

2005

A Content Analysis of Seventeen Magazine and the Messages its Articles and Advertisements are Sending to Teenage Girls

Cheryl Fuller

Follow this and additional works at: https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/senior_research



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fuller, Cheryl, "A Content Analysis of Seventeen Magazine and the Messages its Articles and Advertisements are Sending to Teenage Girls" (2005). *Senior Research Projects*. 37.

https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/senior_research/37

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Southern Scholars at KnowledgeExchange@Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Research Projects by an authorized administrator of KnowledgeExchange@Southern. For more information, please contact jspears@southern.edu.

**A Content Analysis of *Seventeen* Magazine and the
Messages its Articles and Advertisements are Sending to Teenage Girls**

by Cheryl Fuller

Southern Scholars Senior Project

Southern Adventist University

8 April 2005

Abstract

Seventeen magazine has been one of the top-selling teen fashion magazines since its debut in 1944. Girls pour through its colorful pages, looking for advice about clothing, makeup, boys, and anything else they may want to know. They may be getting this advice, but what other messages is *Seventeen* sending its young readers?

Many parents worry about these messages, sometimes expressing their complaints about the way *Seventeen* discusses sex and appearance. Researchers have studied some of the messages and have both positive and negative things to say about the magazine and the messages it is sending its readers.

This research was done in the form of a content analysis. The message themes in thirteen magazines, all since January 2004, were categorized using grounded theory, and then totaled to see which themes dominated. The findings show, not surprisingly, that physical appearance was the most common theme discussed by the magazine. Real life issues, including politics and world affairs, were the next most common themes.

Themes were also divided into the following categories: positive, negative, and neutral. Positive themes were found most often throughout the thirteen magazines, in over half of the articles. Negative themes were substantial, however, constituting more than 20% of the magazine's messages.

Seventeen is a fashion magazine, and therefore it encourages girls to make themselves as beautiful as possible to attract the guys. However, it also briefly covers other issues including politics, faith, and budgets. Overall, research shows that the magazine sends a lot of mixed messages to teenage girls.

A Content Analysis of *Seventeen* Magazine and the Messages its
Articles and Advertisements are Sending to Teenage Girls

Teenage girls are bombarded daily with messages from the media, their peers, and their parents. Teen magazines are one of these media that especially appeal to girls. Because girls are so drawn to these magazines, it is important to discover what messages the magazines are sending and how accurately teenage girls are receiving these messages.

The titles and colors lure girls to open the covers while they wait in the checkout line. The bright covers offer advice about everything from getting rid of pimples to getting a date; quizzes that will tell what kind of kisser a girl is; stories about beautiful celebrities; and much more. What girl can resist such an appeal? Not many, according to a 1999 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation which showed that 15- to 18-year-olds spend an average of 13 minutes a day reading magazines (Tweens, teens, and magazines, 2004). When a girl flips through the pages, taking the quizzes, catching the latest celebrity gossip, and checking out the newest makeup colors, she is receiving both obvious and latent messages. The magazine began rather innocently, but today's *Seventeen* is not considered so innocent by many. Some topics of concern include the incessant focus on personal appearance, the way it discusses dating and sex, the different gender and cultural messages that it sends, and the new role religion plays in the magazine.

History of Seventeen

Seventeen, the most popular teenage girls' magazine (Tweens, teens, and magazines, 2004), was first published in 1944, a time of postwar prosperity. It began with a focus on innocent love, holding up ideals of marriage and femininity that are old-

fashioned in today's world. Specifically, *Seventeen* sent the message that “marriage is inevitable for every normal female, and for those who want to bring about the inevitable more quickly, to catch a man you must be less competent than he, passive, and virtuous” (Teen magazines, 2002). These ideas were widely accepted, and *Seventeen* was well received. It was not until 1988 that the teen magazine trend turned to the more modern message of sex to sell to teens.

Focus on Personal Appearance

An indirect part of the focus on sex is the importance placed on girls' appearance. “The magazine is filled with ways to make yourself over. [It] gives you makeup tips, nail tips, and fashion tips” (Lovely, 2003). This trend in magazines fits with that of American society in general. According to one source, one in every 11 advertisements of any kind has a *direct* message about beauty (Lovely 2003). In 1997, an analysis of *Seventeen's* articles showed that themes relating to appearance, clothing, and fashion were the most prevalent along with dating (Twins, teens, and magazines, 2004). The idea seems to be that if a girl can look good, she can get the guy of her dreams.

