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ORIGINAL PAPER

Playboy and Pornification: 65 Years of the Playboy Centerfold

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Abstract

In the more than 6 decades since its founding, *Playboy* magazine has had to contend with a great deal of cultural change, most significantly the rise of the Internet pornography industry. The magazine, particularly its signature centerfold, the Playmate of the Month, has had to adapt accordingly. In this visual analysis, I review 65 years of *Playboy* centerfolds to consider how their bodies—physical characteristics, positions, contexts, and explicitness—have changed, and how this reflects the broader social change to which they are subject. I find that, overall, very little changes over the years, with two notable exceptions: increased visibility of the montes pubis and the slow decreasing in the amount of pubic hair the models have, and the brief time period in which the magazine attempted to remove nudity altogether. My results show that the magazine appears to place more value on staying true to the *Playboy* image than to adapting to a new market and has continued to be a recognized symbol of gender and sexuality even in light of decreasing readership and publication.

Keywords Pornography · Visual analysis · Sexuality · Mainstream media

Introduction

Mainstream media are becoming more sexual, raising the question of how traditional sex-based or pornographic publications are adapting to keep a foothold in the consumer market. As both scholars and citizens were arguing that American culture is becoming oversexualized or even "pornified" (Paul 2007), *Playboy* was serving as a sexual standard bearer for young adults. Though its status is declining in the face of more accessible internet porn industries, the Playboy bunny and centerfold are still recognizable cultural icons. How does a soft-core pornography publication like Playboy react to increasing sexualization in arenas that were once not its competition?

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Throughout its long history, *Playboy* is, on the one hand, the standard setter it intends to be, defining for young men not only what makes an attractive woman, but how they should present themselves in order to be attractive to her. On the other hand and at the same time, *Playboy* can be considered simply a cultural barometer, aggregating and reproducing sexuality as it is being defined by other cultural touchstones, like internet pornography. Media is always simultaneously encoding and decoding cultural meanings, and *Playboy* is no exception (Hall 2006).

Just over 25 years ago, Bogaert et al. (1993) noted that previous content analyses of sexual materials were concentrating on the degree of violence against women portrayed. The authors suggested that perhaps attention should be focused elsewhere, specifically on the explicitness, objectification, and age dynamics of this content, and conducted the first content analysis of *Playboy* of its full publication up to that date.

In the twenty-five years since Bogaert et al. (1993) analysis, *Playboy* has increasingly had to compete not just with other pornographic publications, but also with mainstream publications like *Rolling Stone* and perhaps most acutely with the instant and often free accessibility of pornography on the internet. In this study, I expand on Bogaert et al. (1993) analysis by conducting a visual analysis of nearly three additional decades of centerfolds, encompassing several major cultural changes. I modify their coding scheme to measure explicitness in a less summative and more qualitative manner, as well as to consider the women's contextualization and personal characteristics as a more holistic approach to objectification. Put together, the 65 years of centerfolds analyzed in this study provide a comprehensive sense of how representations of sexuality have changed over that time, particularly in response to cultural shifts in pornography consumption.

Background

The Playboy Brand

Playboy has a complex history and is the subject of frequent criticism, largely due to the manner in which it portrays gender, sexuality, and the interactions between the sexes in the magazine. Although studies have been conducted on competing magazines, such as *Esquire* and *Hustler* (e.g. Breazeale 1994; Cieply 2010; Dines 1998), there are far more on *Playboy* than its competitors, likely due to *Playboy*'s monolithic presence in popular culture (Preciado 2014). Preciado's (2014) book notes how *Playboy* rocketed images that had long been considered "private" and which were heavily censored by the US government into the public sphere, engaging the spirit of mass consumption that dominated the 1950s United States.

Consumption was a centerfold of the brand, in fact. One study finds that in its early years, *Playboy* presented a new form of masculinity by incorporating characteristics traditionally associated with women, such as interest in fashion and cooking (Beggan and Allison 2001b). The authors see this, not through the image of the ubiquitous Playboy Bunny, but rather through the original character from which it stemmed: The Rabbit. The Rabbit was not a mindless, objectifying consumer of

women's bodies, but rather a suave playboy whose sophisticated lifestyle naturally attracted the beautiful women of *Playboy* to him. The Rabbit, as representative of the kind of many who reads *Playboy*, dressed well, cooked for his women, was a sportsman but also attended the theatre. A rabbit, particularly, is a creature associated with gentleness, and this choice, Beggan and Allison argue, allow the Rabbit to be a masculine ideal while presenting feminine traits that women find desirable in a partner. Rhetorical studies of similar magazines, like *Esquire*, find that magazines directed toward men seem to be, to great extent, about women (Breazeale 1994).

