Framing the Ideal Woman in *Esquire*’s “Women We Love,” 1987-2006

Michael Sheehy, University of Cincinnati
sheehymw@ucmail.uc.edu

Hong Ji, The Pew Research Center’s
Project for Excellence in Journalism
hji@journalism.org

Abstract

This content analysis focuses on media framing of women amid prevailing social trends. It examines *Esquire* magazine’s portrayal of the ideal woman in its regular feature “Women We Love” from 1987 to 2006, during the era following the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The study identified occupational and image frames of featured women and tracked changes through four U.S. political eras and four magazine editorships. The study found that *Esquire*’s framing of the ideal woman changed over time, with occupation becoming less diverse and image becoming more traditional, and that changes were associated with political environment and editorship.

Keywords: backlash, content analysis, *Esquire*, framing, gender, magazines, women

Introduction

*Esquire* magazine has contributed to the framing of the ideal woman in American society from its first issue in 1933 through more than seven decades of political and cultural upheaval, including many waves of feminism. *Esquire* is an influential magazine because of its circulation of 700,000 and its audience of affluent and successful men (Esquire media kit, 2011). It also has been called one of the smart magazines, along with *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*, in the elite ranks of American journalism (Douglas, 1991). As a leader in the men’s segment of the magazine industry (American Society of Magazine Editors, 2011), *Esquire* has carefully negotiated “the razor line between appreciation and exploitation” of women with its publication of sexually suggestive photographs through the years (The women we’ve loved, 2003, p. 123). The magazine’s award-winning journalism also has navigated the currents of social change, including the rise of the women’s movement, as it published “many of the classic manifestos of the women’s movement” in the 1960s and 1970s (Eisenberg, 1988, p. 17).

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*Michael Sheehy is an assistant professor of journalism at the University of Cincinnati.*

*Hong Ji is a senior methodologist in the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism.*
Since the late 1980s, Esquire has framed its version of the ideal women through the continuing editorial feature “Women We Love,” in which a prominent woman, often a figure in entertainment and popular culture, is profiled in text and photographs. The feature appears as a monthly column, with one woman in the spotlight, and as an annual multi-page package in a fall issue that features several women. “Women We Love” first appeared in 1987 during an era of transition at Esquire when the magazine was remaking itself journalistically and philosophically at the dawn of the digital age. Shortly after introducing “Women We Love,” Esquire explained the feminine qualities that framed the image of the ideal women in the monthly feature. “They have, in varying measures, the qualities we crave: [1] wit and power and guts and [2] glamour and mystery and depth [emphasis added]” (Women we love, 1988, p. 99). In other words, the women featured in “Women We Love” have what could be considered both traditional qualities of “glamour and mystery and depth” and non-traditional qualities of “wit and power and guts.”

In the era Esquire was introducing “Women We Love,” the role and image of women in American society was changing. By the 1980s the women’s movement, a powerful force during the 1960s and 1970s, was being viewed in a different perspective. Some social critics, such as Susan Faludi, who wrote the best-selling book Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women, argued that a backlash against the women’s movement had emerged at a time when conservatives were becoming more politically powerful in America. Faludi (1991) described this backlash as “a powerful counter-assault on women’s rights” and “an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women” (p. xviii).

This content analysis examines how Esquire framed the image of the ideal woman through “Women We Love” during an era in American society, from 1987 through 2006, that followed the feminist wave of the 1960s and 1970s. The study is important to mass communication research because it seeks to assess the magazine’s framing of women in the context of changing social trends and because of Esquire’s prominence in and contributions to journalism and American popular culture.

**Literature Review**

This study analyzes “Women We Love” through framing theory of media effects. Entman (1993) argued that frames have at least four key elements in the communication process: communicator, text, receiver, and culture. Employing Entman’s theory in their study on women in Broadcasting & Cable magazine’s weekly column “Fifth Estater,” Book, Little, and Jessell (2010) considered the editorial staff of B&C as the communicator, the column “Fifth Estater “ as the text, the magazine subscribership as the receiver, and the industry at large as the culture.

Similarly, in this study of “Women We Love,” following Entman’s theory, Esquire editors can serve as the communicator, “Women We Love” as the text, Esquire readers as the receiver, and social and political context as the culture. From the communicator perspective,
little has been published on the philosophies and journalistic practices of various *Esquire* editors. Instead, various studies have focused generally on an editor’s role in selecting content and the concept of gatekeeping (Shoemaker, 1997; White, 1950). *Esquire* readership statistics have been provided by the magazine itself and the media data service SRDS (Esquire media kit, 2011; SRDS, 2011), but there is little academic research on *Esquire* readers.

