
Laurel R. Davis' *The Swimsuit Issue and Sport* is a landmark book of its kind, comparable to Radway's (1984) close study of Harlequin novel readers, or Ang's (1985) research on television fans' obsession with the program "Dallas." Although the SI swimsuit issue has become a significant icon of American popular culture, it has never been studied in any comprehensive way until, that is, the publication of Davis' book. Davis looks at what makes the SI swimsuit issue so compelling to its readers, and offers a persuasive feminist critique.

In the first chapter Davis poses the central problem of her study: What does the swimsuit issue mean, and why is it so furiously debated? In addition, she explains her qualitative methods: textual analysis and interviews with some of the producers and consumers (that is, readers) of the magazine. At the end of this chapter, Davis introduces her main argument: that the cultural significance of the swimsuit issue lies in its celebration of hegemonic masculinity, a form of masculinity increasingly threatened by recent changes in American social institutions.

Chapter 2 is an historical sketch of the swimsuit issue, its evolution over three decades, changing from a travel and fashion feature that only hinted at the models' sexuality in the 1960s to a more explicit representation of sexual meaning ("pin-up material") in later years.

Davis, in chapter 3, describes how the consumers interpret the words and photos of the swimsuit issue and identifies the readers at whom the magazine is aimed (the "ideal readers"). Here Davis discusses how the elements of the texts, production, consumption, and the wider societal context all work together to produce a basic agreement over the content of the swimsuit issue—women's bodies, femininity, ideal beauty, and (hetero)sexuality—and the ideal readers—men. Davis argues compellingly against the current theoretical trend in which media analysts grant almost unlimited power to read-
ers to interpret texts. She points out that producers and texts have
significant influence over consumers and that there are limits to the
possible interpretations which may be constructed by consumers.

Chapter 4 is an articulation of the strands of the debate over
the sexual and gendered meanings of the swimsuit issue. Almost all
consumers see sex and sensuality as themes in the swimsuit issue;
what differs among consumers is the extent to which they see the
photographs as portraying sexuality and the degree to which they
approve, tolerate, or disapprove of the issue. This chapter exempli-
fies Davis’ skill in demonstrating how the various features of the
medium work together to produce a coherent set of meanings. Here
the author discusses the features of the photographs that signify sex-
uality, the features of production that shape the sexual meanings of
the text, as well as the cultural genre of pin-up photos/soft pornogra-
phy, and consumers’ reactions to sexual content in the swimsuit pho-
tos.

These preceding four chapters lay the groundwork for the
crucial fifth chapter where Davis answers the perplexing question of
how Sports Illustrated persuades the public that photos of bikini
babes have something to do with sports. With great acuity, Davis
shows precisely how the swimsuit issue is a logical outgrowth of the
ideology embodied in SI, and therein lays the foundation for her
contention that the swimsuit issue is about heterosexuality.

With chapter 6 Davis builds on the previous insights by con-
necting the heterosexual meanings of the swimsuit issue to the cul-
tural conditions that produced the masculinity crisis. Davis situates
Sports Illustrated and the swimsuit issue in the context of changing
gender relations; she argues that feminist challenges to men’s superi-
or position in the social hierarchy have produced hegemonic forms
of masculinity. One of the defining characteristics of hegemonic
masculinity is heterosexuality. Thus, for men, buying and reading
the swimsuit issue is a way of reaffirming their heterosexuality (and
symbolically resisting potential losses of power). Sports Illustrated
in general reinforces hegemonic masculinity by implicitly defining
Sport (with a capital “S”) as men’s physical activities, devoting
most of its coverage to the most masculine of sports, football and
basketball, providing only token coverage of female athletes, and so
on. Davis points out that the producers of the SI are most likely