Magazines paint a picture of a girls who “look good.”

When a teenage girl flips through the pages of *Seventeen* magazine and sees the image of a starved, beaten, gaunt model, she's going to think that's what “pretty” girls look like. If she's a bit overweight or doesn't have a clear complexion, a little voice in the back of her mind will tell her she's not good enough. And before you know it, add another statistic to all the other girls who died from anorexia, suffered from depression or an inferiority complex, or committed suicide because of

their desire to be “perfect,” an image created by the media. (Teens vs. the media, 2000)

Models are skinny, have flawless skin, and wear just the right clothes, makeup, and hairstyles. The thin models make girls feel like they have to strive to be just as skinny. The beautiful skin on the faces in the magazine can make a girl feel very self-conscious if she has even the tiniest blemish. The clothes and makeup help the magazine and its sponsors more than anyone else. Most of the pictures are advertisements, even if they are part of an article, because the clothes on the model are labeled on the side somewhere, so that the reader can find out where to buy the same thing. The majority of paid-for advertisements also use an appeal to beauty to sell their products (New studies, 1997).

The weight of models is one of the most discussed topics of appearance because teenage girls will try almost anything to be thin. “Most of the estimated 7 million women and girls in the United States who have eating disorders developed them in their teens, according to the the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders” (Lee, 2002). According to one set of statistics, the average American woman wears a size 10 or larger, and the average model weighs 23% less than this (Lovely, 2003). Rose M. Kundanis, author of “Children, Teens, Families and Mass Media: The Millennial Generation,” says magazines “seem to have the strongest relationship to eating disorders” (Gibbons, 2003). Teen magazines reported that 35% of American girls between 6 and 12 years of age have been on at least one diet, and around 60% of normal-weight girls consider themselves overweight (Gibbons, 2003).

On the other side, some say that the photos of super-thin models are by no means the most damaging part of teen magazines. Girls generally recognize fashion and beauty

ads as fantasy (Currie, 2003). This may be somewhat true, but even if a girl realizes that the pictures are airbrushed, she is still continually pelted with these images, and they do impact girls' ideas of beauty. Also, even Currie agrees that girls who already have a poor self-image are more vulnerable to teen magazines (2003).

Some magazines have become more responsible, fighting the idea that skinnier is better. Many of them are showing pictures of average girls and telling teenagers how to dress for their body-type, whatever it may be. One magazine in particular has taken a turn-around. Christina Kelly, the editor of *YM*, is committed to promoting a healthy body image. She announced her decision to ban dieting stories and to feature larger-size models in February 2002 (Lee, 2002). Readers have responded positively to this approach. However, it has not spread to *Seventeen*, the most popular teen magazine.

Boys, Dating, and Sex

One of the most prevalent themes in *Seventeen* is dating. This is very appealing for girls who, in their teens, are starting to notice guys more than ever. The preteen and teenage years are the time when most people begin to date, or at least become interested in dating. When a magazine cover offers a girl advice about or from guys, how can she resist the possibility of learning that elusive secret that will make her crush like her? Part of the problem with this is the influence this advice (which is not always positive) can have on a girl, and part is the amount of time spent on the topic of boys, which could make a girl feel like she has to have a boyfriend to be important. Magazines “tell girls to make their boyfriends, and dating, the center of their universes. Girls are supposedly more worthwhile and complete with a boyfriend on their arms. They are also expected to constantly be thinking about the opposite sex” (Spataro, 2003).

Girls take the advice of the small number of boys who are featured in magazines as truth. Research has found that girls use magazines to form their concepts of femininity, and they rely heavily on articles that feature boys' opinions about "how to gain male approval and act in relationships with males" (Twins, teens, and magazines, 2004). Magazines offer numerous tips on how to ask a boy out and keep him interested. These articles and advice columns put words into a girl's mouth, making her appear witty. So often, girls sacrifice their own personalities to catch a boy who may last a month or two, if she is lucky (Spataro, 2003). Teen periodicals emphasize finding and keeping guys, but avoid related issues like sexual harassment, eating disorders, self-esteem, and sexual pressures. "These magazines encourage girls to conform to mythical standards instead of being themselves" (Scanlon, 1997).