While “Women We Love” and *Esquire* have not been the subject of much research, one study by Breazeale (1994) argued that in the magazine’s early days (from 1933 to 1946), “*Esquire* editorial staff sought to constitute consumption as a new arena for masculine privilege by launching in text and image what amounted to an oppositional meta-commentary on female identity” (p. 1).

In general, other studies have examined media framing of feminism, women’s rights, and the women’s movement. For example, research has found that women often are depicted with a focus on their sexuality and that gender stereotyping exists in media (Eaton, 1997; Frith & Mueller, 2003; Gow, 1996; Reichert & Carpenter, 2004; Reichert, Lambiase, Morgan, Carstarphen, & Zavoina, 1999). Tuchman (1978), focusing on the image of women in the media, proposed the reflection hypothesis, which asserts that mass media reflect dominant societal values. Weibel (1977) identified four ideal qualities of American women that are expressed in popular culture imagery, including “housewifely,” “passive,” “wholesome,” and “pretty” (pp. ix–xii). Ashley and Olson (1998), examining media framing of the women’s movement, found that the “women’s movement was marginalized by the press…. The women’s movement was rarely covered, and when it was, it was treated with humor and puzzlement” (p. 272). Bronstein (2005), in her study of third wave feminism, asserted that “[f]raming is a dynamic process, and journalists often restructure frames to match changing social and political conditions” (p. 787).

Research also has examined visual images, the symbolism of those images, and the portrayal of women in the media. Goffman (1979) found that gender images in advertising are linked to masculinity and femininity and reflect the characteristics of social structure. In reference to the visual dimension of *Esquire*, Breazeale (1994) said, “*Esquire*’s pictorial contents can be understood as fulfilling a vital ideological function complementary to the text” (p. 9).

From the cultural perspective, the political and social environment, the media industry, and gender ideals can be considered in the context of framing. Political orientation, such as the policy agenda set by political leaders, can influence trends such as the women’s movement and the social response to it. For example, some scholars assert that President George W. Bush shaped a new politics of gender (Ferguson & Marso, 2007). This new politics of gender could be viewed as an extension of a backlash that began two decades earlier and served as the backdrop for *Esquire*’s framing of women. While Faludi (1991) called it a counter-assault on women’s rights, other scholars labeled it differently. Dow (1996) argued that in the 1980s “some discourse that has been labeled ‘backlash’ is more
fittingly labeled ‘postfeminist’” (p. 87), which can be defined as “the simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second wave feminism” (Stacey, 1987, p. 8). Burns (2008) characterized the period from 1980 through 2001 as “postfeminist backlash” (p. 130).

Amid the complex social environment, media reacted in a complex way. Douglas (1994) asserted that “the war that has been raging in the media is not a simplistic war against women but a complex struggle between feminism and antifeminism that has reflected, reinforced, and exaggerated our culture’s ambivalence about women’s roles for over thirty-five years” (pp. 12–13). For example, in the 1980s, television not only emphasized women’s familial roles but made efforts to appeal to working women (Dow, 1996), while as a smart magazine in the media industry, Esquire launched the column “Women We Love” in 1987 by embracing both traditional and non-traditional images in the framing of ideal women.

Expanding upon research into the media’s portrayal of women and focusing on the framing of women by a major American magazine over two decades, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How did “Women We Love” frame the ideal woman during the era following the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s?

RQ2: Did the framing of the ideal woman change over time during the study period of 1987 through 2006?

RQ3: Were framing trends associated with certain U.S. political environments or Esquire editorships?

RQ4: Did commentary in “Women We Love” indicate that a backlash against the women’s movement was a factor in the framing of the ideal woman?

