69	0.25
2002	17.08 (8.24)	2006	11.83 (3.59)	2.02	0.03*
2002	17.08 (8.24)	2008	14.00 (4.75)	1.12	0.14
2002	17.08 (8.24)	2010	18.17 (6.99)	-0.35	0.37
2002	17.08 (8.24)	2012	18.58 (17.59)	-0.27	0.40
2002	17.08 (8.24)	2014	11.25 (7.70)	1.79	0.04*
2004	15.17 (5.10)	2006	11.83 (3.59)	1.85	0.04*
2004	15.17 (5.10)	2008	14.00 (4.75)	0.58	0.28
2004	15.17 (5.10)	2010	18.17 (6.99)	-1.20	0.12
2004	15.17 (5.10)	2012	18.58 (17.59)	-0.65	0.26
2004	15.17 (5.10)	2014	11.25 (7.70)	1.47	0.08
2006	11.83 (3.59)	2008	14.00 (4.75)	-1.26	0.11
2006	11.83 (3.59)	2010	18.17 (6.99)	-2.79	0.01**
2006	11.83 (3.59)	2012	18.58 (17.59)	-1.30	0.11
2006	11.83 (3.59)	2014	11.25 (7.70)	0.24	0.41
2008	14.00 (4.75)	2010	18.17 (6.99)	-1.71	0.05
2008	14.00 (4.75)	2012	18.58 (17.59)	-0.87	0.20
2008	14.00 (4.75)	2014	11.25 (7.70)	1.05	0.15
2010	18.17 (6.99)	2012	18.58 (17.59)	-0.08	0.47
2010	18.17 (6.99)	2014	11.25 (7.70)	2.30	0.02*
2012	18.58 (17.59)	2014	11.25 (7.70)	1.32	0.10

Note: For each t-test N=24 Overall Range= 2-85 p≤ 0.05 * p≤ 0.01 ** p≤ 0.001 ***

Table 5: T-tests for Differences in Mean Mentions of Specific Behaviors

Year 1	Mean Year 1 (SD Year 1)	Year 2	Mean Year 2 (SD Year 2)	t	p
1996	21.5 (30.47)	1998	13.17 (11.26)	0.89	0.19
1996	21.5 (30.47)	2000	9.67 (6.43)	1.32	0.11
1996	21.5 (30.47)	2002	17.50 (9.65)	0.43	0.34
1996	21.5 (30.47)	2004	18.00 (11.97)	0.37	0.36
1996	21.5 (30.47)	2006	18.50 (13.57)	0.31	0.38
1996	21.5 (30.47)	2008	17.33 (5.79)	0.47	0.32
1996	21.5 (30.47)	2010	22.08 (10.82)	-0.06	0.48
1996	21.5 (30.47)	2012	21.25 (10.52)	-0.86	0.20
1996	21.5 (30.47)	2014	28.67 (20.66)	-0.67	0.25
1998	13.17 (11.26)	2000	9.67 (6.43)	0.94	0.18
1998	13.17 (11.26)	2002	17.50 (9.65)	-1.01	0.16
1998	13.17 (11.26)	2004	18.00 (11.97)	-1.02	0.16
1998	13.17 (11.26)	2006	18.50 (13.57)	-1.05	0.15
1998	13.17 (11.26)	2008	17.33 (5.79)	-1.14	0.14
1998	13.17 (11.26)	2010	22.08 (10.82)	-1.98	0.03*
1998	13.17 (11.26)	2012	21.25 (10.52)	-1.82	0.04*
1998	13.17 (11.26)	2014	28.67 (20.66)	-2.28	0.02*
2000	9.67 (6.43)	2002	17.50 (9.65)	-2.34	0.01*
2000	9.67 (6.43)	2004	18.00 (11.97)	-2.12	0.02*
2000	9.67 (6.43)	2006	18.50 (13.57)	-2.04	0.03*
2000	9.67 (6.43)	2008	17.33 (5.79)	-3.07	0.00**
2000	9.67 (6.43)	2010	22.08 (10.82)	-3.42	0.00**
2000	9.67 (6.43)	2012	21.25 (10.52)	-3.26	0.00**
2000	9.67 (6.43)	2014	28.67 (20.66)	-3.04	0.00**
2002	17.50 (9.65)	2004	18.00 (11.97)	-0.11	0.46
2002	17.50 (9.65)	2006	18.50 (13.57)	-0.21	0.42
2002	17.50 (9.65)	2008	17.33 (5.79)	0.05	0.48
2002	17.50 (9.65)	2010	22.08 (10.82)	-1.10	0.14
2002	17.50 (9.65)	2012	21.25 (10.52)	-0.91	0.19
2002	17.50 (9.65)	2014	28.67 (20.66)	0.23	0.41
2004	18.00 (11.97)	2006	18.50 (13.57)	-0.10	0.46
2004	18.00 (11.97)	2008	17.33 (5.79)	1.75	0.86
2004	18.00 (11.97)	2010	22.08 (10.82)	-0.88	0.20
2004	18.00 (11.97)	2012	21.25 (10.52)	-0.71	0.24
2004	18.00 (11.97)	2014	28.67 (20.66)	-1.55	0.07
2006	18.50 (13.57)	2008	17.33 (5.79)	0.27	0.39
2006	18.50 (13.57)	2010	22.08 (10.82)	-0.72	0.24
2006	18.50 (13.57)	2012	21.25 (10.52)	-0.55	0.29
2006	18.50 (13.57)	2014	28.67 (20.66)	-1.42	0.08
2008	17.33 (5.79)	2010	22.08 (10.82)	-1.34	0.10
2008	17.33 (5.79)	2012	21.25 (10.52)	-1.13	0.14
2008	17.33 (5.79)	2014	28.67 (20.66)	-1.83	0.05*
2010	22.08 (10.82)	2012	21.25 (10.52)	0.19	0.42
2010	22.08 (10.82)	2014	28.67 (20.66)	-0.98	0.17
2012	21.25 (10.52)	2014	28.67 (20.66)	-1.11	0.14

Note: For each t-test N=24 Overall Range= 2-85 p ≤ 0.05 * p ≤ 0.01** p ≤ 0.001***

4.2 Positive or negative mentions

The results I found regarding the proportion of times the magazine spoke positively about kink are more in line with my expectations but the differences are not as dramatic as I had expected. Table 6 shows the proportion of mentions of kink which were positive. As these data show, there is a general trend for issues published in later years to speak about kink more positively than issues published in earlier years. In 1996, *Cosmo* only speaks positively about kink 64% of the time. *Cosmo* speaks positively about kink most often in 2012 where 83% of the mentions are positive. As with the total number of mentions, the proportion of positive mentions of kink increased, but it was not a regular increase. 2006 is an anomalous year. Not only do the issues published in 2006 contain fewer mentions of kink than expected but they also contain a lower proportion of positive mentions.

Table 6: Proportion of Positive Mentions

Year	General Descriptors	Specific Behaviors	Overall
1996	0.634	0.640	0.638
1998	0.602	0.652	0.632
2000	0.827	0.741	0.795
2002	0.795	0.714	0.754
2004	0.742	0.694	0.716
2006	0.697	0.676	0.684
2008	0.798	0.745	0.769
2010	0.839	0.702	0.764
2012	0.866	0.800	0.831
2014	0.812	0.738	0.759

To further explore these data, I conducted proportion tests to determine if there were significant differences in the proportion of positive mentions between the different years. Table 7 shows the complete results from these tests. With the notable exception of 2006, the issues in each year that follow 1998 present kink positively a significantly greater proportion of the time. When looking at the entire study period, *Cosmo* speaks more positively about kink in the most recent period than it did in the earliest period. Instead of gradual steady change, there are some

years where the number of positive mentions increases significantly. *Cosmo* speaks more positively about kink in 2000 than it does in 1996 and 1998, but from 2002-2010 there are few significant changes from one year to the next. The issues published in 2012 speak positively about kink significantly more often than in every year preceding it except for 2000. This spike in positive mentions in 2012 is something that I expected to find since E.L. James published *Fifty Shades of Grey* in 2011.

I also tested the proportions for positive mentions of general descriptors and positive mentions for specific behaviors to see if looking at everything together was obscuring patterns in the data. The results from the proportion tests examining general descriptors can be found in Table 8. These results are very similar to the results for the proportion of all positive mentions of kink. *Cosmo* represents kink positively significantly more often in later issues than it does in the first two years of the study period. The proportion of positive mentions is unusually low in 2006 but for the most part from 2000-2010 there are no significant increases in the proportion of positive mentions. *Cosmo* represents kink positively significantly more often in 2012 than in almost every year preceding it. Interestingly, when only looking at general descriptors there are no significant differences in *Cosmo*'s positive mentions of kink between 2010 and 2012. I suspect that this has to do with the presence of other pop cultural influences like the song S&M.