Though it is often difficult to trace what media and experiences shape beliefs or behaviors, *Playboy* has been shown to impact young men's sexual self-concept (Beggan and Allison 2003). The authors placed a solicitation in *Playboy* itself asking for respondents to describe their first experience with the magazine, and qualitatively coded the 22 responses they received.[1] They found that first exposure to *Playboy* is a memorable event, and the magazine served as a source of sex-related information. Respondents' attitudes towards Playmates lacked a misogynistic component. An earlier study by the same authors also analyzed the text which accompanied the centerfolds' pictorial and found that it encouraged men to include traditionally feminine attitudes in their masculine identities, by virtue of the preferences the playmates expressed for their partners (Beggan and Allison 2001a).

A deep dig through the *Playboy* archives reveals how these norms fit with the image Hugh Hefner was trying to create in his magazine. Hefner's intention with *Playboy* was not simply to provide pornography to young men, but rather to create an entire image of the modern bachelor's lifestyle (Pitzulo 2011). It wasn't merely about consuming the women but rather presenting the idea that if you dressed like the *Playboy* men, outfitted your apartment like them, drove their cars, acquired their hobbies like cooking, and held their beliefs, you too could attract—and maintain a relationship with and eventually maybe even marry—beautiful women.

Valid feminist critiques have been lobbied against *Playboy*, with some women arguing that posing for the magazine is an empowering choice (Snyder-Hall 2010), while other "anti-porn" feminists argue that so long as sexuality is defined by male preference and perspective, there are no truly liberating choices (MacKinnon 1989). Gloria Steinem herself went undercover in a Playboy Club as a Bunny, where she exposes the great lengths the women go to in order to please their male customers, while earning far less than the promised wages (Steinem 1963). These critiques match closely onto debates over sexual agency: is it empowering or degrading if one opts-in to their own objectification? Is it even still objectification if one chooses to flaunt or exploit their sexuality, particularly for financial gain?

However, Pitzulo (2011) also points out where the magazine encouraged women's sexual liberation and agency alongside men's while teaching the men to attract the women as full human beings, not just sexual objects. In their view, the women volunteering to be the nude models, especially the Playmate of the Month, were seizing on their own sexual liberation and participating in men's edification in the

[1] This is, of course, a very small sample, especially when compared to *Playboy*'s circulation of about 3 million at the same time period as the study (Watson 2019), and is therefore likely not generalizable.

art of wooing women. It is worth noting here that in the early days of the magazine, it was average women who applied or were chosen to be centerfolds, sometimes even employees plucked right out of the *Playboy* offices (Rothman 2015); now it is more common to see burgeoning or even established models as the Playmate of the Month. Hefner himself identified as a feminist, and the magazine often paired politically progressive stances on issues like abortion alongside their nude image spreads (Pitzulo 2008), further complicating the overall rhetoric of the magazine.

This paper, however, focuses solely on a visual analysis of *Playboy*, a study which is not entirely new. Krassas et al. (2001) found that *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy* both represent women in the same manner, arguing that they reflect the male gaze and promote the idea that women's primary concern is attracting and sexually satisfying men. They used an intensive coding scheme inspired by Goffman's (1979) study of advertisements, that covered similar body part exposure as the aforementioned study, as well as relational aspects of men and women in the images. Another study similar to the one here coded the centerfolds from 430 issues of *Playboy* that had been published up to 1990 (Bogaert et al. 1993), examining both explicitness and objectification of the models. This study used seven three-point measures of explicitness: breasts, buttocks, pubic hair, genitals, position, hands, and leg elevation. The study also uses three three-point measures of objectification: eye clarity, facial clarity, and how much they faced the camera. They found that overall objectification was fairly low, with some variation from decade to decade, and that the models got slightly older over the years, though still averaged in the early 20 s. They also found that explicitness increased up to the 1980s and then leveled off.

Studying Visual Rhetoric

Over the last few decades, sociology has borrowed more and more heavily from journalism and documentary photography to develop the field of visual sociology. This area has gained prominence in the discipline, resulting in more trainees in the area and publications specifically for such research. Often these studies are focused on sociology where the researcher is creating the images or creating the circumstance in which images are created. However, visual sociology can also encompass the use of adapted sociological methods to analyze images which already exist, in order to see what they can tell us about a culture. Such studies have been done on everything from advertisements in different contexts (e.g. Goffman 1979; Mann and Grzanka 2018; McDonnell 2010), to, as in this study, magazines (e.g. Hatton and Trautner 2011). When considered together, these studies make an argument that the visual rhetoric of an image is constructed from multiple moving pieces: the image itself, the text which accompanies it, and the context in which the image is situated, not to mention all the background the person interpreting the image is bringing with them.

Visual rhetoric is also heavily influenced by the genre and "story" conventions. "Story conventions" usually refers to the rules that structure coverage of particular types of news events, and these rules help make the message understandable (Schudson 1995). These rules typically emerge from the bureaucratic institution

being covered, for traditional reporting (Fishman 1997). These typifications emerge to facilitate a reporter's need to meet tight deadlines and constantly generate their own news stories (Berkowitz 1992). Over time, these conventions are passed down to new journalists through exposure and experience.