"Magazines are missing the chance to help girls develop a healthy attitude toward sex" (Gibbons, 2003). Magazines send girls the message that they are to be simultaneously irresistible and virginal. They provide tips for looking hot and sneaking kisses with their boyfriends by the locker, and intersperse these with warnings to keep sexual matters from getting out of hand. Magazines have more space devoted to non-health sex issues than ever before, but the space for sexual health-focused content has increased only slightly (Gibbons, 2003). They do have a few stories that discourage girls from having sex. Girls who sleep with their best friend's boyfriend or sleep with two men every day are criticized for their behavior, and the consequences of these stories are unpleasant for the individuals. The moral seems to be that "thoughtless sex messes you and your relationships up" (Margesson, 2005).

This growth in sex-related content is related to the changes in society. Younger and younger children are learning more and more about sex. One teen magazine editor is eager to respond to this change. She wants her magazine to tell girls “everything we finally learned at 25 that we wished we'd known when we were fifteen” (Currie, 2003). It is true that girls today have to make decisions about sex and other things at a younger age than in the past, but most parents would agree that they do not want their children getting advice for these decisions from a fashion magazine. Even teens who have had sex tend to wish they had waited until they were older. A survey of a thousand girls between ages 13 and 21 showed that “an overwhelming 81% of the girls who had already had sex wished they'd waited” (Hymowitz, 1996). The media's method of handling sex is a large part of the reason girls did not say “no” in the first place. Many teenage girls are hesitant, but they have trouble justifying their reluctance. They no longer have the full weight of adult society behind their “no” because the media sends ambiguous messages (Hymowitz, 1996).

Gender Messages

When magazines send the message that girls should be more concerned with romance and appearances than with work or school, they send the message that intelligence and a good career are unimportant goals for girls to strive toward (New studies, 1997). Since *Seventeen* was first published in 1944, women have gained a lot of ground. Yet, the primary focus of the magazine is still about being fashionable and appealing to boys (Secor, 2003). The majority of articles that are related to school give advice on what to wear to school, how to look good all day in classes, or how to accessorize a uniform. They do not encourage girls to learn as much as they can so they

can have a successful career. School has its benefits, especially if a girl can sit next to the guy she likes in class, but for the most part it is merely a requirement that keeps girls from having as much fun as they otherwise could (Holm, 1994). "With rare exceptions, women who've distinguished themselves outside of the entertainment field are not presented as women to emulate (or look like) with anywhere near the frequency of actors and singers" (Gibbons, 2003). *Seventeen* magazine presents few occupational possibilities for girls other than the entertainment industry. "Entertainment careers are a viable and prestigious option, men are the norm as workers, men hold the power, and fashion modeling is the pinnacle of 'women's work'" (Massoni, 2004).

The media has a strong influence on girls, because few of them have developed media literacy, and because so many of the messages sent about their role are repeated often in most media outlets. This influence can be such a negative force for a girl because it is during adolescence that girls will determine their goals and priorities for the future. Research shows that media favored by teenage girls often send them messages of limited priorities and potential. They stress the importance of a career much more for men than for women. This is done by the portrayal of men most often in the context of careers and women in the context of relationships. Magazines reinforce this message by focusing much more on dating than on school and careers (Children and the media, 2000). It is only recently that the media has begun to come away from presenting men as bigger, stronger, and better at everything, especially in some television shows and movies (Teens vs. the media, 2000).

Magazines do have some positive messages for girls about their role in society. They often portray women as intelligent problem-solvers. Teenage magazines as well, are

the only form of media that show a substantial amount more women than men (New studies, 1997). Atoosa Rubenstein, the editor of *Seventeen*, spoke to promote a positive image of women in the media. She especially was against the tabloid-press treatment of women. She has changed little about the way her magazine portrays women, though (Torpey-Kemph, 2004).

Multiculturalism in Teen Magazines

Seventeen does not present a representative image of the cultures of American girls. Teen readers have a higher percentage chance of seeing a culturally diverse face on the cover of a magazine than inside. "A 1997 study of the leading teen magazines found that the vast majority of women and men were white in the article photographs (73% and 80%, respectively) and ads (88% for both genders). But according to a 2002 New York Times survey..., one in four teen magazines featured a minority on the cover" (Tweens, teens, and magazines, 2004). Even when non-white models are pictured in the magazine, they are usually white-looking, with relatively pale skin and Caucasian features (Scanlon, 1997). This leads to an overly white picture of society and does not encourage girls to expand beyond their cultural comfort zone. It also could give white girls a feeling of superiority. Girls of other cultures may experience feelings of inferiority when they see this, but little research has been done about this. A study of African American readers shows that they are not as easily influenced as white girls by the content of the teen magazines and by the ideals of beauty portrayed, but are more likely to stick to their cultural standards (Tweens, teens, and magazines, 2004).