The times that *Cosmo* positively mentions specific behaviors associated with kink follow a similar pattern, but the spike in 2012 is slightly more distinct. The full results of these tests can be found in Table 9. There are fewer significant differences between the proportion of positive mentions in 1996 and the years following it. Only five of the years in the sample positively portray specific behaviors related to kink positively more often than 1996; and only three years

in the sample portray specific behaviors related to kink positively more often than 1998. There is another marked increase in 2012. *Cosmo* positively depicts kink significantly more often than most of the preceding years. One way in which this change manifests is that many new specific behaviors are mentioned in 2012. The terms *BDSM*, *bondage tape*, and *Fifty Shades of Grey* all appear for the first time in 2012. This reinforces my belief that the increase in positive representations of kink in 2012 is associated with the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its subsequent popularity. This also helps explain the comparisons with 2014. The representations of kink in 2014 are not significantly more likely to be positive than in 2012 and in fact are not significantly more positive than the representations in most of the preceding years. When the overall discussion about *Fifty Shades of Gray* in the media decreased, *Cosmo* wrote about kink less often. Further research should explore whether other media events, such as the 2015 release of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie are also connected with spikes in representations of kink.

Table 7: Proportion Tests for Positive Descriptors Overall

Year 1	Year 1 Proportion	Year 2	Year 2 Proportion	z	p
1996	0.64	1998	0.63	0.16	0.56
1996	0.64	2000	0.79	-4.45	0.00***
1996	0.64	2002	0.75	-3.52	0.00***
1996	0.64	2004	0.72	-2.30	0.01*
1996	0.64	2006	0.68	-1.31	0.09
1996	0.64	2008	0.77	-3.88	0.00***
1996	0.64	2010	0.76	-3.99	0.00***
1996	0.64	2012	0.83	-6.35	0.00***
1996	0.64	2014	0.76	-3.83	0.00***
1998	0.63	2000	0.79	-4.33	0.00***
1998	0.63	2002	0.75	-3.43	0.00***
1998	0.63	2004	0.72	-2.29	0.01*
1998	0.63	2006	0.68	-1.38	0.08
1998	0.63	2008	0.77	-3.78	0.00***
1998	0.63	2010	0.76	-3.85	0.00***
1998	0.63	2012	0.83	-6.09	0.00***
1998	0.63	2014	0.76	-3.70	0.00***
2000	0.79	2002	0.75	1.28	0.90
2000	0.79	2004	0.72	2.39	0.99
2000	0.79	2006	0.68	3.24	1.00
2000	0.79	2008	0.77	0.82	0.79
2000	0.79	2010	0.76	1.01	0.84
2000	0.79	2012	0.83	-1.26	0.10
2000	0.79	2014	0.76	1.16	0.88
2002	0.75	2004	0.72	1.23	0.89
2002	0.75	2006	0.68	2.18	0.99
2002	0.75	2008	0.77	-0.47	0.32
2002	0.75	2010	0.76	-0.34	0.37
2002	0.75	2012	0.83	-2.82	0.00**
2002	0.75	2014	0.76	-0.18	0.43
2004	0.72	2006	0.68	0.96	0.83
2004	0.72	2008	0.77	-1.67	0.05*
2004	0.72	2010	0.76	-1.62	0.05
2004	0.72	2012	0.83	-4.06	0.00***
2004	0.72	2014	0.76	-1.46	0.07
2006	0.68	2008	0.77	-2.58	0.00**
2006	0.68	2010	0.76	-2.59	0.00**
2006	0.68	2012	0.83	-4.98	0.00***
2006	0.68	2014	0.76	-2.43	0.01**
2008	0.77	2010	0.76	0.16	0.56
2008	0.77	2012	0.83	-2.26	0.01*
2008	0.77	2014	0.76	0.32	0.62
2010	0.76	2012	0.83	-2.57	0.01*
2010	0.76	2014	0.76	0.17	0.57
2012	0.83	2014	0.76	2.73	1.00

p ≤ 0.05 * p ≤ 0.01** p ≤ 0.001***

Table 8: Proportion Tests for Positive General Descriptors

Year 1	Year 1 Proportion	Year 2	Year 2 Proportion	z	p
1996	0.63	1998	0.60	0.47	0.68
1996	0.63	2000	0.83	-3.69	0.00***
1996	0.63	2002	0.80	-3.03	0.00**
1996	0.63	2004	0.74	-1.91	0.03*
1996	0.63	2006	0.70	-1.04	0.15
1996	0.63	2008	0.80	-2.95	0.00**
1996	0.63	2010	0.84	-4.09	0.00***
1996	0.63	2012	0.87	-4.77	0.00***
1996	0.63	2014	0.81	-3.08	0.00**
1998	0.60	2000	0.83	-4.30	0.00***
1998	0.60	2002	0.80	-3.65	0.00***
1998	0.60	2004	0.74	-2.49	0.01**
1998	0.60	2006	0.70	-1.57	0.06
1998	0.60	2008	0.80	-3.54	0.00***
1998	0.60	2010	0.84	-4.73	0.00***
1998	0.60	2012	0.87	-5.42	0.00***
1998	0.60	2014	0.81	-3.63	0.00***
2000	0.83	2002	0.80	0.81	0.79
2000	0.83	2004	0.74	2.01	0.98
2000	0.83	2006	0.70	2.80	1.00
2000	0.83	2008	0.80	0.72	0.76
2000	0.83	2010	0.84	-0.33	0.37
2000	0.83	2012	0.87	-1.08	0.14
2000	0.83	2014	0.81	0.36	0.64
2002	0.80	2004	0.74	1.25	0.89
2002	0.80	2006	0.70	2.09	0.98
2002	0.80	2008	0.80	-0.06	0.48
2002	0.80	2010	0.84	-1.18	0.12
2002	0.80	2012	0.87	-1.94	0.03*
2002	0.80	2014	0.81	-0.38	0.35
2004	0.74	2006	0.70	0.89	0.81
2004	0.74	2008	0.80	-1.24	0.11
2004	0.74	2010	0.84	-2.41	0.01**
2004	0.74	2012	0.87	-3.16	0.00***
2004	0.74	2014	0.81	-1.47	0.07
2006	0.70	2008	0.80	-2.04	0.02*
2006	0.70	2010	0.84	-3.20	0.00***
2006	0.70	2012	0.87	-3.92	0.00***
2006	0.70	2014	0.81	-2.22	0.01*
2008	0.80	2010	0.84	-1.06	0.14
2008	0.80	2012	0.87	-1.80	0.04*
2008	0.80	2014	0.81	-0.31	0.38
2010	0.84	2012	0.87	-0.77	0.22
2010	0.84	2014	0.81	0.68	0.75
2012	0.87	2014	0.81	1.37	0.92

p ≤ 0.05 * p ≤ 0.01 ** p ≤ 0.001 ***

Table 9: Proportion Tests for Positive Specific Behaviors

Year 1	Year 1 Proportion	Year 2	Year 2 Proportion	z	P
1996	0.64	1998	0.65	-0.26	0.40
1996	0.64	2000	0.74	-1.94	0.03*
1996	0.64	2002	0.71	-1.71	0.04*
1996	0.64	2004	0.69	-1.26	0.10
1996	0.64	2006	0.68	-0.83	0.20
1996	0.64	2008	0.75	-2.44	0.01**
1996	0.64	2010	0.70	-1.52	0.06
1996	0.64	2012	0.80	-4.04	0.00***
1996	0.64	2014	0.74	-2.61	0.00**
1998	0.65	2000	0.74	-1.58	0.06
1998	0.65	2002	0.71	-1.28	0.10
1998	0.65	2004	0.69	-0.87	0.19
1998	0.65	2006	0.68	-0.48	0.31
1998	0.65	2008	0.75	-1.94	0.03*
1998	0.65	2010	0.70	-1.07	0.14
1998	0.65	2012	0.80	-3.35	0.00***
1998	0.65	2014	0.74	-1.99	0.02*
2000	0.74	2002	0.71	0.52	0.70
2000	0.74	2004	0.69	0.90	0.82
2000	0.74	2006	0.68	1.25	0.89
2000	0.74	2008	0.75	-0.08	0.47
2000	0.74	2010	0.70	0.78	0.78
2000	0.74	2012	0.80	-1.27	0.10
2000	0.74	2014	0.74	0.06	0.53
2002	0.71	2004	0.69	0.45	0.67
2002	0.71	2006	0.68	0.87	0.81
2002	0.71	2008	0.75	-0.71	0.24
2002	0.71	2010	0.70	0.29	0.62
2002	0.71	2012	0.80	-2.16	0.02*
2002	0.71	2014	0.74	-0.62	0.27
2004	0.69	2006	0.68	0.42	0.66
2004	0.69	2008	0.75	-1.16	0.12
2004	0.69	2010	0.70	-0.18	0.43
2004	0.69	2012	0.80	-2.64	0.00**
2004	0.69	2014	0.74	-1.13	0.13
2006	0.68	2008	0.75	-1.59	0.06
2006	0.68	2010	0.70	-0.62	0.27
2006	0.68	2012	0.80	-3.10	0.00***
2006	0.68	2014	0.74	-1.61	0.05
2008	0.75	2010	0.70	1.04	0.85
2008	0.75	2012	0.80	-1.41	0.08
2008	0.75	2014	0.74	0.18	0.57
2010	0.70	2012	0.80	-2.58	0.00**
2010	0.70	2014	0.74	-1.00	0.16
2012	0.80	2014	0.74	1.76	0.96

p ≤ 0.05 * p ≤ 0.01 ** p ≤ 0.001 ***

4.3 Covers

The results for the covers are much less revealing, likely because of the much smaller quantity of text. On average *Cosmo* mentions kink less than 1 time per cover. Table 9 shows the counts and averages for each year's worth of covers. The data show that the covers from 2002 actually have the highest number of descriptors of any of the years presented here and that the covers from 2014 have the lowest number of descriptors. However, there is no discernable pattern in the number of mentions shown on the cover: the numbers fluctuate up and down too much in this relatively small sample of years. 2012 has a higher than average number of mentions, but not a remarkably higher one. Additionally, almost all the mentions of kink that appear on a cover are positive. This makes a certain amount of sense because on the whole the covers of *Cosmo* include headlines that encourage readers to do things rather than headlines that discourage readers from doing things.

