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Female Pop Stars: Prepare to Disrobe

An analysis of *Rolling Stone* magazine covers finds female artists are increasingly sexualized and presented as sex objects.

By Tom Jacobs

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There is no shortage of voices decrying the sexualization of mass culture. Just last month, actor and director David Schwimmer complained to a London newspaper: “We have this real emphasis on how important it is to look young and sexual, so that’s the message we’re sending our girls. Look at the biggest pop stars around at the moment: Everything they do is about sex.”

Newly published research finds the former *Friends* star has a point: Over the past four decades, images of female celebrities have become much more sexualized. Evidence of this trend, which troubles feminists and social conservatives alike, comes from a major barometer of pop-culture coolness: The cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine covers.

Writing in the journal *Sexuality and Culture*, University of Buffalo sociologists Erin Hatton and Mary Nell Trautner report a “dramatic increase in hypersexualized images of women” on the magazine’s cover between its founding in 1967 and 2009. In the 1970s, only 6 percent of cover photos of women fit that description; by the 2000s, that number increased to 61 percent.

Hatton and Trautner examined 1,006 cover images from the magazine, excluding another 115 for various reasons (such as being text-only, or a drawn illustration). Men were dominant overall, with 726 images, compared to 280 of women. (Seventy-five covers featured a member of each gender.)

The researchers rated the magazine covers for their sexual content by considering 11 variables, including the pose of the subject, whether they were touching themselves or someone else, and whether there was sexual innuendo in the accompanying text. Clothing was, not surprisingly, a major factor in their analysis; it was judged on a five-point scale, from slightly revealing (1 point) to swimsuits or lingerie (4 points) and nudity (5 points).

Adding up the scores on all the variables, each cover was placed into one of three categories: non-sexualized, sexualized or hyper-sexualized.

Hatton and Trautner found that, since the late 1960s, “sexualized representations of women have increased significantly.” Specifically, in the magazine’s first few years, 11 percent of men and 44 percent of women on the cover were portrayed in a sexualized fashion. By the 2000s, that was true of 17 percent of men and 83 percent of women.

“While sexualized images of men have increased, men are still dramatically less likely to be sexualized than women,” the researchers note.

They also found a huge disparity in hyper-sexualized images — those that combine, say, scant clothing, a provocative pose and a racy headline. That description applied to more than 6 in 10 cover images of women during the 2000s, but only 2 percent of men.

“Such images ... show female actors and musicians as ready and available for sex,” Hatton and Trautner write.

Given the concern psychologists have expressed about the impact of such imagery on girls entering into adulthood, it would be interesting to see a similar long-term analysis of magazines aimed specifically at that audience.

Nevertheless, *Rolling Stone* is a reasonably good indicator of pop-culture attitudes. And while its decisions may be based solely on marketing — sex, after all, sells — the cumulative message its cover images convey is certainly troubling.

This research finds men needn’t necessarily be sexy to see their smiling face on the cover of the *Rolling Stone*. But for women — whatever



This collage of *Rolling Stone* magazine covers includes the topless Cindy Crawford cover and the "Go-Go's Put Out" cover, featuring the 1980s girl group dressed in underwear. (vagabondblogger/Flickr)

their artistic accomplishments — hotness is mandatory.

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