Religion in Seventeen

Youth today are looking for answers to all kinds of questions, and *Seventeen* has responded to this search. Rubenstein added a new section entitled "Faith" to her magazine in August 2004. She started this section to provide a forum on an issue that is important to teenage girls today. No single religion is pushed, and girls have written about everything from Christianity, to atheism, to Muslim beliefs (Zoll, 2004). This page has received mostly positive feedback. "Teenage Research Unlimited found that 58% of teens rank faith as among the most important parts of their life" (*Seventeen's "faith" section*, 2004). The only negative response has come from a few of the more religious readers who have complained about the testimonials from skeptics. Rev. Christopher Robinson of DePaul University criticizes the section because he feels that it makes the readers feel good about asking questions about their faith, "but it makes no demands on them; it does not call them to make a stand" (Zoll, 2004). The section also, while it opens doors for religious expression, "provides no easy way to discern truth from postmodern deception. It will either open young people's eyes to the truth, or lead them further from it" (*Seventeen's "faith" section*, 2004).

Research Questions

Although *Seventeen* is a very popular magazine with teenage girls, research and commentaries are mostly critical of it. It has been studied from many different angles and sends some conflicting messages, but the overall impression of it is as a magazine that sends negative messages to teenage girls. Most content analyses of *Seventeen* are taken from before 2000 (e.g., Children Now, 2000; The Kaiser Family Foundation, 1997; K.

Massoni, 1992). The magazine has probably changed in some way since then. Also, few have studied a full year of issues. This leads to the following research questions:

- *What are the primary themes of the advertisements?*
- *What are the primary themes of the articles?*
- *How does Seventeen divide its articles in the index?*
- *What is the combined content of the articles and advertisements in Seventeen?*
- *Is Seventeen sending an overall positive or negative message?*

Method

A sample of thirteen *Seventeen* magazines was used for the research. These ranged from January 2004 through March 2005, excepting the June and July issues of 2004 which were not available to the researcher at the time of the analysis. The ads and the articles were studied separately, because *Seventeen* produces the articles, but only runs the ads making them less representative of the magazine's editorial vision. These two types of messages can also be combined to create a more complete picture of the messages *Seventeen* is sending its readers.

Procedure

The method of research used was a quantitative content analysis. Categorization of the themes in the advertisements and articles was developed using an inductive method through the grounded theory approach. The ads were categorized by the first impression of their themes. Articles generally required closer inspection to discover their themes. Most issues had the same themes running through them, making this a consistent approach. Every theme appearing within an article or advertisement was accounted for, so

the total number of the themes and the total number of advertisements and articles do not equal.

It is difficult to measure advertising and articles with the same measures, because the articles cover more themes than do the advertisements. Measured advertising themes included physical appearance, hygiene (including deodorant, feminine products, and hair removal), media (including movies and television shows), service (including army and environmental issues), food (including candy, gum, and drinks), and other. Measured article themes were positive physical appearance/fashion (including the idea that every girl is beautiful and tips to enhance her appearance), negative physical appearance/fashion (including the ideal of skinniness and changing how a girl looks to be more attractive), positive ideas about sex (including ideas about waiting and being careful), negative ideas about sex (including discussions about sexual pleasure and encouragement to have sex, but keep it safe), dating (including advice from boys and ways to attract that special boy), relationships (with friends and family), responsibility (including preparing for the future), the world (news, issues, faith, and travel), health, media (including celebrity stories), attitudes, and other.

Some themes from both articles and advertisements were combined to get an overall total. A "health" category comprised food and hygiene (from the advertisements) and health (from the articles). Service (from the advertisements) and responsibility (from the articles) were combined as "service." The positive and negative themes of physical appearance and sex were also combined to give each just one category.

To compare the totals from the analysis with those in the magazine index, some themes were combined. Physical appearance (from the analysis) was categorized as

“beauty” to be compared with fashion and beauty (from the index). Attitudes (from the analysis) and faith (from the index) were both labeled “faith.” Sex, dating, and relationships (from the analysis) were labeled “lifestyles” (to be compared with the same section from the index). World and responsibility (from the analysis) were combined with real life (from the index) and all were put under the category “real life.” The amounts are not comparable because some articles had more than one theme in the analysis. However, the percentages may be compared.