Table 10: Counts from Cosmo Covers

Year	Total Mentions of Kink	Average Mentions Per Issue	Proportion of Positive Mentions
2002	11	0.92	0.82
2004	5	0.42	1.00
2006	5	0.42	0.80
2008	9	0.75	1.00
2010	7	0.50	1.00
2012	9	0.75	1.00
2014	3	0.25	0.67
Total	49	0.58	0.92

Mentions per cover ranged from 0-4

Though there is not a discernable pattern in the number of times kink is mentioned on the covers of *Cosmo*, I examined whether any of these differences were significant. Table 11 shows the results of the t-tests for each pair of years. The covers of *Cosmo* in 2014 contain significantly fewer mentions of kink than the covers from 2002, 2008, and 2012. These were the only significant differences among the covers. Though most of the times *Cosmo* mentions kink on the

cover are positive I also checked to make sure the differences were not significant. Table 12 shows the results of the proportion tests for each pair of years and indeed there are no significant differences in the proportion of mentions that are positive.

Table 11: T-tests for Differences in Mean Cover Mentions

Year 1	Mean Year 1(SD Year 1)	Year 2	Mean Year 2(SD Year 2)	t	p
2002	0.92 (1.16)	2004	0.42 (0.51)	1.36	0.10
2002	0.92 (1.16)	2006	0.42 (0.67)	1.29	0.11
2002	0.92 (1.16)	2008	0.75 (0.62)	0.44	0.33
2002	0.92 (1.16)	2010	0.50 (0.67)	1.07	0.15
2002	0.92 (1.16)	2012	0.75 (0.62)	0.44	0.33
2002	0.92 (1.16)	2014	0.25 (0.45)	1.85	0.04*
2004	0.42 (0.51)	2006	0.42 (0.67)	0.00	0.50
2004	0.42 (0.51)	2008	0.75 (0.62)	-1.43	0.08
2004	0.42 (0.51)	2010	0.50 (0.67)	-0.34	0.37
2004	0.42 (0.51)	2012	0.75 (0.62)	-1.43	0.08
2004	0.42 (0.51)	2014	0.25 (0.45)	0.84	0.20
2006	0.42 (0.67)	2008	0.75 (0.62)	-1.26	0.11
2006	0.42 (0.67)	2010	0.50 (0.67)	-0.30	0.38
2006	0.42 (0.67)	2012	0.75 (0.62)	-1.26	0.11
2006	0.42 (0.67)	2014	0.25 (0.45)	0.72	0.24
2008	0.75 (0.62)	2010	0.50 (0.67)	0.94	0.18
2008	0.75 (0.62)	2012	0.75 (0.62)	0.00	0.50
2008	0.75 (0.62)	2014	0.25 (0.45)	2.25	0.02*
2010	0.50 (0.67)	2012	0.75 (0.62)	-0.94	0.18
2010	0.50 (0.67)	2014	0.25 (0.45)	1.07	0.15
2012	0.75 (0.62)	2014	0.25 (0.45)	2.25	0.02*
Note: For each t-test N=24		Overall Range= 2-85		p≤ 0.05 * p≤ 0.01** p≤ 0.001***	

Interestingly, but not altogether surprisingly, the term *naughty* is the most common term to appear on the cover. It appears in a variety of positions on the page and a variety of font sizes. It seems likely that the magazine is framing sex in general as *naughty* and this term is used regardless of the actual sexual behaviors being presented; I discuss this further in the next section. It seems likely that the magazine is trying to keep a similar tone in its depictions of sexual behavior. Consistently calling sex *naughty* or *bad* means that the tone stays the same even if the practices presented by the magazine change over time. I also found evidence that *Cosmo's* content and presentation were directly influenced by *Fifty Shades of Grey*. On the August cover

from 2012 *Cosmo* advertises the ability to “Wow Your Man With These Moves Inspired by *Fifty Shades of Grey*.” Though the actual term *Fifty Shades of Grey* is written in one of the smallest fonts on the page, it is positioned as a subtitle for the second largest title that appears on the cover. This article title is clearly an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of the novel, and suggests that the moves inspired by *Fifty Shades of Grey* will be satisfying for the readers’ partners.

Table 12: Proportion Tests for Positive Cover Descriptors

Year 1	Year 1 Proportion	Year 2	Year 2 Proportion	z	p
2002	0.82	2004	1.00	-1.02	0.15
2002	0.82	2006	0.80	0.09	0.53
2002	0.82	2008	1.00	-1.35	0.09
2002	0.82	2010	1.00	-1.20	0.12
2002	0.82	2012	1.00	-1.35	0.09
2002	0.82	2014	0.67	0.57	0.71
2004	1.00	2006	0.80	1.05	0.85
2004	1.00	2008	1.00	0.00	0.50
2004	1.00	2010	1.00	0.00	0.50
2004	1.00	2012	1.00	0.00	0.50
2004	1.00	2014	0.67	1.38	0.92
2006	0.80	2008	1.00	-1.39	0.08
2006	0.80	2010	1.00	-1.24	0.11
2006	0.80	2012	1.00	-1.39	0.08
2006	0.80	2014	0.67	0.42	0.66
2008	1.00	2010	1.00	0.00	0.50
2008	1.00	2012	1.00	0.00	0.50
2008	1.00	2014	0.67	1.81	0.96
2010	1.00	2012	1.00	0.00	0.50
2010	1.00	2014	0.67	1.61	0.95
2012	1.00	2014	0.67	1.81	0.96

$p \leq 0.05$ * $p \leq 0.01$ ** $p \leq 0.001$ ***

5 QUALITATIVE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 It’s good to be bad

One of the most consistent underlying themes in *Cosmo* is the idea that being bad is good. Sex is frequently described as “dirty” or “naughty” but is still something that readers are

encouraged to do. According to *Cosmo* it is positive to be a “bad girl,” to behave in a “naughty” way, or to do something “sinful”:

True, any sex style can be naughty if your mind is gleefully in the gutter, but certain poses have a little extra sin built right in. “Anything that deviates from traditional missionary sex could be considered taboo,” says Keesling. But these carnal configurations really raise the bad-girl bar. (Crain 2002a:216)

This excerpt from 2002 exemplifies this message: Sex itself is naughty, and certain sex positions are even naughtier. The “extra naughty” sex positions presented in this article include performing oral sex on a partner while he is standing and reverse cowgirl (woman on top but facing away from her partner). These positions do not appear to stray too far from the charmed circle, especially since the underlying assumption is that a heterosexual couple would try them out in the privacy of their home. However, even though these positions seem relatively tame, Crain frames these sex positions as more enjoyable than missionary position and claims that trying them would make a woman a “bad-girl.” However, being a bad girl is an aspirational goal *Cosmo* suggests readers should attempt to achieve, not an indictment of their characters. Being bad is a desirable trait: it will dramatically improve a woman’s sexual experience and make her more appealing to her partner.

The specific behaviors *Cosmo* associates with being a bad girl change somewhat from year to year but a lot of the core elements remain the same and are often tied to clothing which is associated with sex. For example in 1996 while encouraging women to purchase items from their “must-have” accessory guide the magazine contrasts a “bad-girl leopard print bra”(1998b:76) with a nice “rosebud strewn camisole” (1998b:76). In 2012 the motorcycle jacket is the new “bad girl staple” (Baptiste 2012:185). In 2002 readers are told that one of the secrets of women who have the best sex lives is to “[w]ear nothing except one ultraracy accessory. Thigh-high boots, a lacy thong, or a skinny belly chain creates a bad-girl vibe.” —Candace, 25” (Crain 2002b). Here

Crain has provided an example that makes an explicit connection between bad-girl clothing and bad-girl sex. This connection is not always stated, but it is usually at least implied. In 2006, one of the magazine's 101 sex tips included wearing "a supershort denim skirt — the kind bad girls always wore when I was growing up" (Neumann 2006). In 2012 the motorcycle jacket is the new "bad girl staple" (Baptiste 2012:185). Though these types of clothing are specifically connected to being a bad-girl at different points in time animal print, leather, thongs, short skirts, and thigh high boots were all connected with being naughty or wild at other times, so though the specific recommendations changed cyclically with whatever was fashionable at the time, none of the suggestions differ from the stereotypical bad-girl image. However, no matter what *Cosmo* describes as a characteristic of a bad-girl, it encourages readers to emulate these traits and claims that being bad is beneficial for a woman's life.