Method

Content analysis assessed Esquire’s framing of the ideal woman in “Women We Love” for a 20-year period from 1987, when the feature first appeared, through 2006. The unit of analysis was each woman profiled in “Women We Love” in text and photographs. The sample included 340 cases, and each was categorized by four key variables:

1. Occupation of the featured woman. Categories were adapted from those initially developed by Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) and later modified by Cooper-Chen, Leung, and Cho (1995). These included
   a. Business executive
   b. Professional
   c. Educator/scholar/social psychologist
   d. Entertainment/arts/sports, with subcategories:
      i. Actress/comedian/television host (non-news)
ii. Director/producer
iii. Model
iv. Journalist/writer/news anchor/author/critic
v. Musician (classical, popular)
vi. Dancer (e.g., ballet, modern dance)
vii. Artist (e.g., painter, sculptor, fine arts photographer)
viii. Athlete (professional, amateur)
ix. Entertainment other
e. Public service (e.g., government service, foreign service, clergy, justice, public safety)
f. Social activism
g. Other

Occupational categories were eventually collapsed to facilitate the chi square test. The collapsed categories were
a. Business/professional/educator/public service/social activism
b. Entertainment/arts/sports, with subcategories:
   i. Entertainment/performing arts/sports
   ii. Journalism/literature/visual arts/entertainment other
c. Other

2. Image of the featured woman. The image of the featured woman was coded as “traditional,” “non-traditional,” or “other.” The coding judgment was based on the overall impression given by the photographs and the text. The “traditional” image identified by Esquire as consisting of “glamour and mystery and depth” emphasizes physical beauty and sexual characteristics. It is represented in a visual sense by a woman who is not dressed in business attire, who may not be fully clothed, and who may be positioned in a sexually suggestive manner. The environment and circumstances in which the photograph is taken can also influence the perception of the traditional image. Moreover, the text can reinforce the traditional image by discussing the physical and sexual characteristics and the desirability of the featured woman. Meanwhile, the non-traditional image identified by Esquire as consisting of “wit and power and guts” emphasizes strength, independence, and intellect. It is represented in a visual sense by women who are fully clothed, usually in business attire or the attire of their profession, and in a business or professional setting. The text would convey non-traditional themes, such as wisdom, intellect, and courage.

3. Editorship era. This variable was included as one possible measure of change over time and because the editor in chief can greatly influence how Esquire frames the image of women. The categories were the editorship of Lee Eisenberg, April 1987 through November 1990; Terry McDonell, December 1990 through December 1993; Edward Kosner, January 1994 through July 1997; and David Granger, September 1997 through the end of the study period. No editor in chief was identified in the August 1997 issue between the end of Kosner’s tenure and the beginning of Granger’s editorship.
4. Political environment. This variable also provided a possible measure of change over time and was included because the prevailing social-political environment, in which conservatives, moderates, or liberals may hold power, can influence media framing (Bronstein, 2005). One approach to analyzing the political environment from 1987 through 2006 is through the time frames of presidential administrations. Thus, the categories were the time frames of Republican Ronald Reagan, January 1987 through January 1989; Republican George H.W. Bush, February 1989 through January 1993; Democrat Bill Clinton, February 1993 through January 2001; and Republican George W. Bush, February 2001 through December 2006.

The authors did all the coding. Ten percent of the sample (n=35) was selected at random for an inter-coder reliability test consisting of simple percentage agreement. Eighty-six percent agreement occurred on occupation before it was collapsed into the broader categories, 91 percent agreement occurred on projected image, and 100 percent agreement occurred on editor era and political era.

In addition to the content analysis, this study included a qualitative element. A close examination of Esquire editorial content sought to identify evidence that a backlash against the women’s movement in American society was a factor in how “Women We Love” framed the image of the ideal woman.

Findings

RQ1: How did “Women We Love” frame the ideal woman during the era following the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s? For the entire 20-year study period, Esquire tended to frame the ideal woman as one with an entertainment/arts/sports occupation who projected a “traditional” image of “glamour, mystery and depth.” From 1987 to 2006, 83.5 percent of women were in entertainment/arts/sports, 10 percent were in business/professional/educator/public service/social activism, and 6.5 percent were other (see Table 1). For image, 65.9 percent of women overall were traditional, while 34.1 percent were non-traditional/other (see Table 2).
### Table 1
**Type of Occupation for Featured Women by Political Environment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Business, professional, educators, public service, social activists</th>
<th>Entertainment/arts/sports</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ronald Reagan</strong> (n=76)</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>77.6%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>George H.W. Bush</strong> (n=73)</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>68.5%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bill Clinton</strong> (n=102)</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>86.3%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>George W. Bush</strong> (n=89)</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>97.8%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong> (n=340)</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>83.5%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square=41.11, df=6, p<0.01