To discover whether the magazine is sending an overall positive or negative message, all categories were coded into the categories of positive, negative, or neutral based on how likely they are to affect the teenage reader's self-esteem or behavior. This was only done for the articles, because it is difficult to categorize advertisements as anything other than neutral. They are put into the magazine with the intent to sell a product; the message is latent. For the articles, the following themes were considered positive: positive physical appearance, positive ideas about sex, relationships, responsibility, health, world, and attitudes. Neutral themes included dating, media, and other. Themes considered negative were negative physical appearance and negative ideas about sex. Inaccuracies in this method are mainly due to the fact that the themes that fell into the “other” category may or may not be neutral. Also, some of the ideas within the theme of dating were negative.

The content analysis was done by a single coder, so this study has no inter-coder reliability. However, after every third magazine, the coder rechecked herself with the first magazine coded to keep from experiencing coder drift. Articles were also measured by their categories within the magazine index. These themes were more inclusive than those

used in the analysis, but they provide some value in comparison to the themes found in analysis and can serve as another check on the accuracy of the analysis.

Results

[See Appendix for original document these results were taken from. It includes the total number of themes in articles and advertising in each issue.]

Themes in advertising throughout the magazines can be shown in total number and percentage format. Table 1 shows both of these.

Table 1
Advertisement Themes

Ads	Physical Appearance	Hygiene	Media	Service	Food	Other
Tally	399	99	54	34	27	50
Percent	60.2%	14.9%	8.1%	5.1%	4.1%	7.5%

Table 2 shows the same data for the themes within articles.

Table 2
Article Themes

Articles	Physical Appearance (+)	Physical Appearance (-)	Sex (+)	Sex (-)	Dating	Relationships
Tally	110	129	21	14	58	18
Percent	17.1%	20.0%	3.3%	2.2%	9.0%	2.8%

Articles	Responsibility	World	Health	Media	Attitudes	Other
Tally	50	85	48	44	23	45
Percent	7.8%	13.2%	7.4%	6.8%	3.6%	7.0%

Table 3 combines the data in Tables 1 and 2 to show the themes for both the advertising and the writing in *Seventeen*.

Table 3

Magazine Themes (Article and Ad Themes Combined)

Articles and Ads	Physical Appearance	Sex	Dating	Relationships	Responsibility	World
Tally	638	35	58	18	84	85
Percent	48.8%	2.7%	4.4%	1.4%	6.4%	6.5%

Articles and Ads	Health	Media	Attitudes	Other
Tally	174	98	23	95
Percent	13.3%	7.5%	1.8%	7.3%

Table 4 illustrates the divisions the magazine uses to divide its articles in the index. This does not include the articles that are advertised on the cover, because the magazine does not categorize any of these.

Table 4

Article Themes from the *Seventeen* Perspective

Articles	Fashion	Media/Stars	Beauty	Lifestyles	Health	Real Life	Faith
Tally	91	64	68	23	35	90	23
Percent	23.1%	16.2%	17.3%	5.8%	8.9%	22.8%	5.8%

Compare the percentages of Table 4 with Table 5, a recategorized version of Table 2, the themes within the articles from the analysis. The total of percentages for the fashion and beauty sections in Table 4 is 40.4%.

Table 5

Article Themes as Analyzed with Comparable Categories

Articles	Fashion	Media/Stars	Beauty	Lifestyles	Health	Real Life	Faith
Tally	239	44	<i>see fashion</i>	111	48	135	23
Percent	39.8%	7.3%	<i>see fashion</i>	18.5%	8.0%	22.5%	3.8%

No matter which way one looks at the content of *Seventeen* magazine, it is easy to see that appearance is by far the most popular theme. This includes both fashion and beauty and positive and negative messages. There is definitely a reason these are called beauty magazines. Beauty is also a latent message in the majority of articles and advertisements that do not use or discuss it explicitly.

The positive and negative comparisons of the articles in *Seventeen* magazine are represented in Table 6.

Table 6

Overall Positive and Negative Article Totals

Articles	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Talley	355	177	143
Percent	52.6%	26.2%	21.2%

These results show that *Seventeen* is a beauty magazine with mostly positive themes.

Discussion

After learning the results of the content analysis, it is useful to compare these, along with any experience gleaned from the research, with earlier information. Topics still include the incessant focus on personal appearance, the way *Seventeen* discusses dating and sex, the different gender and cultural messages that it sends, and the new role

religion plays in the magazine. Other important topics that arose during the analysis of the magazine are politics, budget, and horoscopes.