In 1998, Coucher encourages *Cosmo* readers to improve their lives by becoming bad-girls. Being bad will transform a person's life from boring to interesting:

Ask yourself: Do I have the guts to abandon my inhibitions, sacrifice my reputation, and stay up way too late on school nights? If the answer is yes, read on for all the how-to you need to know to become a Bad Girl. (Coucher 1998:306)

Bad-girls are desirable; they break the rules and receive benefits for their bad behavior. The benefits include confidence, better relationships, and better sex. Better sex is, of course, one of the most important things a bad-girl could get. In fact, "[b]ad girls don't just have sex. They have marathon sex--hours upon hours of dancing the sideways samba that takes them into dawn dazed, sore, and totally satisfied" (Gregory 2000:248). According to *Cosmo*, both men and women should be very interested in *bad-girl sex*. The connection between being a bad-girl and being good in bed is a theme that runs from 1996 all the way through 2014. In 2012, the magazine even explicitly comes out and says that it's good to be bad. "Good to Be Bad: A

hemline that hits midthigh makes this pleated skirt a little nice, a lot of naughty. A leather jacket and pretty blouse complete the perfectly mixed message” (Baptiste 2012:184). In 2014, *Cosmo* presents bad-girl sex as the be all and end all of sex. “BREAK THE RULES WITH Bad-Girl Sex: Take it from the RiRis and Delevignes of the world--it's good to be bad. In 2014, dare to wake up your inner rebel” (Panariello and Ruiz 2014:84). Thus, *Cosmo* positions sex that is “naughty” or “breaks the rules” as the most desirable kind of sex to have.

Breaking the rules is repeatedly lauded as desirable. The taboo nature of sexual behaviors that are “off limits” makes them more appealing. Men who contribute their thoughts to the magazine frequently mention enjoying sex that is “naughty” or “extra-naughty” in nature though the behaviors that constituted extra naughty sex changed from year to year, and person to person. Interestingly, the behaviors *Cosmo* presents as taboo tend to get further from the charmed circle of sex as time goes on. In 1996, the magazine frames things like premarital sex as naughty and therefore exciting. In advising a reader who reported a low sex drive after her wedding Kurtz, the advice columnist, suggests “[b]efore your nuptials, perhaps you thought sex was forbidden, therefore exciting. Now that it's “legal,” the thrill has gone” (Kurtz 1996:34). By 2008, *Cosmo* is suggesting that using household items as sex toys is a “bad-girl sex trick.” Benjamin (2008) recommends hairbrushes, blush brushes, and rolling pins in her article “Bad-Girl Sex Tricks.” In 2014, the behaviors which count as naughty extend even further. In a review of *Secretary*, a 2002 film with a depiction of a BDSM relationship starring James Spader and Maggie Gyllenhaal, *Cosmo* explains the reasons that the movie is so hot:

Spader's Mr. Grey is masterfully kinky when spanking his assistant, Ms. Holloway, over a typo: “Put your elbows on the desk, bend over...and read it aloud.” S&M sex at the office is totally taboo--and super arousing. C'mon, no one fantasizes about a loving monogamous couple doing it missionary-style in their master bedroom. (Surnow 2014:118)

The sex described here falls into several categories of the outer limits since it is non-marital, sadomasochistic, and in a semi-public place. Surnow claims that the behaviors that fall inside the charmed circle are boring to imagine. Surnow's claims seem to align with Weiss's (2006) findings that kinky imagery in the media has been increasing. People are used to seeing references to monogamous couples having sex in missionary position in their bedrooms, so including depictions of sexuality that vary from this image will be more attention-grabbing or interesting.

Though which behaviors *Cosmo* describes as naughty or taboo change over time, using negative sounding terms to refer to different sexual behaviors remains relatively steady. Sex is nearly as *naughty*, *sinful*, *twisted*, and *taboo* in 2014 as it is in 1996. This use of terminology may help explain why there were so few differences between years in the number of general descriptors present in the magazine. The idea that sex itself is naughty did not change, but the boundary around what was acceptably naughty clearly shifts to include a wider range of behaviors. The fact that sex is still framed using negative sounding words is not entirely surprising given the sex-negative nature of the United States in general. Acknowledging that sex is fun and exciting without using this negative terminology might draw more censure to the magazine, especially since women's sexual behavior is frowned upon by the culture at large.

5.2 You need a partner

One of the boundaries that *Cosmo* does **not** push against is the idea that in order to have a fulfilling life, people need to be involved in monogamous heterosexual relationships. Though these messages are more common in earlier issues of the magazine, they are present throughout the study period. The magazine frequently portrays acquiring and maintaining these relationships as one of the greatest achievements of a person's life. This ideal is a norm in the United States

though the outcome of *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) directly challenges the requirement that these relationships be heterosexual. It is therefore not particularly surprising to find that *Cosmo*, a magazine targeted toward young presumably heterosexual women, both subtly and explicitly reinforces this norm.

Simple messages like indicating that “[w]omen are willing to wait for Mr. Right[,] whatever it takes” (Heyn 1996:186), or suggesting that “[w]hen it comes to snagging what their hearts desire — from marriage proposals to pricey gifts — some chicks are master manipulators” (Sobol 2006:202) reinforce the idea that all women yearn for marriage. These assertions also reinforce the idea that men are repulsed by marriage; women must either wait them out or trick them into it. *Cosmo* does not always push marriage explicitly but often implies that stable, long term relationships are a desirable goal. The magazine puts women directly in charge of making sure these kinds of relationships happen, and also puts the burden of making sure that they appear desirable to potential partners and maintaining their existing romantic relationships squarely on their shoulders. Having partnered sex is so important that “sleeping alone for too long isn't healthy for a girl” (Smith 1996:112). Not only are women responsible for the work that goes into building a relationship, but it is also unhealthy for them not to work to achieve one.

According to *Cosmo*, sexual relationships should be limited to just two partners. In the earlier years of the study period the *Cosmo* advice columnist is very particular about this point. When asked whether swinging (having sex with other couples) was feasible in the long term, she replied: “Call me prejudiced, but I believe that sharing intimate moments with outsiders is tacky, promiscuous, antilove, and could signal the end of a relationship” (Kurtz 1998:136). People who seek sex outside of their current relationship receive the same censure from Kurtz as couples who are interested in exploring additional partners together. “You say these flings satisfy your

naughty streak and keep you excited, but a healthy relationship should be doing all those things for you” (Kurtz 2000:74). Kurtz insists that these women’s desire to have sex with men other than their current romantic partner is a sign that their relationships are unhealthy and that a healthy relationship should provide all the sexual satisfaction they need. Kurtz is not the only author to advise readers that emotional connection with a partner is more important than “spicing up” their sex lives. In 2004 when giving advice about whether or not to make a sex tape Le Poer Trench reminds readers that “Finally, consider the repercussions on your sex life.

There are external ways to fuel your desire for each other — like making videos and using sex toys — and then there is the emotional spice, which may, in fact, be what your sex life is really missing,” says Cooper. In other words, your very own remake of *Debbie Does Dallas* may not actually be the right solution to blah booty time. (Le Poer Trench 2004:141)

This advice reinforces the idea that a person’s romantic and sexual partner should be fulfilling all of her sexual needs and also insinuates that having a romantic partner is the only way to get these needs met. These stories illustrate the overall trend for *Cosmo* to argue that having extramarital sex or using toys with a partner is an indicator that a person’s romantic life is unfulfilling and they need to instead concentrate on making emotional connections with their partners to improve the situation.

Cosmo also reinforces the norm of coupling up by centering the fulfilling nature unique to partnered sex. Masturbating, for example, is not an acceptable long-term substitute for having a partner:

Masturbation for most men--and some women too--is a very different kind of sex act from intercourse, like taking a quick shower as opposed to swimming in a golden sea. Masturbation is a problem only when it is preferred over shared sex, as it is by your boyfriend. (Kurtz 1998:136)

Though Kurtz is quick to point out that masturbation is a different sexual behavior than partnered sex; she characterizes it as a lesser form of sex. Similarly, many of *Cosmo*’s authors also frown

upon pornography since it may lead to men -- and it's always a concern about men -- preferring masturbation and watching porn over having sex with their partners:

“There are two current factors that are leading more and more men to develop masturbation dependencies, which is when someone masturbates so frequently that it interferes with a healthy sex life,” says sex therapist Ian Kerner, PhD, author of *She Comes First*. And rest assured, neither of them have anything to do with you. “First, the bad economy is leaving a lot of guys without jobs, so they sit at home, bored, and start masturbating more often,” says Kerner. “And second, porn has become so accessible that guys can watch something new every day, so a compulsion grows.” (Heitman 2010:90)

Indeed, though porn consumption has nothing to do with a man's desire for a woman, a woman should still be concerned about her partner's use of porn. The more easily a man can access porn, the greater the risk that he will abandon his partner in favor of masturbation.