### Table 2
**Type of Image for Featured Women by Political Environment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Non-traditional/other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ronald Reagan</strong> (n=76)</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
<td>51.3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>George H.W. Bush</strong> (n=73)</td>
<td>56.2%</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bill Clinton</strong> (n=102)</td>
<td>61.8%</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>George W. Bush</strong> (n=89)</td>
<td>93.3%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong> (n=340)</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square=43.51, df=3, p<0.01
Image also was found to be associated with occupation, with women in the business category generally depicted as non-traditional, and women in the entertainment category depicted as traditional (see Table 3). One exception was the group of women in the entertainment subcategory of journalism/literature/visual arts/entertainment other, who were more often depicted as non-traditional (see Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Type of Occupation for Featured Women by Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business, professional, educators, public service, social activists (n=34)</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment/arts/sports (n=284)</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (n=22)</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n=340)</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square=43.86, df=2, p<0.01

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
<th>Type of Occupation (with subcategory) for Featured Women by Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business, professional, educators, public service, social activists (n=34)</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment/performing arts/sports (n=239)</td>
<td>82.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism/literature/visual arts/entertainment other (n=45)</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (n=22)</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n=340)</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square=99.69, df=3, p<0.01
Women in the business category were always featured in the annual issue along with several other women, but never alone in the spotlight of the monthly column (see Table 5). Likewise, women depicted as non-traditional were more likely to appear in the annual issue along with several other women than alone in the monthly column (see Table 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Occupation for Featured Women by Column Frequency</td>
<td>Business, professional, educators, public service, social activists</td>
<td>Entertainment/ arts/sports</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual issue (n=275)</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly column (n=65)</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>98.5%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n=340)</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>83.5%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square=13.20, df=2, p<0.01

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6</th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Image for Featured Women by Column Frequency</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Non-traditional</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual issue (n=275)</td>
<td>61.8%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly column (n=65)</td>
<td>83.1%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n=340)</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square=11.21, df=2, p<0.01

RQ2: Did the framing of the ideal woman change over time during the study period of 1987 through 2006? As time went on, the occupational range of featured women became less diverse and more focused on the entertainment category. During the Reagan era, 19.7 percent of women were in the business category, while 77.6 percent were in the entertainment category. However, by the George W. Bush era, almost all women, 97.8 percent, were in the entertainment category (see Table 1). Similarly, during Eisenberg’s tenure, 23.9 percent of women were in the business category, while 76.1 percent were in the entertainment category. However, by Granger’s tenure, only 1.6 percent of women were in...
the business category, compared with 98.4 percent in the entertainment category (see Table 7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7</th>
<th>Type of Occupation for Featured Women by Editor Era</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Business, professional, educators, public service, social activists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee Eisenberg (n=109)</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry McDonell (n=48)</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward Kosner (n=47)</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Granger (n=122)</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None (n=14)</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n=340)</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square=33.14, df=4, p<0.01

**RQ3: Were framing trends associated with certain U.S. political environments or Esquire editorships?** The traditional image became more common among featured women as political environment and editorship eras went on. During the political environment time frame of the Reagan administration, there was nearly an even distribution of image, with 48.7 percent of women depicted as traditional and 51.3 percent as non-traditional/other. By the time frame of the George W. Bush administration, the traditional image prevailed overwhelmingly, with 93.3 percent of women depicted as such (see Table 2). Similarly, during Eisenberg’s tenure, the numbers of traditional and non-traditional images were almost same (50.5 percent vs. 49.5 percent). By Granger’s tenure, there were much more traditional images than non-traditional/other images (86.1 percent vs. 13.9 percent) (see Table 8).
RQ4: Did commentary in “Women We Love” indicate that a backlash against the women’s movement was a factor in the framing of the ideal woman? A close examination of Esquire text found confirmation of an association between the backlash proposed by Faludi (1991) and the magazine’s framing of women. In the annual “Women We Love” issue in 1988, Esquire observed “You don’t live through—you don’t—twenty years as witness to the greatest social revolution in history without storing up some fairly heart-felt convictions about women. And they need to be expressed” (Women we love, 1988, p. 98). This passage, which paid tribute to the transformations in American society from 1968 on, acknowledged the role of women in the cultural upheaval of the late 1960s and 1970s and the resulting desire of Esquire to frame women in the context of contemporary society in the late 1980s.

