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Cardboard Cutouts: Male Types in *Seventeen*

Katherine Brownlow

PO Box 210, Collegedale, TN 37315

321-277-1266

Southern Adventist University
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“I’m dating the perfect guy, but when I first met him I thought there was no way I’d ever be seen in public with him, let alone date him. He’s a preppy guy, and I used to like the thugs – preps seemed so stuck up.”

Entries like this one from August 2003 make up a large portion of the content in teenage girls’ magazines, a medium that serves as a social text for its readers according to a growing body of research. As researchers begin to understand how social texts influence their readers, there is an increasing interest in the content of these social texts. For example, volumes of research are being published about how women are represented in the media. As women’s roles are more clearly understood, there is also a small, but growing interest in how men are represented and how their representation in the media affects our perceptions of masculinity. Because young girls read magazines like *Seventeen* as a social text or map to behavior in real life, I believe it is important to understand the ideas that they are internalizing, especially where males are concerned.

In the 1970s, Ernest G. Bormann developed a new way of understanding communication called symbolic convergence. He says that societies develop symbolic realities through shared past experiences or anticipated events. He calls them “rhetorical visions,” a collection of fantasy types and themes. These visions help people understand concepts that are otherwise difficult to comprehend, give motivation to behaviors, and assign meaning to different modes of communication. Each fantasy, which includes a cast of characters and dramatic action, acts as a guide of behavior in real life. Shared fantasies and rhetorical visions create communities among
those who ascribe to them. Other researchers have applied this model to mass media as he suggested to “examine the social relationships, the motives, the qualitative impact of that symbolic world” (Bormann, 1972, p. 401). His theories can be used to understand how teen magazines shape reality for their readers. Magazines such as Seventeen ascribe to a rhetorical vision and readers who accept this rhetorical vision will apply it as a guide to behavior in their real life.

Kidd (1975) discovered two rhetorical visions in popular magazines between 1951 and 1973. Vision I is a traditional view that has inflexible right and wrong behaviors, in which one is required to conform to an arbitrary ideal to be socially accepted. This vision was prevalent from the 1950s to the early 1960s and is still visible today. Vision II is a more subjective, postmodern view that began to emerge in the late '60s that doesn’t have a definitive code of “right” behavior. It promotes change as normal and presents meaning as open for negotiation, not prescribed by authorities.

Based on previous research, it seems likely that teenage magazines still subscribe to the traditional Vision I. This firmly structured social vision offers security and significance to its members, as well as the possibility to mold themselves into the ideal of their social reality.

“Females and males were expected to behave according to traditional patterns, and when one did not do so, it was not the pattern but the individual’s sexuality at fault … Vision I drama indicated how to create an image which most closely resembled the ideal in order to have high value on the interpersonal marketplace” (Kidd, 1975, p. 33).

Such a promise of stability and importance is seductive to someone in as much personal turmoil as an adolescent girl. Vision II offers no such incentive (Kidd, 1975).

The danger is that girls are likely to internalize the social reality that is presented in teen
magazines because as adolescents, their motivation for media consumption has a significant effect on how they apply the information they gather (Steele, 1999). More exposure to teen-focused magazines is associated with support of stereotypical male roles. It is also associated with enforcement of traditional female roles, defined by Kim and Ward as “using an inauthentic voice and objectifying one’s body” (2004, p. 54). Women who are motivated by information seeking are more likely to accept the social reality of what they see in the media (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) and will shape their beliefs about gender behavior to fit what they read in magazines (Kim & Ward, 2004). Adolescent girls may be especially influenced by teen magazines because there is little else targeted so specifically at them and their desire for information (Peirce, 1990) and because females have been found to have a general preference for printed media for its valuable information content (Hawk, Vanwesenbeeck, de Graaf, & Bakker, 2006).