Though *Cosmo* consistently frames pornography as a men's problem, it judges female masturbation as well. When a reader writes to the advice columnist in 2000 saying that she is getting everything she needs sexually from her new vibrator and no longer feels the need to date men, Kurtz is very critical of her decision:

You are swapping all that tenderness, knowledge, and love for perpetual masturbation. Do I think you are off your rocker? I wouldn't presume to say. But I do believe that anyone who asks that question is already halfway to answering it herself. (Kurtz 2000:74)

Not only will toys ultimately be unfulfilling for this woman, she is crazy for thinking that they are a viable alternative to a flesh and blood partner. *Cosmo*'s readers should also be concerned if they are becoming overly dependent on a vibrator even when they are also having partnered sex. If a woman nearly always needs a vibrator to have an orgasm Ruiz suggests in 2014 that she may be in need of a “sexorcism.”

Your magic wand can't yank off your underwear and flip you into doggie like a human lovah can. So “try making yourself come without the vibrator,” suggests Helen Fisher, PhD, author of *Why We Love*. Kick it old-school with your hands and fingers to find out what motions turn you on, then show him how to do the same to you. Try a vibrating penis ring during sex with a human man, so you're both in on toy time. “A man wants to see you come,” says Fisher. “Include him!” (Ruiz 2014b:167)

So, thirteen years apart, Ruiz and Kurtz frame an orgasm with a vibrator as less fulfilling than sex with another person without props. Women's sexual needs go beyond the orgasm and women need to find a partner who will meet those needs. Additionally, women are encouraged to have partnered orgasms, not just because that is the most desirable kind of orgasm but specifically because it is something that their partners want to see. *Cosmo* consistently portrays both male and female masturbation as a less than ideal experience that will never be as fulfilling as heterosexual partnered sex. Thus, finding and maintaining a sexual relationship should be everyone's top priority.

5.3 Kinky but not too kinky

While readers are encouraged to be "bad," there are limitations to how bad a woman should be. Because of the underlying assumption that a person needs to have a partner and that heterosexual sex with that partner is the best kind of sexual activity, readers must be wary of frightening off their partners with "abnormal" sexual desires. In its role as a sex advisor *Cosmo* encourages its readers to experiment and try new things. However, certain behaviors are portrayed as going too far and that might scare a (male) partner off. The later issues of the magazine embrace a wider range of behaviors than the earlier ones, but the idea that there is always something simply too risqué to try, or even to mention to a partner, persists.

In a 1996 article, "Unleashing the Sex Goddess in Every Woman," St. Claire encourages readers to indulge in their sexual fantasies. She encourages them to explore whatever behaviors they wanted to in their fantasy life including examples like having sex in Times Square, imagining a scenario where they were a nymphomaniac mermaid, or dreaming about "being trussed up, blindfolded, and ravaged by twenty-seven Mongol warriors" (St. Claire 1996:136). However, she advises readers not to discuss these fantasies with their partner:

I think it's best not to share your fantasies with your mate. He might feel threatened or even betrayed especially if his delicate male ego is called into question. Worse yet, he might criticize your fanciful efforts, punching a gigantic hole in your fantasy balloon. (St. Claire 1996:136)

Here St. Claire emphasizes the importance of women not putting stress on their partners because it might ruin the relationship. Sharing fantasies that a partner might find too deviant has the potential to scare him away, upset him, or cause him to disregard your interests and shame you for having them. St. Claire advises that readers' attempts to fulfill their own fantasies should be approached with caution. "The exception would be fantasies that you specifically want to turn into reality and that you feel are safe and nonthreatening" (St. Claire 1996:136). She never actually offers any guidelines for determining which of a woman's desires are nonthreatening, but does provide a single example of one of her own fantasies that she was able to turn into reality:

I once had a vision of taking my lover to the opera, both of us dressed to the nines, and slipping off for a stand-up quickie in some dark corner while the onstage drama raged on. The elegance and danger of this make-believe scenario really appealed to me and to my man when I shared it with him. For months, it was a joint fantasy that we used to titillate each other. Then one night at the theater, he got up in the middle of the first act and led me to the vestibule, where, behind a swinging door, we pounded into each other until we heard the audience applaud and begin to leave the theater. (St. Claire 1996:136)

Cosmo readers must somehow intuit that their fantasies will not be threatening to their partner before they bring them up. Essentially, encouraging women to be wary of sharing their own fantasies reinforces the idea that keeping a partner interested is more important than realizing their own fantasies.

While the consequences of going too far are not always explicitly laid out, the implication is almost always that men will find it undesirable. However, the description of which behaviors are too extreme changes over time. In 1998, *Cosmo* offers readers a quiz to see if their sexual experimentation and rule-breaking is exciting or whether they are "going too far when

getting it on” (Fitzmorris 1998:122). Scoring too high on the quiz would suggest that the reader occasionally takes things too far. The first question on the quiz asks:

- Your lover playfully spansks you during foreplay. Your reaction?
- a. You laugh and squeal, “Punish me! I've been a very bad girl.”
 - b. Not applicable. You always lie flat on your back, so he never touches your tush.
 - c. You grab your riding crop, pin him down, and say, “If you're going to spank me, honey, you better do it right.” (Fitzmorris 1998)

The third answer provides the highest number of points for this question, so it is clear that spanking is not necessarily a bad thing, but incorporating a riding crop into your sex play might be an issue. Other activities that provide the most points towards a reader’s overall score include having a threesome with two celebrities, using blindfolds, having sex in public places, enjoying one night stands, purchasing bondage gear, making excessive noise during sex, and making a sex tape (Fitzmorris 1998). While Fitzmorris suggests that trying some small subset of these things could be fun, readers needed to “make sure that [their] quest for kink is not a substitute for emotional intimacy” (Fitzmorris 1998:122). While experimentation is encouraged, creating a lasting and fulfilling relationship is the main priority which is consistent with *Cosmo*’s overall message that maintaining relationships should be the Cosmo Girl’s goal.

By 2002, *Cosmo* changed its position on some of the behaviors mentioned above. In 1998 blindfolds are too risqué, but in 2002, they are offered as an alternative to being tied up.

Of course, you should never do anything that feels creepy to you. For instance, if he brings up tying you to the bedposts and you're not up for it, negotiate. Say “I don't know about that exactly--how about blindfolding me instead?” This way, you're open to his naughty notions but not stepping outside your own passion parameters. (Hofstedt 2002:232)

This section also highlights another key issue; *Cosmo* often tells women that they must be open to their partner’s desire for more variety. Not only should they be open to it, they must have an alternative idea to offer if they are not interested in something that their partner suggests. This

responsibility is consistent with Farvid and Braun's (2006) conclusion that women are responsible for learning sexual skills to keep their partner from leaving them. Learning about the different varieties of kink is just another way women can improve their sexual abilities.

It is clear that *Cosmo* encourages a wider range of behaviors as time goes on. In 2008, "[s]lightly kinky foreplay, like binding his hands with his tie, drives him wild" (Dixon-Cooper 2008:260). Tying someone up, in turn, becomes something readers should be willing to embrace and is no longer something that readers should find "creepy" as they might have in 2002. By 2012, *Cosmo* encourages being tied up, or tying someone up eighteen times, more often than any previous year. Furthermore, 2012 is the first year in which *Cosmo* talks about being tied up, or tying someone up exclusively as a positive behavior; in each of the previous years, *Cosmo* mentions it negatively at least once.

Cosmo's accounts of vibrators provide an unusual blend of positive and negative portrayals. The magazine almost always positively presents women using vibrators for masturbation as a part of their overall sex lives. Vibrators, rather than being a scary prop, are useful tools for women who are interested in exploring their sexuality. "Like Jennifer, nice girls everywhere are discovering that sex toys, vibrators in particular, are as indispensable as lipstick and --dare we say it?-- more reliable than men when it comes to satisfying us" (Geller 1996). Presenting the usefulness of the vibrators helps destigmatize their use. *Cosmo* routinely mentions that vibrators are a reliable source of female orgasms and asks sex experts to opine on the issue. "Vibrators provide one of the strongest and most consistent forms of stimulation," says Judy Kuriansky, PhD, sex therapist and author of *Generation Sex*" (Chudnofsky 2004). People are often more willing to trust an authority figure, so having a sex therapist comment on the usefulness of vibrators helps destigmatize their use. However it is important to note, that as

discussed in the previous section, exclusively using vibrators to have orgasms is not an acceptable substitute for having a partner.

In addition to telling readers that using vibrators for masturbation is acceptable, *Cosmo* also encourages readers to incorporate vibrators into partnered sex. However, using vibrators for partnered sex is a slightly more fraught topic. Using props during sex is behavior that is outside the charmed circle, but in *Cosmo*, vibrators become more acceptable over time. *Cosmo* warns readers that introducing a vibrator into partnered sex carries an element of risk and taking the wrong approach might wound a partner's ego and potentially drive him away. Several different authors advise readers against introducing certain kinds of vibrators, particularly those which are large and phallic. "Hint: For his sake, don't use a threatening phallus dildo; a small egg-shaped vibrator works best" (Gaynor 2004:137). *Cosmo* continues warning readers about the dangers of phallic toys through 2014 where Ruiz informs readers that "[r]olling up to bed with a giant phallic toy that's bigger than he is can give him a complex"(Ruiz 2014a:211). Rather than using simulated penises, *Cosmo* encourages readers to use small egg-shaped vibrators(Gaynor 2004, Ruiz 2014a), bullet style vibrators (Chudnofsky 2006, Triffin 2006), finger vibrators (Chudnofsky 2006, Talarico 2012), and vibrating penis rings (Ruiz 2014b) so they don't scare their partners away or damage their egos.