Playboy, as one of the first publications of its type, was largely able to set the genre conventions for a long time. Though conventions are not exactly the same in magazines as in they are in beat reporting, they serve the same purpose: using the same "narrative" (or visual) qualities to increase a message's readability and control the meaning readers interpret. *Playboy* created an iconic visual style—image conventions for the soft-core magazine pornography genre—that was imitated by other publications. Much as the "money shot"—a man ejaculating on a woman's body or in her mouth in hard-core pornography (Attwood 2007)—became a convention for that genre, *Playboy* created poses, contexts, and standards for female attractiveness that were used by many other publications of all types (including internet pornography, to some extent) for many years. However, as competing publications began to push the envelope with their explicit images, *Playboy* was no longer the be-all, end-all in magazine-based pornography.

Visual Representations of Gender and Sexuality

The history of how gender and sexuality are represented in images is extensive and complex. Goffman, in his seminal book (1979), argued that advertisements, which at times can feel excessively stereotypical, look this way because gender is already a ritualized performance, and the advertisement is a performance of the performance. The performance of gender and sexuality in advertisements can still be understood through this theory, as excessively performative to underscore social roles.

Pornography can be similarly understood, then, as a performance of the performance of sexuality. Such an approach to defining pornography, as a result of the process of pornification and therefore performative, creates the necessary space to understand the context in which certain forms of pornography are produced and consumed. Such contextualization has, in many ways, become central to categorizing pornography as such and potentially even deconstructing the category of pornography itself (Attwood 2002). As culture is potentially becoming more sexualized, the context in which pornography is produced and consumed shifts, and cultural institutions will adjust accordingly as well (Attwood 2006).

Although *Playboy* hovers on the edge of pornography, comparison with studies of pornography can still be illuminating. Shim et al. (2015) reviewed 200 images from 4 different sites, two directed at women and two directed at men (it is not clear if these sites are targeted specifically at heterosexual individuals or not). They found that pornography sites aimed at men were more likely than those aimed at women to include content with elements of sexual inequality such as status inequality, authority, or sexual encounters involving rape, bondage, or torture. Women's sites, on the other hand, were more likely to show sexual objectification of the female, where she is reduced to an object through decreased presence of the face and increased

prevalence of shots of female genitals. I apply similar concepts to the images of women within *Playboy* to determine their sexual objectification.

Studies of how women are represented in pornography often analyze female objectification. Fritz and Paul (2017) compared objectification between "Mainstream," "For Women," and "Feminist" pornography through internet videos. Overall, they find that different categories of pornography provide different sexual scripts for objectification, agency, and gender dynamics. Specifically, they found that Mainstream pornography features more female objectification than the other two, and that the objectification gap between men and women exists in all categories of pornography, but is widest in the Mainstream category. They also found that queer Feminist pornography contained more indicators of female sexual agency than the other categories, as well as heterosexual Feminist pornography. *Playboy*, which would fit solidly in the Mainstream category, by these authors' definition, has been debated as to whether the women are objectified or not and how much sexual agency women are given, making this an interesting path to trace in a visual analysis.

Other research expresses concern that it is not just pornographic material presenting sexual imagery, but that this has invaded mainstream media. Levy (2005) has called this "the rise of raunch culture." Other scholars have focused on gendered implications. Gill (2007) suggests that practically all representations of women are sexually objectifying; Rohlinger (2002) argues that "the erotic male" is now the primary conception of masculinity. Hatton and Trautner (2011), however, contend that only considering media that is intended to be sexually titillating or even arousing does not accurately represent whether culture as a whole has moved toward being "pornified." Instead, they choose to analyze a magazine that can be found on any grocery store rack: *Rolling Stone*. They find that both men and women on the magazine's cover are more sexualized now than they were in the past, but to different degrees.

The Present Study

Because *Playboy* straddles, to some extent, the line between pornography and mainstream media, it plays a unique role in the development of cultural scripts around sexuality, particularly for the young men that read it. My study is in large part a replication of Bogaert et al.'s (1993) study looking at explicitness and objectification in *Playboy*'s earlier years. However, I account for an additional thirty years of publication, as well as a significant development in that expanded time frame: internet porn. I also account for the significant cultural changes and changes within the company that have occurred since 1990, most notably the transition of leadership to Hefner's daughter upon his death in 2017, and the massive expansion of the internet porn industry. I also include more variables around the position of the model and setting she is placed in to more fully analyze the visual rhetoric and sexual nature of the image. This expanded approach allows me to understand not only the explicitness of the image, but rather, by taking a broader view of the image context, also understand the complete narrative that is suggested by the images. Although this study is largely exploratory

and I do not propose particular hypotheses, I will suggest that if the internet porn industry had a significant effect on *Playboy*, I would expect to see changes in the explicitness of the images, particularly with regard to images of vulvas and overtly sexual positions of the body, in the 1990s and 2000s.