Girls are likely to incorporate outside images of men from the media because they don’t have as much personal experience with male behavior (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Also, the more exposure women have to the media, the greater their endorsement of traditional gender roles. In fact, “TV viewing appears to be a stronger predictor of viewers’ expectations of their peers’ behavior than of their own sexual attitudes or experiences” (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999, p. 246). Girls are especially susceptible to imitating behaviors when they can identify with the content that they find in the media (Carpenter, 1998; Steele, 1999; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). While the effects of TV and magazine consumption may be different, this research suggests an interesting and alarming trend toward media in general as a significant influence on adolescents’ interpretation of social reality.

This makes it important for us to understand what girls are internalizing. Although much
attention has been focused on how women are represented (e.g. Peirce, 1990, 1993; Carpenter, 1998; Duke & Kreshel, 1998; Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998; van Roosmalen, 2000; Kim & Ward, 2004), there is little research about how males are portrayed. Existing analysis of males in teen magazines reveals limited stereotypes. There are two characters in the overall teen magazine drama: guy and girl (Garner, et al, 1998), and each have clearly defined attributes. “Girls were assumed to be, quite simply, in the process of ‘becoming’ ... Guys simply ‘are’” (pp. 65, 67).

Although relatively little is known about the roles of males in teen magazines, boy’s voices regularly appear in teenage magazines as a source of authority, telling female readers what guys like and how girls can gain their approval. While much of what these guys say is positive, the dependence on a male voice for that kind of authority encourages a pattern of passivity in adolescent females (Duke & Kreshel, 1998). Letters to the advice column of Seventeen indicate that girls base their position in their social reality on the presence or lack of a guy in their life (van Roosmalen, 2000). Guys are sources of authority, sexual aggressors, and emotionally incapable (Garner, et al, 1998). As late as 1994, almost half of sexual encounters were characterized by victimization, reduced from 62 percent of cases in 1974 and 1984 (Carpenter, 1998). Females are overwhelmingly found to be dependent on others, specifically men (Peirce, 1990, 1993; Duke & Kreshel, 1998; Garner et al., 1998; van Roosmalen, 2000). They are encouraged to become what other people, especially significant (male) others, want them to be (Garner, et al., 1998).

Peirce (1993) found in her analysis of fiction in Seventeen and 'Teen that in more than 50 percent of cases, the heroine was dependent on some other person to solve a conflict for her. Almost half of those conflicts involved boys. Peirce also analyzed occupation stereotypes and their fulfillment in the two magazines. In all but two of the 44 occupations presented, stereotypes were
enforced. An earlier study found that men command 15 percent of editorial text in these magazines, and male public figures are featured at least twice as often as female public figures (Peirce, 1990).

This paper seeks to study the representation of males in Seventeen magazine. Whatever their character in reality, girls are presented with a rhetorical vision in magazines about the nature of the male gender that can shape their opinions. What are the primary relationships addressed? What are the male characteristics that are considered desirable or undesirable? Do different authors present different representations of males? And how does the terminology used to refer to males reflect their characterization?

Methods

Participants

This study is rooted in a larger collaborative effort between three other researchers and myself, each studying Seventeen magazine and different ways that it shapes reader perceptions and expectations of male-female interactions. My study included 46 articles, which I separated into 126 distinct entries. It is common practice in Seventeen and other magazines to include several different speakers within one article, such as in a question and answer format. Because one of my research questions directly addresses authorship, I chose to divide articles into smaller units determined by author. These smaller units are termed “entries.” Articles were selected from issues published between January 2001 and December 2004, dates that were based on previous studies (Peirce, 1990) and ready availability in online databases. Article selection began with gathering each magazine’s table of contents and choosing articles with titles that suggested sex, love, or relationships in the following categories: a) having to do with guys, b) guy/girl friendships with
dating suggestions, c) true to life stories/ submissions, d) stories from interviews with stars, and e) dating tips, quizzes, and suggestions. Titles were excluded that suggested topics such as a) health, b) beauty, c) homosexuality, d) molestation, e) incest, f) cross-generational, g) world events, and h) horoscopes.