The way the magazine frames less intense alternatives to kinky desires is another marker of the changing boundaries around appropriate behavior. In 2000, *Cosmo* starts to suggest trying "kinky-lite" activities as an alternative to seriously kinky activities. "Water down the wilder stuff. Test the waters with a lite version of a kinky fantasy, like if you think you'd be into getting tied up, ask him to hold you down"(Collins 2000:104). *Cosmo* repeatedly uses the term "kinky-lite" from this point forward. In 2002 the article "85 Ways to Make Sex Even Sexier" includes a

whole section of tips under the heading “Kinky-Lite Extras” including incorporating food, leaving scratch marks on a partner, using blindfolds, and light spanking (Rush 2002). Kinky-light is still in use ten years later. The article “Kinky-Lite Sex Moves Guys Love” in 2012 adds additional behaviors, which I discuss in more detail below, to the growing list of behaviors and toys that are acceptable for the readers to explore (Miller 2012).

However, while the boundaries around what constitutes acceptable behavior are fluid, *Cosmo* does not appear to see the boundaries themselves as problematic:

Bring the right amount of risqué and he'll be seriously turned on; go too far into freaky territory and he'll just freak. To help you hit the sweet spot, we surveyed men online to get their take on a ton of naughty moves. They weighed in on how kinky they think each one is and how often they'd want to do them. With all these options, you'll never run out of ways to let your kinky-lite flag fly (Miller 2012:112).

Though being a little kinky is framed as positive, Miller indicates that there is still a boundary and crossing it will have consequences. She explicitly tells readers that doing something that a man finds too deviant or unusual is undesirable. The men who were surveyed did not report many behaviors that they were completely unwilling to try. Out of the forty-eight scenarios *Cosmo* asked them about, the men only said that they never wanted to do two of them. The men did not want their partner to “[h]and him your vibrator, and tell him to use it on himself while you watch” (Miller 2012:113). They also were uninterested in the following activity: “[b]efore you start 69, lube up your fingers. When you get started, reach up and alternate running your slippery digits over his perineum and the area around his anus (Miller 2012:114). The men’s lack of interest in these two activities is intriguing. It seems likely that when considering the first scenario the men do not think using a vibrator on themselves would be a particularly stimulating activity. The reluctance to try the second activity may be a result of several different factors. One possibility is that anuses are constructed as dirty places, and the men have a reluctance to engage

in acts that they see as literally dirty. Another possibility is that it is connected to homophobia. The men may see allowing stimulation of their anus to be an indicator that they are secretly gay and thus claim a lack of interest to avoid this label.

The list of activities that these men find very kinky but were open to trying once is much more extensive. This list includes using lube ice cubes on his nipples and his partner's labia, letting a partner make a gag out of her underwear, using a finger vibrator on a partner and letting her use it on him, letting his partner put a blindfold on him, having sex up against an open window with the lights on, acting out sex scenes from his favorite porn, letting his partner spank him, and having his partner dress up like a stranger and seduce him (Miller 2012). So where St. Claire in 1996 does not give helpful advice about which behaviors are too kinky, Miller provides an extensive list of suggestions vetted by men who participated in an online survey. However, though this article does contain a lot of ideas, it does not encourage readers to discuss these moves with their actual partners; instead, readers are expected just to try out the different moves and hope that their partner will enjoy them.

Cosmo often contextualizes what it would consider mild or "kinky-lite" behavior by offering examples of desires that are over the top and are cause for alarm. The magazine is highly supportive of role-playing for example, but only certain types. Role-play costumes, such as the French maid, the naughty nurse, the hot secretary, the sexy librarian and the school girl are framed as positive and are even encouraged by the magazine, while it frames things that differ too much from this script as too strange:

I was totally into a man I was dating until he invited me back to his place for the first time. I looked around to find it entirely decorated in a clown theme. He had clown dolls all over the shelves, posters on the walls, and even a clown puppet on his bed. When I asked him why he was so into clowns, he didn't really give a reason. Instead, he pulled a clown costume out of his closet and asked if I wanted him to put it on. I told him I wasn't feeling well and left before I had to watch him juggle (Goins 2002:150).

It is acceptable for readers to add certain costumes to their sex lives, but the types of acceptable costumes are limited and should preferably be introduced by the woman. It is also important to note that there are no specific guidelines for determining which costumes are okay and which are not. *Cosmo* does not typically encourage communication on this issue either. Men and women are just supposed to surprise their partner with the outfit and hope that it won't upset or alienate their partner. This particular example is also interesting because it creates a space where the woman is uninterested in the man's desires. Similar examples can also be found regarding the types of props and sex toys that readers might be willing to incorporate into their sex lives:

BDSM is known for its accessories, but if butt plugs and floggers freak you out, try storing a roll of bondage tape in your nightstand. When he least expects it, use the tear-and-wear restraints to tie his wrists to the bed or bind his hands behind his back (Panariello and Ruiz 2014:85).

Here the magazine is telling readers that it is okay to be freaked out by certain toys and offers an alternative example that seems less extreme and less deviant. The readers are still expected to experiment sexually, but they can be flexible about what form these experiments take. This example also illustrates the idea that discussing kinky behavior with a partner is not actually necessary; readers should just bring out their props without warning and hope that their partners won't be upset.

Cosmo does make sure to identify behaviors that are still not entirely acceptable. There are certain practices and props that the magazine almost always describes using negative language. The phrase "whips and chains" is often used as a code for more extreme types of behavior that readers should avoid. While both terms are mentioned independently of each other, they are mostly used together and always used to indicate behavior that would be a step too far for *Cosmo's* readers and their men. *Cosmo* first uses the phrase to indicate undesirable behavior

in 2002. “Here are a few bad-girl moves for your randy repertoire--no whips or chains required” (Crain 2002a:216). Not even a bad-girl would use them. *Cosmo* still paints them as extreme in 2006 but frames them as slightly more acceptable: “Light love taps can make the action more playful; tying each other up can feel dangerously lusty. But anything more extreme (wooden paddles, whips, chains) may be too intense for most” (Benjamin 2006:101). Though Benjamin explicitly says that whips and chains are both intense and extreme, they are not necessarily too intense or extreme for everyone. She also does not denigrate people who might enjoy using these particular accessories or who enjoy intensity in their sex play.

In 2010, Miller mentions whips, chains, and other kinky implements in her article “Whips, Chains, Cages... Whoa.” She describes celebrities who have adopted kinky accessories, styles, and behaviors into their public personas. These celebrities increased the shock value of their performances and stayed in the media spotlight by choosing styles with kink elements.

However, Miller describes these changes as a problem:

When Rihanna appeared on the cover of one of her singles wearing barbed wire, our first thought was just, Huh, that's racy. But combined with Shakira's recent cage dancing and Christina Aguilera throwing on a sex hood and caressing a bound chick in a music video, it all points to a troubling trend. These stars are successful enough that they can call the shots when it comes to what they wear and which themes they explore. Why, suddenly, are they embracing S&M? (Miller 2010:54)

By suggesting that women who should be able to make their own style decisions are making a bad choice by embracing kink, the author is saying that the style elements they have chosen are too extreme. However, even though much of the article's tone is judgmental of these choices, Miller also reassures readers that kink is probably already part of their lives and that this is okay:

Whether you realize it or not, you may indulge in some aspects of S&M yourself. Just like how barely there hoo-ha hair came from porn, nose piercings, cutout dresses, and zip-up strappy heels got their start in S&M. Incorporating S&M into fashion is one way for us to show we're badass without venturing too far into taboo territory. (Miller 2010:54)

Being too kinky has the potential to drive partners or potential partners away, and since having a partner is the assumed ultimate goal of the Cosmo Girl, women need to be careful about what boundaries they are willing to cross.

5.4 Guys are kinkier than girls

As an extension of expanding the types of activities that are acceptable in the bedroom (and out of it), *Cosmo* consistently maintains the idea that men are kinkier or have more deviant desires than women. This discovery is consistent with Farvid and Braun's (2006) findings suggesting that the advice in *Cosmo* tends to prioritize men's sexuality and to suggest that women are responsible for developing sexual skills to keep their partners happy and interested in the relationship. So where *Cosmo* cautions women not to be too kinky themselves, it suggests that men are kinky by nature. Articles in *Cosmo* which are written by men or feature the opinions of men often assert that men crave sexual variety, or non-normative sex:

A former girlfriend from Fort Worth said to me once when I asked her, as we hungrily pulled off each other's clothes, to keep on the cow-girl hat and red lizard boots, "If all you want is a whore to play dress-up doll, go buy one." What she had trouble grasping was that not only did I want the fantasy, I also wanted her. Quite badly. (Baroni 1996:32)

On the whole, *Cosmo* suggests that readers should wear sexy costumes or outfits during sex. These suggestions are mostly positive, however, in this situation his partner reacted negatively to his fantasy and associated it with prostitution, a huge negative (for her). Commercial sex is far outside the charmed circle and *Cosmo* rarely mentions it at all. The men of *Cosmo* are very interested in exploring their own kinky fantasies with their partners, and they find a woman's willingness to explore those fantasies a desirable trait.