Further confirmation of the association between a backlash and Esquire’s framing was found in the annual “Women We Love” issue in 1993. This installment was a summary of the previous six decades of Esquire as part of the 60th anniversary edition. The issue recalled descriptions of women from past decades, including women who did not like marriage but had to be married in the 1930s; the new dream girl in the 1940s; childish women in the 1950s; women “who are apologetic for being ‘only housewives’” in the 1960s; women who bash their husbands in the 1970s; women who would eventually become men in the 1980s; and women who want men’s company, sex, and laughs in the 1990s (Special sixtieth-anniversary edition, 1993, p. 76). These descriptions provided a glimpse of women’s social roles over 60 years through the Esquire lens, confirming the magazine’s respect for the women’s movement of the 1960s and acknowledging the era that followed.
Discussion

Esquire’s framing of the ideal woman in “Women We Love” changed significantly over two decades. In the early years of the study period, women in business, the professions, and education were featured in significant numbers. Moreover, the early years featured a relatively balanced combination of women embodying “non-traditional” qualities of “wit and power and guts” with those embodying “traditional” qualities of “glamour and mystery and depth.” By the later years, however, occupational diversity had diminished, and the prevailing image was traditional. Moreover, women over age 40 became less visible in “Women We Love” as time went on. In 1988, during the Eisenberg editorship, several women over age 40 were featured, including philanthropist Brooke Astor, social psychologist Sissela Bok, actress and political activist Audrey Hepburn, AIDS researcher Mathilde Krim, and Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor. By the political environment time frame of the George W. Bush administration and the Granger editorship, few women over age 40 were featured. These trends, consisting of a diminished occupational diversity, an increased traditional image, and a decline in the number of women over age 40, indicate that American society in the era following the women’s movement was embracing a new perception of the ideal woman and that Esquire projected such in its framing of women in “Women We Love.”

Moreover, the qualitative portion of this study found evidence that Esquire’s framing of women in “Women We Love” was influenced by a backlash against the women’s movement. Editorial comments accompanying the annual “Women We Love” issues in 1988 and 1993 provided valuable insight into the philosophy underlying “Women We Love” and the perspective of the editors. In addition, social critic Faludi (1991) argued that the general editorial thrust of Esquire in the era following the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s was influenced by an anti-feminist backlash. She asserted that Esquire in 1990 paid symbolic tribute to the backlash when it featured fictional television character Laura Palmer on the cover of its annual “Women We Love” issue. Palmer’s sensational death in the dramatic series Twin Peaks generated widespread news coverage at the time. Faludi (1991) also noted that the magazine “devoted its entire June 1990 issue to a dewy tribute to the ‘American Wife,’” another Esquire acknowledgement of a backlash (p. 88).

The content analysis portion of this study showed significant association, but not necessarily cause and effect, between framing trends and political environment eras. The strong change over time in occupational diversity and image suggests that the changing perception of the ideal woman was occurring at a time of rising conservative political power in the United States. Conservatives, many of who were often critical of the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s and its underlying philosophy, were gaining strength in the mid-1990s after losing the 1992 presidential election. The strong traditional image of women depicted during the political environment time frame of the George W. Bush administration is consistent with the new politics of gender that, according to some scholars, emerged during his presidency (Ferguson & Marso, 2007). Interestingly, during the Clinton
era, the only Democratic presidency in the time studied, the featured women tended to be more traditional and less often in the business category compared with the previous presidential eras, but they were less traditional and more often in the business category than during the subsequent George W. Bush era. This suggests that under certain political climates, a presidential administration that reflects generally conservative (Republican) or liberal (Democratic) leadership can influence and interact with other social-political elements in a complicated way. These trends are consistent with Bronstein’s study (2005), which argued that media frames can be changed given changing socio-political conditions.