A random sample of 200 relevant articles were chosen as a sample population for the larger study as a whole. I took a random sample from this population to code for this particular project. For both stages of the selection process, articles were numbered sequentially, and minimum/maximum numbers were entered into a random number generator at http://www.random.org. In the first stage, we took the first 200 numbers that were randomly generated and used the corresponding articles for our study. In the second stage, I took the first 50 numbers and used the corresponding articles for my research project. In the process of conducting my coding, two entries, one involving homosexuality and the other involving molestation, were discovered and removed as unrelated to the study. Also, one article was poorly copied and unreadable, and two articles were incomplete. These were removed from the sample without substitution, leaving a total of 46 articles.

Procedures

I developed a coding scheme (See Appendix) specific to my research questions and revised it several times until it addressed the areas of interest for this study. My primary interest for the study was to examine how specific vocabulary was used to refer to males. I included questions on my coding scheme regarding article type, speaker, and the nature of the relationship in order to determine whether vocabulary was influenced by any of these variables. I also left space to write down specific words that were used to refer to males, as well as the number of times the word was
used within the entry. Another element of the study was how males were described. To gauge this,
I included a number of characteristics that I expected to encounter in my coding, based on my
experience in evaluating males as a teenage girl. I also included a scale for each characteristic to
indicate whether it was presented as positive, neutral, or negative. I was also interested in whether
males, females, both, or neither were presented in the following roles: authority, sex instigator, and
eye candy.

Revisions to the coding scheme were instituted based on input from Dr. Linda Crumley,
who teaches Communication Research and is the faculty advisor for my project, and based on input
from a fellow student who coded a selection of articles to test intercoder reliability, as well as
revisions that I became aware of as I coded those first articles.

To establish intercoder reliability, this classmate coded 10 articles from my sample and
compared his results with mine. Intercoder reliability was 86 percent.

Data from the coding sheets was entered into SPSS for data analysis, mainly chi square
tests and frequency distributions. I was responsible for all coding and data entry, except for
duplicate coding of the previously mentioned 10 articles, used to establish intercoder reliability.

Results

Of the entries that were coded in this study, 74 percent were about specific male partners:
46 percent about boyfriends, and 28 percent about crushes. Other relationships described include
male friends (6 percent), abstract males, (i.e., “any guy”) (6 percent), ex-boyfriends (5 percent),
celebrities (4 percent), family members (2 percent), and others (3 percent).

Study articles were overwhelmingly written by peer-age authors (96 percent) and females (88 percent). Peer-written articles included several formats: embarrassing stories (14 percent), question and answer (24 percent), slimy/sweet stories about males (12 percent), and others (25 percent).

There was a highly significant correlation between the gender of the speaker and what type of relationship was written about ($r(124) = 0.178, p < 0.048$). Females were more likely to talk about established relationships than casual acquaintances.

Very few articles were written solely by males: only 8 percent. But 18 percent of the entries were in a question and answer format in which a girl asks a question of “answer guy.” This format is a popular one, with readers like this 17-year-old from Boston, MA, who writes, “I like this guy, but he has a baby. (He broke up with the baby’s mom.) Should I go out with him if he asks me?” Answer Guy – “that one great guy all the girls go to for love advice” – responds, “Breaking up is one thing, but breaking up with your baby’s mama is a whole other ball game ... Getting into a relationship with the father of a newborn is a serious commitment.”

The majority of male “characters” in Seventeen were little more than cardboard cutouts: the level of characterization was incredibly low, even in committed relationship settings. This study looked specifically at whether males were characterized as extroverted or introverted, athletic, artsy or tech savvy, attractive or unattractive, smart or non-intellectual, and whether these were positive or negative traits. This follows previous research about the characterization of males (Garner, et al,
1998). The outcome was unexpected: 50 percent of males in primary relationships had none of these characteristics.