'I've always fantasized about having sex on a swing, and I hope you're wild enough to try it.'

"When I bring up trying a new sex act with a woman, I'm really hoping she'll be game, no matter how casual I try to sound," says Kevin, 26, a currency trader. If you've never been

where he wants you to go, the response he seeks is “No, but I've always been curious.” (Perron 2000:196)

Cosmo's authors consistently reiterate men's desire for open-mindedness throughout the study period. In 2002, *Cosmo* asks 7000 men about their secret sex desires:

A lot of the guys who wrote in claimed the best thing you can bring to bed is an open mind. “I want someone who won't freak out if I flip her over, suggest doing it in an elevator, or ask her to leave her panties off,” says Malcolm, 27. (O'Rourke 2002:188)

In 2008, another *Cosmo* survey finds that “61% of men say their partner is not as adventurous in the sack as they'd like” (Katz 2008:103). In 2010 the editor-in-chief of askmen.com reveals in an interview with *Cosmo* that one of the most frequently asked questions on his site is “What can I do to encourage her to explore new/kinkier sex acts?” (2010:82). Each of these articles describes the sex acts that the men are interested in doing with their partners. There is also an implication that the men are supposed to bring up these desires; women are just expected to go along for the ride. This implication is an interesting contrast with what both Farvid and Braun (2006) and I found regarding women's responsibility to introduce sexual variety. It's also an interesting contrast with the underlying warning that women who expressed kinky desires would scare their partners away. So women are expected to be open-minded about exploring a man's fantasies, but not have any kinky fantasies of their own, while at the same time being able to learn new sexual skills to keep their romantic partner satisfied. It appears that women cannot win, even in a magazine that claims to empower young women.

Cosmo typically frames men's very kinky desires and fantasies as normal. However, though they were supposedly kinkier than women, men whose voices *Cosmo* included expressed concerns that their kinky desires would freak out their female partners. In Baroni's article quoted above, the woman immediately shoots down his request. Many other men also report partners having extremely negative reactions to them bringing up their kinks:

Hughes, who produces TV commercials, told me he'll never forget the night he wanted to bind his girlfriend gently to the bedposts with his best Valentino ties and she told him he made her sick. "She shamed me into feeling like a filthy pervert. More than a year went by before I dared to tell another lover what I really liked" (Baroni 1996:32).

The men of *Cosmo* express a lot of this kind of shame. Their shame about their kinky desires usually manifests as concern that their partners would be scared away by fantasies the women consider too extreme.

Part of the men's nervousness about upsetting their partners is a result of a partner shaming them for their porn consumption. *Cosmo* contains several stories of men whose girlfriends were unhappy with their decision to watch porn:

"My girlfriend was jealous of magazines! She would always say 'Why do you need that when you have me?' I couldn't convince her that grabbing a magazine and spending 10 minutes in the bathroom is a different experience from sex with her." (Bryson 1998:154)

Though *Cosmo* becomes more accepting of porn in later issues and encourages women to watch it with their partners, in the earlier issues women's problems with porn are framed as just as normal as men's desire to consume it. The fact that *Cosmo* frames watching porn as a perfectly normal desire for men means that the magazine already accepts that men have desires beyond what is in the charmed circle. While deviant desires come naturally to men, women need to be convinced that indulging their partners in their desires is a good thing.

More generally, even if they have not experienced a negative reaction, the men of *Cosmo* express concern about how their partners will react to their interests:

"Men are reluctant to reveal their deepest fantasies because they're afraid of your reaction," says Michael Perry, Ph.D., a sex therapist in Encino, California. "A guy fears either you'll see his thoughts as a negative reflection on you or think he's a pervert." (Benjamin 2002:32)

Cosmo consistently frames being seen as a pervert in a negative way. Men's concern about being seen as a pervert, and losing partners as a result, forms an interesting parallel with *Cosmo*'s

advice that women who have deviant desires will also lose partners. However, since the magazine assumes that men are kinkier, the men interviewed by the magazine appear more concerned with the potential loss of a partner if they reveal their actual desires than do kinky women.

It's very common among men to think about doing something taboo, Perry says. "But they're often afraid they'll be thought of as a pervert, so they're unwilling to ask for anything that might be perceived as such." That fear is what's been keeping Brendan, 30, from talking: "There are one or two racy things I would be really into, like playing doctor with my girlfriend, but I could never say that to her. It's kind of out of respect. I feel like she would be a little horrified." (Bryson 1998:154)

This article specifically details this fear. Men are frequently operating under the assumption that women will automatically be "horrified" by their fantasies. Without the assumption that men are kinkier than women, these fears would not be justified. This assumption appears to be a direct contradiction to *Cosmo's* advice that women should not appear too kinky lest it scare their partners away.

In order to address the perceived mismatch in the kinky fantasies of men and women, readers are encouraged to try new sexual behaviors:

"It's important for her to experiment in bed. In the first few months, you learn the other person's basics. But for the spark to last she has to keep discovering new kinks in both of us —Seth, 30, nonprofit executive." (Holmes 2002:192)

This is also a clear perpetuation of the idea that it is the women's responsibility to learn new moves and create positive sexual experiences for their partner. Increasing the amount of kink in sex is one way to provide those new experiences. In 2008, Benjamin (2008) explicitly states "[a]ll men secretly crave boundary-pushing action in bed, so whip out these moves to wow him like crazy" (Benjamin 2008:144). Willingness to indulge these desires will make the reader a desirable partner. However, men are rarely encouraged to express these desires, women are just expected to introduce new kinky moves and hope he enjoys them. So while *Cosmo* suggests that

readers should push some of the boundaries around what they think of as “normal” and that men would really like them to do so, women can also scare their partners away if they introduce an activity the men are not comfortable with. This apparent contradiction sets up a situation where women cannot be sure of what exactly to do and positions the magazine in a position of authority. Women need to continue to buy the magazine in order to keep up with its advice and trust that *Cosmo* knows what men will be interested in.

Cosmo is about as likely to suggest trying kinky things to increase a partner’s pleasure as it is to suggest trying kinky things to increase the reader’s pleasure. However, *Cosmo* typically frames keeping sex interesting as something that readers should do in order to maintain their relationships which would, in turn, improve their own pleasure. Remember, according to *Cosmo* having a relationship is the only way to get fulfilling sex. Previous research indicates that women’s magazines typically suggest that women are more responsible for maintaining relationships (Gupta, Zimmerman and Fruhauf 2008) as well as creating positive sexual experiences for their partner (Farvid and Braun 2006), so this message is fairly unsurprising. Though it is not exclusively portrayed as a masculine desire, *Cosmo* consistently describes men as people who crave sexual variety. This characterization has the consequence of encouraging women to fulfill their partner’s desires in order to keep a partner, and since being without a partner is one of the worst things that could happen to a *Cosmo* Girl, *Cosmo* creates an environment where women are expected to try the things in which their partners are interested.

6 CONCLUSION

Cosmo markets itself as an edgy magazine full of shocking sexual secrets. One headline from July 2012 claims the issue includes a section so sexy that an unknown party made the magazine seal it. However, instead of being truly edgy, most of the messages *Cosmo* sends

reinforce patriarchal norms about sexual desire and behavior. It is important to remember that *Cosmo's* primary interest is selling magazines and encouraging women to purchase the products it advertises. The sexual behaviors the magazine presents to women must necessarily include greater and greater variety. As certain behaviors become normalized, the magazine must provide novel ideas for keeping sex interesting. As Surnow mentions in her article “no one fantasizes about a loving monogamous couple doing it missionary-style in their master bedroom” (Surnow 2014:118). Introducing boundary pushing representations of sex thus serves as a marketing technique. The changes in *Cosmo's* representations of kink are minor and take place over an extended period.

Cosmo's representations of kinky behavior change between 1996 and 2014, though the changes are not as significant as I initially expected them to be. I anticipated shifts in the types of behaviors the magazine would include since Matza (1969) and Erickson (2005) claim that behaviors that count as deviant almost always change over time. I observed that, over the course of the study period, *Cosmo* suggests a wider variety of sexual practices for readers to try and is more likely to depict kink in a positive way in later years than in earlier ones. These changes take place gradually, and the behaviors become more inclusive over time, usually without excluding acts that had previously been acceptable. Sex acts that *Cosmo* suggests are too risqué or shocking in 1998, like using a blindfold, are commonplace in 2012. Interestingly, of the four new types of sex toys *Cosmo* introduced in 2012 and 2014, the magazine connected three of them with *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The timing of these new recommendations suggests that the magazine was attempting to capitalize on the hype surrounding the book. This may indicate that the magazine is willing to push against boundaries, but only when it has a good idea that pushing the boundaries is less likely to generate serious controversy. Though these changes were slower than I expected,

the changing boundaries around what *Cosmo* is willing to print and encourage readers to participate in are consistent with the understandings about deviance in general.