Data and Methods

The images used were selected from the 757 issues of Playboy, spanning the full 65 years of publications through 2018. In many years 12 monthly issues were published, although in some years some months were doubled up in one issue, and in the most recent year, only 6 issues were published. However, in issues that were combined, there was still a Playmate of the month for every month of the year, resulting in 788 Playmates (782 different women). Every single image was coded on the complete codebook, and where multiple women were featured in the same image (such as issues with twins where they were not representing different months in one image), each woman was coded separately.

Every issue featured an image that was labeled with "Miss 'Month'"; these were the images used for analysis. Whether the Playmate of the Month is the true "centerfold" of the magazine is debatable, as not every issue featured something clearly identifiable on the online database as a centerfold (that is, a full two page spread that crosses the "centerfold" with little or no text on the image). The vast majority of these images appear to be single page images, although in more recent years it is more common to find two-page or sometimes even three-page foldouts.

To analyze the images, I created a codebook that was inspired by Hatton and Trautner's (2011) codebook intended to quantitatively assess sexualization on Rolling Stone covers. However, I did not intend my codes to be ordinal—and therefore summative—in nature. Rather, I coded for which body parts were visible and how visible, what fabric or clothing was present in the image and how it was used, various aspects of the model's pose and position, and the setting in which the model was placed. I also coded for recurrent themes in the image, such as men's objects, infantilization, and over-femininity. Because some of these codes emerged throughout the coding process, any time a new code was created, I went back and recoded all previous images for the new item. Collectively, these codes created a measure not of how sexual the images were, but instead, how sexuality was represented over the decades of Playboy's publication and the narratives within which these women were embedded. Using Stata IC 15.1, I plotted the "points" created by each image and analyzed where the points clustered and how those clusters moved over time. I primarily focus on a descriptive analysis of the clusters and their movement and as such did not run any statistical tests on the data. These individual pieces, when looked at together, create the visual rhetoric of the image and reveal what message about sexuality *Playboy* was trying to sell at the time, as well as what was acceptable in mass society.

Findings

Overall, across the years, the *Playboy* centerfold is remarkably consistent, or at least is consistent in its variation. Many of the variables oscillate evenly between the various codes created here, with a few notable exceptions.

Model Demographics

While the vast majority (92%) of Playmates of the Month were white, there was some racial and ethnic diversity among the models; oftentimes in the early issues, the model's "exotic" background was emphasized in the accompanying text. Though there is no way to be sure of the exact ethnic and racial background of the models, I estimate that about 2% (19) were Asian/Asian American, 4% (29) were Black/African American, and less than 1% (6) were Latina. There was also a small percentage (around 1%) who were racially/ethnically ambiguous or potentially multiracial, making it difficult to place them in a category. My racial estimations are based on my socialization of "reading race or ethnicity," which is both socially biased and impacted by the bias of color photography toward white skin tones (Lewis 2019), and I supplemented with the accompanying text where possible. Finally, Playboy featured its first openly transgender Playmate in November of 2017, and this woman is represented in the dataset.[2]

Explicitness

First, in the tradition of Bogaert et al. (1993), I consider the variables related to the explicitness of the image. The centerfolds, on the whole, are relatively "tasteful," for want of a better word. Tasteful is a loaded word that relies heavily on particular class standards, which are not infrequently at odds with mass consumerism and the mainstream presentation of sexuality (particularly with regard to female sexual empowerment), and such standards can set cultural critique at odds with feminist subjectivities (Evans et al. 2010). In this case, taste refers to a lack of vulgarity—fully exposed genitals, body positions that are intentionally reminiscent of sexual positions—that would be acceptable to the middle/upper-middle class man to whom the magazine directs itself. The pose in which the women are placed is only overtly sexual (defined as a position which would be suggestive of sex even if they were fully clothed such as widespread legs or on hands and knees with bottom raised) 4% of the time. Touching is similar, reaching pseudo-masturbatory levels in only 10 images, less than 1%. Full nudity, measured as an absence of any top, bottom, or other fabric (regardless of how much it is covering), occurs about evenly across the years, with about half the models fully nude and half having at least one article of clothing or fabric around their body.

[2] There have now been 2 transgender Playmates, but only one is captured in this sample. They have both been women of color.

The centerfolds' nipples are initially visible about 50% of the time, until 1977, at which point in nearly every image one or both of their nipples is mostly or fully visible, not hidden or suggested but mostly covered. Breasts, similarly, are 50/50 until about 1970, with the exception of *Playboy*'s brief full nudity ban in 2016, in which point they are mostly visible in outline if at all, and also in 2018, for reasons that are not entirely clear but possibly due to the leadership change to Hefner's daughter in 2017. The centerfolds' montes pubis and/or vulvas are not shown at all until 1960, and remain rare until 1970. They vary about evenly between being mostly obscured or mons pubis visible but no vulva after that, with 37 of the images having the vulva semi-visible and only 6 showing the vulva in its entirety (Table 1).