The mean number of characteristics of each male in the study was 1.02. Celebrities had the highest number of characteristics at 2.8, and family members had an average of two characteristics per male, although relationship type and number of characteristics were not significantly correlated ($n(126) = 9.580, p < 0.143$). There were also no significant correlations between the number of characteristics and the gender of the speaker or the vocabulary used to refer to the male ($n(124) = 3.391, p < 0.269$). “Extroverted” was the most popular characteristic and was applied toward 38 percent of the males. Along with the lack of characterization, there was an even greater lack of information about which character traits were desirable or undesirable, which prevented even nominal statistical analysis.

In a similar vein, this study found that 47 percent of references to the primary male in an entry simply label him in generic terms like “guy” and “boyfriend.” However, 33 percent of articles address males by name, and 20 percent use other vocabulary such as crush, creep, hottie, etc. Vocabulary was a particular point of interest in this study, and each reference to a male in the coded entries was written down on the coding sheet for comparison with other variables.

Peer-age speakers used the word “guy” more frequently than other speakers ($r(73) = -0.311, p < 0.007$). They also used the word “boyfriend” more often ($r(30) = -0.361, p < 0.050$). Interestingly, males with a higher number of characteristics were less likely to be referred to as “guy” ($r(73) = -0.291, p < 0.013$).

One example that girls have to look at for ideal and non-ideal traits is the “Sweet/Slimy” format, reader-submitted stories that feature models of good and bad male behavior. In February
2002, the “Sweet” story reads like this. “harry & sally”: I’d been going out with this guy for nine months when he dumped me out of the blue. I was so upset, all I could do was mope around. My best friend, Bryan, felt really bad and wanted to do something to cheer me up, so he went to the video store and rented every romantic comedy he could find. We sat around all night watching movies and pigging out. Needless to say, I got over the other jerk—and Bryan and I are now happily together.”

To their credit, the authors of “the verdict,” who provide short comments on the stories, aren’t particularly impressed. But this story is still featured as “Sweet.”

Despite the abundance of generic referents and lack of characterization, in 52 percent of entries there was evidence of male authority (such as girls looking to males for approval or social status). Seven percent of entries recognize parental authority, 9 percent describe both male and female holding authority, 15 percent assume female authority, and 18 percent do not seem to recognize any authority.

Discussion

The widespread lack of characterization of males was surprising: they are set up as authority figures who are necessary for social success, but are not discussed with any kind of detail. Titles like “Get kissed by midnight” and “Are you a cool girlfriend?” emphasize male-dependent roles for Seventeen’s readers.

In an article from November 2003 titled, “My Two Boyfriends,” the 17-year-old author describes her experience dating two guys: Royce and Matt. Royce is five years older than she is and behaves inconsiderately. Matt is presumably the same age as the author and sweet. That’s all
we know about them. The author is quite attached, though, and frets about breaking it off with Royce even though she realizes that Matt treats her much better. “I guess in a way I was scared that if Matt broke up with me, I would be alone, and I couldn’t take that.” In the end, Royce cheats on her and she gladly breaks off their relationship, dedicating herself to Matt. “I let go of that old, comfortable feeling and finally got what I always wanted.”

In this sample of relationship-oriented articles, girls are repeatedly given examples and social guidelines of girls taking a back seat to male initiative. One possible reason for the pervasiveness of male authority in these articles is that girls make mistakes — guys rarely do. In this study, 14 percent of entries were embarrassing true stories submitted by female readers. Not a single one was written by a male. Girl readers have plenty of opportunities to hear about the uncertain process of growing up female, but there are few examples of male fallibility. Guys don’t run into windows, say the wrong thing, mess up their clothes on a date, or think a girl is flirting with him when she’s not. A qualitative research study by Garner, et al, found that in the media, girls are “becoming,” but guys “are.” Their findings may be supported by this study.

The following is an example of a “traumarama” entry: a short reader submission describing an embarrassing event. It is a good example of the kind of logic and lack of characterization that peer-age female authors apply to males in Seventeen.