Focus on Personal Appearance

The goal of *Seventeen* is, first and foremost, to make money. This means that it prints what the market wants. *Seventeen* tries to focus on issues that are important to teenage girls (*Seventeen's* "faith" section, 2004). This is why it spends so much time on beauty and guys. Girls naturally want to be beautiful, and they are naturally attracted to guys. What parents want to know is, when their daughter is reading about beauty and boys in her *Seventeen*, is she learning things they want her to learn, or is it negatively affecting her outlook and behaviors?

As most parents suspect, *Seventeen* sends a lot of negative messages. In the ads, the models are thin and flawless. This tells a girl, without saying it in words, that if she does not look like these girls, she is inferior to them. She is not as beautiful, and the guys that so often accompany the girls in the advertisements would never be attracted to her. Some of the articles tell a similar story, giving tips on how to lose weight, how to make her skin *look* flawless even if it is not, and what color and style her hair should be this season.

Other articles are not so vehement that a girl needs to change herself to be beautiful. Almost every issue includes an article about finding the right style of a particular garment to flatter her figure the most, whatever her figure may be. Many also include tips for ways to wear your hair, including all different types of hair. Articles like this show girls that it is all right to be themselves, and they can make the most of who they are so that they can be beautiful and feel good about themselves without having to

change. Another positive thing that the fashion section does in every issue is to include a section on finding bargains. This lets readers know that spending lots of money is not required to look good. Many beauty articles are relatively neutral: how to apply blush that will last all day, shampooing and conditioning properly, what to wear with a blue jean skirt to be stylish for almost any activity. These neutral themes were divided these equally between the positive and negative personal appearance themes in the quantitative content analysis.

Boys, Dating, and Sex

What teenage girls' magazine could ignore boys? *Seventeen* has a page in every magazine that offers guys' opinions on the topic of the month. Guys tell about what they like girls to wear, how they like to talk to them, and any other topic *Seventeen* can think of to ask them about. These can be encouraging or discouraging to a girl, depending on what the guys say. Most of the time, they have a broad range of opinions, so this is a relatively neutral section. Girls may take some of the advice too seriously, however, and this could hurt their relationships.

When it comes to premarital sex, *Seventeen* sends a lot of mixed messages. In most cases, the magazine discourages this behavior. For example, one article talks about "hookups" (defining these as all the things people do when they want to have sex, but do not go all the way) and all the STDs that girls and guys can get from oral sex, anal sex, and a couple of other things. Another story did not deal with sex directly, but it talked about a girl who "hooked-up" a few times with her best guy friend. She learned that friends "with benefits" is not a good idea, because it may be fun for a little while, but it messes up the friendship and ends up hurting a lot.

Seventeen had a series through the first three months of 2004 called "Your Sex Dilemmas Resolved." This provided a page where girls could ask absolutely anything they wanted and get answers. This section in the January issue was overall positive. Three questions were asked, and one was not specifically about sex. Of the other two, one response to a question said "the only truly safe sex is no sex," and the other encouraged girls to tell their partner to stop or slow down and mentioned the problems with drugs and alcohol. The next two issues are not as positive. One response to a question in the March issue does advise girls to set their limits. The other two answers in March merely offer suggestions with how to deal with the problems. In the February issue, however, every single answer encourages sex. One encourages protection, one tells the girl to be sure to choose the right birth control, and the last one tells the girl she has to be relaxed to enjoy sex.

In their August 2004 issue, *Seventeen* printed a sex survey, which said that 68% of the girls surveyed had never had sex. That is an encouraging number, and when girls read it, they may feel less pressure to have sex, because not everybody is doing it like the media generally imply. One girl was quoted promoting abstinence as surefire insurance against STDs and pregnancy. The magazine also listed the commonly used methods of contraception and what risks each of them involved.

As a whole, the magazine seems to be against premarital sex (or at least against sex at an early age). The editor, Atoosa Rubenstein, actually wrote about her stance on sex in the August issue. Her mother had not allowed her to shave her legs until after she graduated from high school. She hated this at the time, of course, but has never regretted it because it kept her from having sex when she was a teenager. She represents having sex

as falling off the path of success, and she encourages girls to stay on the path at least through high school.