Personal Characteristics of the Women

The women who star in the centerfolds are similarly consistent, other than their race, which is discussed in detail below. There is no apparent preference for a particular hair color, style, or length. Short hair does become somewhat less common in the later years of the magazine, but not as sharp of a drop-off as one might expect, given modern beauty standards which often seem to prefer long hair. The first woman with a (visible) tattoo appears in 1993, and though they certainly aren't common (less than 3% of all the images), they do not seem to be a disqualifying feature, regardless of where or what they are.

The women's pubic hair is, of course, a main variable of interest. Related to the visibility of the mons pubis, we do not see pubic hair until 1963, and it remains rare until 1971. Until 1991, the majority of models appear to be untrimmed—au naturale or "full bush," as it is often colloquially known. For a few years, the centerfolds then vary about evenly between a "full bush" and some trimming, but usually not entirely clean shaved, up until about 2003. For a brief period between about 2001–2003, the women vary evenly between a "full bush," somewhat trimmed, and being entirely clean-shaven, and after 2003, the women are nearly twice as likely to be clean shaven as they are to be trimmed (and only 1 image features a "full bush"). It is sometimes suggested that bare genital skin (especially on women) is intended as an indicator of girlishness and by extension virginity (Ferriss 2011), potentially making these women seem more appealing the male consumer. However, in other forms of modern pornography, performers of both sexes remove hair from their genitals (and often the rest of their bodies as well); this suggests that the bare skin is an indicator of sexual desirability and status for both sexes (Fahs 2011, 2013). The centerfold, then, is simply conforming to a marker of class privilege that is consistent with other lifestyle elements the magazine presents to their audience (Fig. 1).

Image Characteristics

The contexts in which the models are situated also remain stable across the decades. Although alcohol of various types and in various forms appear across all decades—often as two glasses of something around the model, suggesting the invisible *Playboy* consumer's presence in the image—alcohol appears 3 to 6 times more

Table 1 Explicitness Measures by Decade

	1950s (n = 73) (%)	1960s (n = 120) (%)	1970s (n = 121) (%)	1980s (n = 121) (%)	1990s (n = 122) (%)	2000s (n = 123) (%)	2010s (n = 108) (%)	Total (n = 788) (%)
Breasts								
Not Visible	8	3	1	0	0	0	5	2
Outline Visible	26	12	3	2	0	1	10	6
One Breast Mostly/Fully Visible	30	27	16	10	11	18	11	17
Both Breasts Mostly/Fully Visible	36	59	80	88	89	81	74	75
Nipples								
Not Visible	53	16	4	2	2	1	12	10
One/Both Nipples Suggested/Somewhat Visible	25	16	1	2	0	2	4	6
One Nipple Mostly/Fully Visible	10	19	28	17	16	28	19	20
Both Nipples Mostly/Fully Visible	12	50	67	79	83	68	65	63
Mons and Vulva								
Fully Covered/Out of Shot	100	96	43	13	17	28	51	47
Mons/Vulva Visible but Obscured	0	4	12	15	12	22	17	12
Mons Visible but No Vulva	0	0	40	60	67	44	22	36
Vulva Semi-Visible	0	0	3	8	4	6	10	5
Vulva Fully Visible	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	1
Clothing – Bottom								
None	74	81	86	92	84	91	88	86
Non-underwear, Fully Covering	15	10	4	0	0	0	0	4
Non-underwear, Revealing/Sheer	1	4	3	5	8	7	2	5
Underwear, Fully Covering	10	3	4	0	1	1	6	3
Underwear, Revealing	0	3	2	3	7	2	5	3

Table 1 (continued)

	1950s (n = 73) (%)	1960s (n = 120) (%)	1970s (n = 121) (%)	1980s (n = 121) (%)	1990s (n = 122) (%)	2000s (n = 123) (%)	2010s (n = 108) (%)	Total (n = 788) (%)
Clothing – Top								
None	68	74	56	26	9	49	53	47
Mostly Covering	14	1	0	0	1	0	4	2
Revealing	18	25	44	74	90	51	44	51
Other Fabric								
None	81	83	96	93	100	98	95	93
Sheets/Blankets Covering	7	8	0	0	0	0	2	2
Solid Fabric, Partial Coverage	7	4	1	0	0	1	0	2
Sheer Fabric, Partial Coverage	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Solid/Sheer Fabric, No Coverage	5	3	3	7	0	2	2	2
Pose								
Non-Sexual	79	72	47	60	75	72	85	69
Sexually Suggestive	18	28	42	31	22	26	13	26
Overtly Sexual	3	1	11	9	3	2	2	4