Significant association also was found between framing trends and editor era, with strong change observed in occupational diversity and image over the four editorships. For example, during Granger’s tenure, which began in 1997 and was the longest during the study period, “Women We Love” was characterized much less by occupational diversity and much more by traditional image than during the earlier Eisenberg era. Indeed, an editor’s individual philosophy can strongly influence the direction of a magazine, thus raising the possibility that *Esquire’s* framing of the ideal woman might have been affected by the personal whims of editors or their assumptions of how *Esquire* readers perceive the ideal woman. For example, Granger, when hired in 1997 at a time when the magazine was struggling with declining readership, emphasized a new direction for *Esquire*. He said at the time that he planned to revamp *Esquire* by focusing on service-oriented articles. “I want to strike the right balance,” he said. “Service can be anything from fashion, telling guys how to invest their money, to exercise and sex” (Quoted in Kelly, 1997, para. 9). Asked later in his tenure specifically about “Women We Love,” Granger expressed his view that the feature aims simply to entertain and draw readers to the magazine:

> We just have fun with it. A couple years ago, we started doing this long, slow, six-month reveal of who we would be naming the sexiest woman alive in our November issue. It’s been funny and well-received. Against all expectations, men continue to be interested in women, and we try to offer some insight in various places in the magazine in amusing ways. (Quoted in Stableford, 2007, para. 7)

Granger’s views suggest that *Esquire* did not consider “Women We Love” as having major cultural significance, at least during his editorship, which began in 1997. This view would appear to contrast sharply with the magazine’s mindset, as characterized by the content of “Women We Love” during the Eisenberg years.

In addition to political and editorship considerations, economic issues in magazine publishing and in the men’s magazine segment in the 1990s and 2000s were likely factors in *Esquire’s* framing trends. The emergence of the sexually exploitative lad magazines in the 1990s likely influenced *Esquire* to follow a more sexually explicit path in its content. *Esquire’s* circulation began to decline in the mid-1990s and dropped dramatically when *Maxim*, a lad magazine known for depicting women with strong sexual imagery, began publication in 1997. In 1994, about three years before *Maxim* appeared, *Esquire* circulation...
peaked at 756,030. In the ensuing seven years, *Esquire* circulation fell steadily, reaching a low of 672,700 in 2001. *Esquire* circulation then rebounded and stood at 710,826 in 2006. Meanwhile, *Maxim* recorded strong growth through its first five years, reaching a circulation of 2.56 million in 2002 (SRDS, 2003). One would expect that *Esquire*, facing tough sales competition from the sexually provocative *Maxim*, would promote a traditional depiction of women in “Women We Love.” Such would have the effect of selling more copies to *Esquire*’s male target audience, thus abating *Maxim*’s growing market share and strengthening its own financial health.

Through “Women We Love,” *Esquire* apparently found a vehicle both to satisfy its sophisticated male readership’s taste for the physical beauty of women and to assert itself as a socially conscious elite magazine that reflects and interprets cultural trends. Achieving such a balance, between exploiting the sexuality of women and pursuing serious journalism on critical issues of the day, has been a longtime hallmark of *Esquire*. Just as it published sexually exploitative covers through the years and then offered in the pages within a thoughtful examination of the women’s movement by feminist writers such as Nora Ephron, so too did *Esquire* strike a balance between exploitation and appreciation in “Women We Love.”

This study argues that “Women We Love,” with its framing of the ideal woman, was a journalistic projection of the changing perception of the ideal woman in American society in the era following the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The study demonstrates significant change over time from 1987 through 2006, concurrent with changing political environments, editorships, and publishing industry eras, in *Esquire*’s framing of the ideal woman. The trends support the argument that *Esquire*’s framing projected a change in the perception of women in American society and the emergence of a backlash against the movement.

Future research on this topic could be pursued from a qualitative perspective, examining, for example, the motivation of *Esquire* editors in publishing “Women We Love.” This study was intended to be primarily quantitative and did not involve interviews with current and former editors. Such interviews in future research could better reveal *Esquire*’s perspective on the women’s movement and the era that followed, and why its perception of the ideal woman changed over time. Further research also could focus on the association between political era and *Esquire*’s framing to ascertain a possible cause-and-effect relationship. From a quantitative perspective, a more detailed content analysis, perhaps focusing on the sexual explicitness of *Esquire* photos in “Women We Love,” could produce a better assessment of the change over time of the magazine’s perception of women.
References


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"Woman in Love" is a song performed by Barbra Streisand and taken from her 1980 album, Guilty. The song was written by Barry and Robin Gibb of the Bee Gees, who received the 1980 Ivor Novello award for Best Song Musically and Lyrically. It is her fourth of four Platinum records, and is considered her greatest international hit. After the success enjoyed by the Bee Gees in the late 1970s, the band was asked to participate in musical endeavors for other artists, and Streisand asked Barry Gibb to write