Gender Messages

Some of the articles found during research for the literature review criticize *Seventeen* for not talking about responsibility or preparing young girls for the future. Many argue that this sends the message that girls do not need to be as responsible for their future, a negative gender message. This is partially true. *Seventeen* is a fashion magazine, and responsibility and future planning are not primary focuses of any fashion magazine. *Seventeen* does have a few tips for planning, though. In the “Real Life” section of the May 2004 issue, *Seventeen* gives advice for a job interview. It fills a full page with tips to help a girl with writing her cover letter and resume, asking the right questions and dressing right for the interview, and following up properly after the interview. The April 2004 issue offers a list of 10 summer programs that will look great on a resume or college application, provide good experience, and help girls learn something new. The magazine gives information for girls who want to apply for these summer programs, which cover a wide range of topics: anything from marine biology or finance to filmmaking or Spanish. In the March 2005 issue, the magazine tells girls “everything” they will need to know when they are buying their first car. It had a quiz to find out what “car type” a girl is. Then, it gave some good advice for things to watch for and a few tips for getting a better deal. The magazine also gave some suggestions for what to do in case of any car trouble. This is all part of being responsible, because the magazine encourages girls to do their research, which is something they will need to learn to do for every significant purchase.

Multiculturalism in Seventeen

The cultures within *Seventeen* were not measured, but to the observer it is easy to see that the majority of the girls in the magazine are Caucasian. However, it is easy to see that the editors have made an effort to cross cultural barriers. In articles that suggest hairstyles for various hair types and clothing styles for various body types, the magazine always has at least one African-American girl, generally more. They also give tips for putting makeup on darker skin. Other cultures are also included in various other places throughout the magazine. They are technically multicultural, but they obviously favor the white American.

Religion in Seventeen

“Faith” is the title of the newest section in *Seventeen*. This section has a page that works as a forum for girls to write whatever they wish to in relation to their religious experience. This is an entirely open-minded section, giving no single religion preference over another. For example, in the February 2005 issue, the big question is “does your faith affect your love life?” Nine girls have their response printed. Their religions are Jewish, Muslim, unidentified, Seventh-day Adventist, atheist, polytheist, Wiccan, Catholic, and unidentified Christian. This represents almost everyone who might read this magazine.

The faith section also offers inspirational quotes, and, often, a story written by a girl about her personal religious experience. The editor started this section as a response to the market. Faith is an important issue girls are dealing with, so the magazine is wise to cover it. It could provide some ambiguity for some girls who are unsure of their faith when they read the section and even confuse them further in their search for faith. It could

also, by bringing the topic of faith to the front of their minds, lead them to consider their beliefs and make a choice.

Politics and World Issues

Seventeen is a fashion magazine, and so its readers might be surprised to come across some discussion of politics and world issues. This was something the researcher had found little information about through other research, and therefore had not expected in the content analysis. From February to October 2004, each issue had one page dedicated to the presidential election. A lot of them focus on the importance of voting in general. The August issue actually listed each president's platform on the top issues. In September, Bush's daughters and Kerry's daughter each got a page to write about why girls should vote for their fathers. This is good because the average *Seventeen* reader probably knows very little about anything political. It is important to learn about the nation's leaders, however, and it is good that *Seventeen* discusses this topic because it is a venue that girls are more likely to read. They might never learn about it during their teenage years if politics was only discussed on the news. That seems uninteresting to many teenage girls.

Seventeen actually covers a variety of nonpolitical issues. The January 2004 issue had an article on Private Jessica Lynch, and various others have talked about different world issues. The magazine also deals with some issues that are important for some girls to know about. One girl told her story about being stalked over the Internet. This is something that girls really need to be aware of and careful to avoid. However, the story was handled poorly. The girl told about her experiences, how she showed somewhat revealing pictures of herself on her blog, and people sent gifts to a special address she

created to be safe. A man stalked her, and once she got rid of him, she said she is still doing all the same things she had done before. So, this is not really teaching girls to avoid the things she did. It is telling them that it is fun and worth doing as long as they can get rid of anyone who stalks them. This was a rare case, however, and it seemed that most of this type of story was dealt with positively, so that girls could learn from the mistakes of others.

Budget

Another unexpected positive in *Seventeen* is the fact that it does consider a girl's budget. Almost every issue has a section with popular clothing and accessories that lists the price and a place to buy each item. These are all relatively inexpensive, helping girls know that they do not have to spend a fortune on clothes to be stylish. In a couple of issues, they took an article of clothing and showed a few different styles of it with an expensive and a cheaper version in each style. This gives people who do want to spend a lot of money on clothes a choice, and gives more responsible people a very similar option at about an eighth of the price.