Note: Although each image falls into only one category, numbers do not add to 100 due to rounding

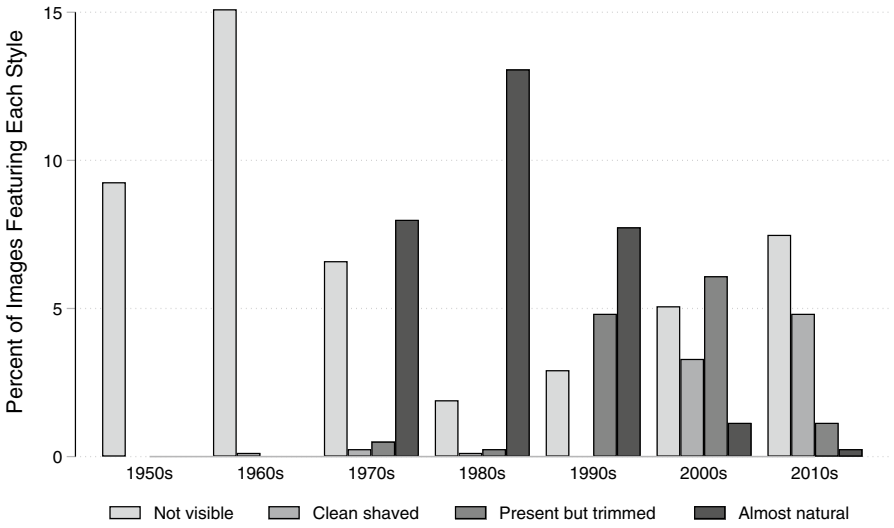

Fig. 1 Style of pubic hair by decade

frequently in the 2000s than in any other decade, featured in nearly 20% of all the images in this decade. The "public indoor" setting, which includes places such as bars and fake movie sets (but nothing domestic), becomes far more common in the late 1980s, at which point all four coded settings (public indoor, outdoor, domestic bedroom, domestic non-bedroom) vary almost equally across the images. Finally, seven women are shown with indicators that they are in college (e.g. pennants, letter jackets, and schoolwork), one in 1955, and the other six between 2001 and 2010.

Women's Appearance in the Images

In addition to varying the characteristics of the women themselves, and the characteristics of their context in the images, there is some variation in how the women are staged in the images. Their position—lying down, kneeling, sitting, or standing—varies evenly across all the decades and images, with the small exception that kneeling poses are much less common from the 1970s to the 1990s. Beginning in 1974, garter belts and corsets begin to appear, occurring 60 times after that year, about 11% of those centerfolds. The non-clothing or ambiguous fabric category occurs quite often in the early years, varying evenly across sheer and solid fabric which covers some or all of the body, sheets or blankets used to conceal some or all of the body, and sheer or solid fabric which does not conceal any of the body. However, from 1972 to 1987, almost all of these codes become sheer or solid fabric which is not used to conceal (6% of all the images in these years), and after that, almost no non-clothing fabric is used in the images, concealing or not. The final variation in staging comes in the model's eyes, which in the early years vary between being closed, directed away from the camera, coyly lidded, or, primarily, straight on, but

after 1969 are nearly exclusively straight on, with only 4 exceptions.[3] It is also worth noting here that nothing seems dramatically different in any of these categories (personal characteristics, image context, or women's appearance) for the only transgender Playmate included in this dataset, Ines Rau. She lies on her stomach, concealing her pubic area and breasts while exposing her buttocks, which is a less common but not unheard-of position for the centerfolds. This seems to be merely coincidental, rather than intentional, as other images in the spread and of Rau more generally feature frontal positions.

Variation Based on Race or Ethnicity

Although the first Black centerfold, Jennifer Jackson, was featured in *Playboy* in 1965, and the first centerfold of color in 1964, Asian-American China Lee, women of color were still a relative rarity throughout the decades. In the earliest years, a model's ethnicity or race was often explicitly disclosed in her accompanying biographical article, likely as a way to bring a sense of the "exotic" to the pages of the magazine. However, in the later years, I could only make my best estimate of the centerfolds of color, using the identification of others to guide me where possible. All in all, I estimate that around 8% of the centerfolds were a race or ethnicity other than white. After the first centerfold of color in 1964, 75% of the remaining years featured a centerfold of color at least one month out of the year. The highest count in one year is 5, in 2015 and again in 2018, and many years in the late 2000s and 2010s had 3 women of color. Though this is not necessarily an adequate sample to say that these differences are meaningful or intentional, it is worth noting where there are differences between the white women and the women of color, which are treated as an aggregate category in order to increase sample size.