Traffic signal: “The other night when I was driving home from work, there was a really hot guy in the car in front of me. While I was stopped at the red light, he turned around and started pointing at me and waving. After a few seconds, I waved back and acted all flirty with him. At the next light, he did the same exact thing, so, naturally, I thought he really liked me. Finally, at the next light, I had the chance to pull up next to him. His window was
down, so I said in a cute voice, 'Hey, what's up?' He looked at me kind of funny and said, 'Your headlights are off!' I felt like a total loser.'

The only thing that we know about this guy — or that she knew, for that matter — is that he was “really hot.” All it took was a wave, maybe two, and our girl thought, naturally, that he “really liked” her. With such a rapid buildup, it isn’t much of a surprise that the letdown was equally swift. With his four words, our girl’s self esteem plummeted until she felt “like a total loser.” This roller coaster of emotion is instigated at a wave and terminated with a reality check, both coming from the male. The author of this “traumarama” only responds to his initiative. This lack of characterization and obsession with male attention is typical in many of the entries that were coded and is inherent in some of the article constructions, such as the “Answer Guy” column mentioned in the Results section.

So what rhetorical visions are girls presented with in Seventeen?

1. Girls have boyfriends, or at least a specific object of attention.

The significant relationship between female speakers and established relationships is easy to see: three quarters of the entries that were coded were about specific partners, and more than three quarters of the entries were written by females. This high concentration of female authors talking about specific relationships sends girl readers the assumption that most girls have someone specific to talk about. Readers looking for clues on how to fit into the rhetorical vision found in Seventeen could easily come to believe that it is normal, even necessary, to have a specific object of affection.

2. What a guy is like isn’t as important as the fact that he is male.

Peer-age authors (which were primarily female) used the word “guy” in their entries more frequently than other speakers at a highly significant level ($r(73) = -0.311, p < 0.007$). While this
might be because adult authors have different words they use to refer to males, another highly significant finding causes concern. Males with a higher number of mentioned characteristics were far less likely to be referred to as “guy” \( r(73) = -0.291, p < 0.013 \). In other words, the “guys” that peer-age authors are so concerned with are likely to be one-dimensional. The only characteristic that is guaranteed to be mentioned is gender.

**Limitations and Future Research**

There was a distinct presence of male authority in the sample, but unfortunately the nominal nature of the data collected in this study limited the number of statistical tests that can be used. There were very few articles written by males, and those that were present were difficult to work with in the context of this study because the male authors didn’t refer to other males in their text. The results of this study may have been enriched if a wider selection of topics had been allowed in the sample.

There is plenty of opportunity for future research in this area. Most importantly, interval and ratio level data needs to be collected so that more statistical tests can be utilized. Also, it would be interesting to compare the level of female characterization with male characterization: maybe the lack of characterization is a common problem, not specific to males. Another option would be to purposely study the male-authored texts in teen magazines: if male authors do not talk about each other, what do they talk about? Since this study focused on relational topics, an opportunity for future research could be to study how males are mentioned outside a relational context, and whether they are represented differently in other arenas. Given the frightening lack of characterization of males in teenage girls’ magazines, it might be a good idea to compare male
characterization with female characterization – perhaps the lack of description is a problem for both genders.

Also, the focus of this study was solely on the written text. There was no analysis of how the magazine’s audience reacted to what they were reading.
References


Appendix

10-11-07 Coding: Teen Magazines
Date: __________ Coder: __________ 
Magazine: 17 Entry # __ of ____ 
Article # ____________ 

Type of Article: 
____ Advice 
____ Embarrassing 
____ Fantasy/Fiction 
____ Peer-Written 
____ Quiz 

Speaker: 
____ Famous Person M/F 
____ Peer M/F 
____ Expert M/F 
____ Advice Columnist M/F 

Age of male __ younger __ same age __ older 

Age of female __

Primary relationship between male and female speaker (specify vocabulary used)
____ Family 
____ Dad/step dad 
____ Other family 