The vast majority of the depictions of kink in *Cosmo* over the study period fit neatly into Weiss's (2006) argument that the depictions of kink in the media fit into two key categories; kink is understood either through normalizing or pathologizing. Over time, the magazine normalizes certain behaviors like light spanking, blindfolds, role-play, foot fetishes, using vibrators with a partner, and light bondage. Where it initially describes some of these things as freaky or risky, *Cosmo* eventually comes to include these behaviors in lists of sex tips alongside sex in different positions. By suggesting that these are activities that most people engage in, the magazine normalizes the kinky behaviors. Though *Cosmo* normalizes kink more than it pathologizes kink, it does perpetuate understanding via pathologizing. Individuals who have more extreme kinks are sometimes framed as outsiders to the community of *Cosmo* readers and sometimes framed as people who have something wrong with them. The man who clearly had a clown fetish, for example, is derided as being a creep and the woman who went on a date with him was entirely justified in assuming that there was something wrong with him. The magazine also associates kink with crime on a regular basis. Many of the descriptions of kink I coded as negative were due to the association of kink with men who assaulted or murdered women.

However, even though *Cosmo* pathologized some kinks, it is clear that other kinks have moved from their position among the "worst" kinds of sex in Rubin's (1984) sexual hierarchy into contested space, and one could argue that depending on the circumstances some kinks could potentially be considered part of "good" sex. Rubin argues that "Only sex acts on the good side of the line are accorded moral complexity" (Rubin 1984:14). These findings also reinforce the importance of looking at the different contexts in which sexual behavior occurs. In *Cosmo*, we

see that, at least in later years, several kinky behaviors fall on the good side of the line as long as the people who engage in them are long-term, heterosexual, monogamous couples. *Cosmo* often suggests that spanking (as long as it's not too hard) is a perfectly healthy and acceptable bedroom behavior, but spanking using whips or floggers is not necessarily something in which everyone is interested. These suggestions leave some space for disapproving of certain kinks, but as a whole, kink is not automatically placed at the bottom of the hierarchy.

The fact that *Cosmo* expands the boundaries around appropriate sexual behavior but reinforces that boundaries still exist also aligns with the existing understandings of deviance. Deviance serves as a way of creating community cohesion (Erickson 2005) and it functions similarly in *Cosmo*. Though Cosmo Girls are not a physical community, they are connected by the content printed in *Cosmo*. *Cosmo* positions itself as the authority and by following the advice published in it readers can learn the rules of the community. By providing examples of behaviors that are unacceptable (like whips and chains) *Cosmo* provides the community with a line and Cosmo Girls may assume that crossing the line will not get them the results that they want and will no longer belong to the community. People who are interested in behaviors that cross this boundary are people it is okay for Cosmo Girls to exclude.

The slower than expected boundary expansion and continued pathologization of certain kinks are almost certainly related to the sex negativity in the United States. The cultural narrative around sex in the United States tells us that sex is necessarily harmful and that people should only talk about and engage in certain kinds of sex (Irvine 2002, Luker 2006, Rubin 1984). This sex negative narrative also explains why *Cosmo* uses negative sounding language when discussing sex. According to *Cosmo*, experimenting with different sexual practices is “naughty,” indulging in sexual pleasure is “sinful,” and women who seek sex are “bad girls.” In the later

years in the study period, the behaviors *Cosmo* framed as acceptable were more expansive than in earlier years but still used language that is limited at its core. Though readers of the magazine are likely to pick up on the actual message that being “bad” is actually good, continuing to use this negative sounding language fails to challenge the overarching sex negativity in the culture.

Though expanding the types of sexual behavior portrayed as sexual differentiates *Cosmo* from many of the cultural beliefs about sex, the magazine is not as progressive when it comes to expanding the types of relationships it considers acceptable. *Cosmo* regularly reinforces the idea that women are supposed to be seeking long-term relationships. These findings are consistent with previous research (Ménard and Kleinplatz 2008, Saraceno and Tambling 2013) and are not surprising considering that marriage is at the top of the sexual hierarchy (Rubin 1984). By positioning marriage, or at least long-term partnership, as the primary goal and framing all other sexual configurations as unhealthy, *Cosmo* encourages women to focus on cultivating positive relationships with romantic partners.

I also found results consistent with previous research about men’s sexuality. Ménard and Klienplatz (2008) argue that popular magazines claim that men’s sexuality is more aggressive and wild compared to women. *Cosmo*’s consistent implication that men are kinkier than women is another indicator that men have deviant desires that women are responsible for controlling. In many ways, these depictions of sexuality can be examined using arguments similar to the ones used to examine pornography. Women’s control of or acquiescence to male sexual desires is a common narrative in pornography (Dines 2010), and the narrative reinforces male dominance (Dines et al. 2010, Dworkin 1974). Though the *Cosmo* is more willing to discuss non-normative sexual behaviors, it does not challenge the gendered power dynamics connected with sexuality; it reinforces the mainstream narrative that privileges male sexual experiences and men’s sexual

access to women. As with porn (Naughty 2013, Taormino 2013, Taormino et al. 2013), researchers must be critical of the narratives presented in *Cosmo*, telling the same stories with different trappings does not necessarily indicate significant progress on the core issues.

Similarly, I found that *Cosmo* generally expected readers to perform the labor of maintaining relationships. This finding was consistent with Gupta, Zimmerman and Fruhauf's (2008) previous research on the topic. In regard to kinky sex, this includes having an open mind and being willing to indulge their partners' desires, while also seeking out greater sexual variety to maintain their partner's interest in the relationship. Indeed, according to more than one mainstream magazine, learning sexual techniques to please their partners is a critical responsibility for women (Farvid and Braun 2006). Additionally, I find the *Cosmo* expects women to take responsibility for making sure that their sexual experiments do not frighten their partners. Bringing phallic vibrators to a sexual encounter with a partner or expressing a desire that is "too kinky" are specific behaviors women are expected to avoid. *Cosmo* presents a variety of conflicting responsibilities women must shoulder to make their partners happy. To be a desirable partner a woman must be willing to satisfy her partner's sexual desires, but she must also somehow magically figure out what his desires are and surprise him with his fantasy because he is terrified to bring it up. She must be excited about indulging his kinks but not have kinky sexual desires of her own, because if she were to have an interest that her partner did not find appealing, he would no longer want to be in a relationship with her. The expectations for a *Cosmo* Girl sound exhausting.

Cosmo positions itself as the authority on beauty, sex, fashion, and relationships. Readers who wish to achieve the standards set by the magazine will continue to purchase the magazine and the products it recommends. Reinforcing gender and sexual stereotypes is a much easier way

of accomplishing this than making dramatic changes. As I read through the magazine and coded its language, I felt negatively about myself. The consistent repetition that not having a partner made a person incomplete, that only certain types of sex were acceptable, and that relationships were supposed to function in particular ways was draining even though I knew that these were stereotypes that I need not apply to myself. I could easily imagine someone who was not conducting a critical analysis having similar negative feelings and assuming that the advice in *Cosmo* would help overcome those difficulties.

Though it does often reinforce gender stereotypes and some harmful positions about what makes healthy sexuality, *Cosmo* depicts a variety of sexual behavior and helps to normalize some previously stigmatized sexual desires. To further understand how popular culture constructs gender, relationships, and what constitutes deviant behavior it will also be critical to examine other sources of popular culture. *Cosmo* is one of the most widely read magazines and was one of the first that concentrated on women's sexuality so future research cannot ignore its influence. However, exploring the messages targeted to different demographics will provide a clearer picture of what counts as deviant sexual behavior and to whom it counts. Examining men's magazines, such as *Men's Health* or *GQ*, to see what norms and practices they are perpetuating will help fill in more of the story, as will studying magazines targeted at women of other races like *Ebony* or *Essence*. Exploring how gender and race also intersect with behaviors on the Charmed Circle will improve our understanding of the sexual hierarchy.

The writers, editors, and publishers of *Cosmo* have pushed the envelope around publishable sexual content for a long time (Landers 2010). The editor-in-chief at the time of this writing, Joanna Coles, is taking the magazine in a more political direction. She has published several articles about online harassment, including issues like the lack of legal recourse for

women whose ex-partners post graphic images of them online as a way of harassing them. Her vision for the magazine may mean that future changes will be more dramatic. It will be interesting to see if she directs the magazine away from the stereotypical messages about gender and relationships. There is certainly space for women's sex advice that challenges the mainstream narrative in the same way that there is space for feminist porn, and sometimes *Cosmo* does publish this kind of content. *Cosmo*'s treatment of female masturbation, for example, is relatively empowering for women and is a story uncommon in the rest of the mainstream media. However, the next big challenge for the magazine may be to break further from the mold and produce more feminist content.

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