Stimulating or pseudo-masturbatory touching appears only for white women; no model of color is engaged in these behaviors. Models of a race/ethncity other than white are about 2/3 less likely to be shown in sexually suggestive poses compared to the white models, although they are equally likely to be in overtly sexual poses. The domestic-bedroom setting is used twice as frequently for the white women as it is for the women of color. White women are twice as likely as women of color to have their nipples completely concealed and nearly six times more likely to have their nipples only suggested; one or both of non-white models' of color nipples are always exposed until *Playboy*'s nudity ban in 2016. None of the centerfolds of color were coded as having her vulva mostly or entirely exposed, nor were there any women of color whose breasts were entirely covered; they were always at least partially exposed. Objects which suggested male presence were never used with centerfolds who were not white, nor were objects suggesting college enrollment. White women were five times more likely to have a seductive smile, and women of color were about 10% more likely to have a slightly open mouth, accounting for 50% of their photos.

[3] The camera angle for every single centerfold is straight on, with only a slight upward or downward tilt in a few cases.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although I did not attempt a summative measure of explicitness or objectification as Bogaert et al. (1993) or Hatton and Trautner (2011) did, trends in how the images in *Playboy* have changed can still be examined. The most easily established change is, of course, the increased visibility of montes pubis, pubic hair, and, to a lesser extent, vulvas, as a result of the "Pubic Wars" in the 1970s, when the magazine attempted to compete with more explicit magazines like *Penthouse* and *Hustler*. The even variation between visible and non-visible montes pubis after that point seems to symbolize Hefner's own ambivalence on that particular facet of the images.

Pubic hair itself too seems reactionary to a market change, but in this case, it is reacting to the rising internet porn industry. For reasons that have not been clearly documented, ranging from less restrictive MPAA ratings to a desire for the "virginal" appearance of a little girl, internet porn stars (of both sexes) tend to be clean-shaven of all pubic hair (Ferriss 2011). Internet porn really took off in the late 1980s and early 1990s as computers were increasingly common in private households (Kushner 2019). With the take-off of smartphones in the late 2000s (Mishra 2017), even *Playboy* was forced to migrate to a heavily online presence, hosting a variety of pornographic image sites, and reducing the number of print issues the magazine puts out from twelve to ten in 2012 and then from ten to six in 2017. However, aside from pubic hair, there are not dramatic changes in the images in the 1990s/2000 s, when one might expect internet porn to be putting the greatest pressure on the magazine, suggesting that *Playboy* resisted these pressures, which could be part of the reason for its consistently declining readership and popularity (in addition to the simple fact that internet porn is far more accessible than the magazine and its virtual presence).

The final changes of note were the singular year of non-nudity in 2016, when just prior to Hefner's death, leadership attempted to appeal to a different sort of market. Precipitous drops in sales for an already changing company ended that endeavor in less than 12 issues. However, there also appears to a marked decrease in nudity beginning in 2018, shortly after Hefner's daughter Christie took over the company. Though there is no explicit evidence that Christie Hefner had a different vision for the magazine, it is certainly possible that a "woman's touch" is responsible for the reduced explicitness in the images around that time. Though it is impossible to know for sure how much Hef personally influenced the magazine's choices, he remained not only CEO of the Playboy Corporation but also the editor-in-chief of the magazine until shortly before his death, frequently writing his own op-eds for the magazine and directly approving much of the content personally (Manserus 2017). This suggests that Hef, and his daughter after him, had a great deal of influence on the magazine through its entire run.

The magazine generally does not seem to be going for a purely pornographic styling, though the centerfold image is occasionally if not often less explicit than other images in the centerfold spread and other pictorials in the magazine. However, in keeping with Hefner's vision, the centerfold itself seems to largely adhere

to its goal of presenting the type of women *Playboy* consumers could hope to attract if they follow the advice of the magazine. The women are rarely in overtly sexual poses and almost never pseudo-masturbating. The centerfolds are never stripped of their agency in the manners commonly analyzed in pornography, namely faceless- or even headlessness; they never appear to be photographed or filmed unknowingly. Rather, they are always presented as active and willing participants in the seduction, varying from seeming accidentally caught (but unashamed) in the middle of changing or primping, to seeming to have just returned from a date and preparing to engage in sexual activity with their beau. Hatton and Trautner (2011), however, argue that with images so intensely sexualized, the women cannot be labeled as anything but "sexual objects," and that same logic could easily hold true here. Beyond just their blatant sexuality, Hefner also wanted the women to be "innocent, affectionate, faithful girls" and did not see them as intellectual equals to men (qtd in Levy 2005:59), turning them into not just sexual but docile and possessable objects as well. This branding is also certainly apparent in the images through the same mildness that mitigates the magazine's feeling of pornography.

As far as diversity goes, *Playboy* is questionably ahead of its time, in certain regards. Though they featured women of color well before other publications, both competitors and non-competing magazines of other genres (Pitzulo 2011), these women are few and far between, and likely there more to feed the fetishization of bodies of color than out of a true commitment to inclusion. Similarly, a transgender woman graced the centerfold before other sex symbol groups such as the Victoria's Secret Angels were featuring transwomen (the first transwoman Angel was hired shortly before this writing, on the heels of transphobic comments from Victoria's Secret's chief marketing officer). This decision, in conjunction with other changes to the centerfold's format and a drastic increase in models of color, suggests a more genuine attention to inclusion may be beginning under the leadership of Christie Hefner.