____ Peer 
____ Peer/unromantic 
____ Crush 
____ Boyfriend 
____ Ex-boyfriend 
____ Benefriend 

____ Authority 
____ Teacher 
____ Other authority 
____ Celebrity 

____ Other 

Intensity of primary relationship: 
Not at all 1 2 3 Very intense 

Qualities and positive/negative view of male: 
____ No primary relationship 
____ Quiet/introverted 1 2 3 4 
____ Unattractive 1 2 3 4 
____ Non-intellectual 1 2 3 4 
____ Athletic 
____ Tech. savvy 
____ Artistic 
____ None of the above 

Roles: 
Authority: M F B N/A Other ____________ 

Sex Instigator: M F B N/A 

Eye Candy: M F B N/A
Appendix 2

Relationship Types:

![Graph showing relationship types]

Article Types:

![Graph showing article types]
Southern Scholars Honors Program  
Senior Project Proposal Information Sheet

Name: Katherine Brown  
Date: 2-2-07

Major: Print Journalism

A significant scholarly project, involving research, writing, or special performance, appropriate to the major in question, is ordinarily completed the senior year. The project is expected to be of sufficiently high quality to warrant a grade of "A" and to justify public presentation.

Under the guidance of a faculty advisor, the Senior Project should be an original work, should use primary sources when applicable, should have a table of contents and works cited page, should give convincing evidence to support a strong thesis, and should use the methods and writing style appropriate to the discipline.

The completed project, to be turned in in duplicate, must be approved by the Honors Committee in consultation with the student's supervising professor four weeks prior to the last day of class for the semester the project is turned in. Please include the advisor's name on the title page. The 2-3 hours of credit for this project is usually done as directed study or in a research class.

NOTE: Senior Project Proposal Due Date: The senior project proposal is due in the Honors Program Director’s office two weeks after the beginning of the semester the project will be completed. The proposal should be a detailed description of the Honors Project’s purpose and proposed methodology.

Keeping in mind the above senior project description, please describe in as much detail as you can the project you will undertake. Attach a separate sheet of paper.

Signature of faculty advisor: [Signature]

Expected date of completion: March 29, 2007

NOTE: An advisor’s final project approval does not guarantee that the Honors Faculty Committee will automatically approve the project. The Honors Faculty Committee has the final vote.

Approval to be signed by faculty advisor when the project is completed:

This project has been completed as planned (date): March 29, 2007 + revisions by April 2008

This is an "A" project

This project is worth 2-3 hours of credit

Advisor’s Final Signature: [Signature]  
Date: 4-24-08

Chair, Honors Committee: [Signature]  
Date Approved: 1 May 08

Dear Advisor,

(1) Please write your final evaluation on the project on the reverse side of this page. 
Comment on the characteristics that make this "A" quality work.

(2) Please include a paragraph explaining your specific academic credentials for advising this Senior Project.
Katherine Brownlow’s paper “Representation of the enemy: Male types in Seventeen” represents a concerted effort to become familiar with and cognizant of the literature in the area and to use this literature to frame a new focus of study. Katherine has done a fine job of understanding and citing the literature; she writes succinctly, but has read enough to make this a good summary of the body of work relevant to her topic.

Katherine developed her own coding sheet and coding manual, revising each several times as she learned more from her study of other research. She coded her articles, found a colleague and trained him to code, and derived intercoder reliability. She entered her data in SPSS and performed most of the statistics without outside help. When she was uncertain as to how to read some statistics, she looked for assistance. In short, this is her work, and she has learned a great deal in the process. I would award her paper an “A” based on the quality of thinking and the independence and quality of work that she exhibits.

Katherine has continued to work on this project in 2008. She has reformulated some of her ideas, created charts to better explain her data, and is undertaking a major coding project to be able to match her data with those of others in a larger teen magazine project. Her research will become part of an article on this topic.

My Ph.D. is in Communication Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. I have continued working on research since my grad student days. The original sample of articles from which Katherine drew her own sample are part of a larger project examining teen magazines and what they communicate to teenaged girls. The preliminary results from that study were presented at the Southern States Communication Association convention in Louisville, KY in April 2007. Katherine’s own study was presented this April (2008) at the Southern States Communication Association convention in Savannah, GA.