Playboy's narrative, then, at least until recently, is what is primarily of interest. If one can agree that *Playboy*'s mission is to create a narrative of American heterosexual bachelorhood in which the right clothes, cars, apartment, and hobbies can bring the right woman to him—and this was Hefner's mission in word, if not necessarily in deed or intention—then even in the modern age up until the most recent of years, it seems that the images are still working to this end. The women of *Playboy* are surrounded not just by nude images, but by full narratives of who they are and what they like, and even what they want in a partner. As cited earlier, Hef exercised great influence over the magazine format, and these biographies of the Playmates were likely part of his overall vision for the brand. It is possible that these biographies were just a form of virtue signaling, to moderate public outrage to the pornographic elements of the magazine; however, I would suggest that they were also motivated by Hefner's desire to present his models as the "girl-next-door." Though many Playmates are professional models these days, *Playboy* does largely preserve the image of the "every-girl," while straddling the line between this and competing with the porn stars that are more and more shaping American heterosexual male desire and expectations of women.

Playboy was once the idealized publication for defining the genre conventions of what is most generously termed "soft-core, mainstream pornography," setting the standards for other publications of this type, and this is evidenced by the remarkable homogeneity of the images. In a recent examination of the changing role of print media and porn in the modern day, the authors argue that "within a framework where diversity is both a value in itself and that which lends value to the magazines published, the mainstream stands for the non-diverse, the inauthentic, and the non-artistic" (Cardoso and Paasonen 2020:13). However, in the time the magazine first came on the scene, *Playboy* was often a leader in the inclusion of certain types of diverse bodies (though likely for fetish reasons more than commitment to diversity) and intentionally sought authentic presentations of the women they showed in their pages. In short, *Playboy* as a mainstream publication did find at least some value in the same forms of diversity and authenticity now associated with queer publications.

On the other hand, limiting some forms of diversity by keeping relatively consistent settings, styling, and levels of explicitness over its long history, *Playboy* attempted to ensure that every reader got the same message from their images every single time. It is standard practice for journalism, as Schudson (1995) argues, and it is good for branding too. However, as its competitors began to eschew *Playboy*'s mildness in favor of a more explicit and potentially more objectifying model, *Playboy* faced the tough choice of modifying its presentation to compete or staying true to Hef's original vision and losing consumers. They appear to straddle this delicate line by somewhat increasing the images' explicitness in terms of pubic hair and vulvar shots while maintaining the surrounding narratives in the images. The modern (post-2016) *Playboy* situates itself even more firmly in its original roots of girl-next-door nudity by returning to a style that borders on artistic nude.

As people have for decades, one could debate the feminist implications of *Playboy*, whether it is creating unrealistic expectations of women. Less debatable is that *Playboy* is still clinging to its honored place in American culture amidst hefty threat from the internet porn industry and is still seeking to function as a defining publication for the young and suave American bachelor. The image of the Playboy bunny is still ubiquitous and highly identifiable, and the trappings of womanhood that build the visual still very much represent how society defines desirable women.

Though this study includes every centerfold produced by *Playboy* up through 2018, it is limited in that it does not consider any other publications. Analyzing *Playboy* across the decades can certainly tell us a great deal about the changes in sexuality over time, but comparison with other similar magazines like *Hustler* and *Penthouse* would provide insight into the evolution of sexuality while accounting for the influence of *Playboy*'s particular branding. Future research should undertake these comparisons both inside and outside of *Playboy*'s genre, to expound upon how sexuality is performed even in publications that are not explicitly sexual and how genre conventions carry over between them. Additionally, considering sexual publications directed to women, such as *Playboy*'s far less successful counterpart, *Playgirl*, to analyze the difference in representations of sexuality depending on the gender and sexual orientation of the intended audience.

Better understanding the visual content of *Playboy* and how it has changed over the years gives insight into broader social change around sexuality. Being aware of

what messages are being directed to young men (and women) about their sexual image can make us more able to effectively combat the aspects that are dangerous while encouraging the facets that lead to positive sexual interactions and equality. This analysis also contributes more broadly to the literature on visual representations of gender and sexuality and how they at once shape and are shaped by social understandings of sex and gender. In this case, we see a conflicting presentation where women are both objectified in the image itself in many ways, but also contextualized with a great deal of agency, in particular explicitly listing qualities and characteristics that they find attractive in men in the narratives which accompany the otherwise objectifying pictures.

Availability of data and material All data is available online through the Playboy archives.

Code Availability Stata code is available from the authors upon request.

Compliance with Ethical standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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