Celebrities

It is not discussed by many other sources the researcher found, but in every issue there is a full story about a celebrity. *Seventeen* always has a famous girl (or sometimes two) on the cover, and she gets a four-page article inside the magazine. These celebrity stories are a relatively neutral theme. Girls want to hear about girls who are famous. That is how it works. It really depends on the celebrity whether or not her story will be a positive or negative to the girls. For example, Natalie Portman, in the September 2004 issue, talked about the importance of voting. In her spare time, she is a social activist.

This is a more positive celebrity role-model. Mischa Barton had a relatively neutral interview in the May 2004 issue. She talked about what she did and how she became an actress. She works hard, and that is positive, but the interview will probably not encourage girls to do anything differently. The most recent issue of those analyzed, March 2005, has a story about the Hilton sisters. Nicky's story is relatively neutral, but Paris is a negative role-model. For example, she made a video of herself and her boyfriend having sex. She is angry that he posted it to the web after their breakup, but states that she did nothing wrong. This is a negative message for her to be sending to any girls who may want to emulate her because she is a star.

Horoscopes

Every *Seventeen* magazine has the horoscope for the month. Some may not appreciate them, but it is true that they are fun for girls to read. Although, these magazines come out only once a month and have relatively short horoscopes, the worry is that there are girls who do believe in them, and run their lives by what they say. Perhaps the horoscopes should be treated more like the faith section. If the magazine has horoscopes for those who put their faith in the stars, it is only fair that it have a Bible verse or a short devotional for those who put their faith in God, and the equivalent for other religions.

Conclusion

Girls receive many different messages from *Seventeen* magazine. Over half of these messages are positive, which is a surprising result. With some thought, however, it is easy to understand these results. People believe the magazine is sending negative messages. This is true. They may comprise only 21% of the magazine, but this is still a

substantial part. People who look at the magazine with a critical eye will see mostly negative messages. These are the ones that offend, and thus will be the ones most remembered. It is important, too, to realize that even 21% of negative messages is too great a number for teenage girls who are highly susceptible to developing low self-esteem and looking for love and security in the wrong places.

Media literacy training is probably the only thing that society can do to ensure that teenagers, and everyone else, for that matter, are getting the information that they should from the media and know what to ignore and how to really understand things. Parents, too, are an important factor. They need to instill values into their children, because girls who are looking for different things (whether or not they realize it), will find what they are looking for.

As for effects on the reader, the average girl will probably wish she were more skinny and beautiful when she looks through *Seventeen*. She will also probably want to experiment with some of the makeup and buy at least a couple items of clothing that are similar. The advice that guys give may influence some of her actions. Beyond that, the average girl will read the embarrassing moments and laugh, check out the horoscopes just for fun, critique all the fashion, be intrigued or bored by the real life stories and issues presented, take all the quizzes, chat with her friends about everything, and then move on. The magazine sends contradictory messages, some positive and some negative. Each message will stay somewhere in the girl's brain forever, but it will not surface unless she comes across it again in some way.

Limitations

The research method of content analysis was subjective in this study. The researcher tried to be objective, but personal values get in the way of this kind of research. In measuring positive and negative values, personal beliefs influenced some of the categorization. The lack of another coder to provide inter-coder reliability was another limitation. This was counteracted as much as possible with self-checking against the first magazine analyzed after every third magazine and by comparison of the analyzed themes with those found in the magazines' indexes. The study did not include two issues from the previous year, so this changed the study slightly from what it would have been were there a full year of magazines to analyze.

The comparisons of the themes in the index and those analyzed (See Tables 4 and 5 in the Results) are relatively close for everything but the lifestyles and media categories. This is a good sign that the coding is relatively accurate. Three categories were added to the lifestyles section of the analysis, so this could be a factor in changing the percentages within this category. Some of these may have been considered media by the magazine, making its media section larger than that of the analysis. It is difficult to judge why these have such different percentages. It is probably either error on the part of the coder or a result of the combining of categories.

Whether the content of the analyzed magazines is overall positive or negative depends on the person who is deciding whether it is positive or negative. This is a subjective and qualitative judgment, and the researcher can only give her perspective as a conservative Seventh-day Adventist Christian who has read a lot of *Seventeen* issues

recently with an analytical eye. Almost anyone could agree, however, that above all else, *Seventeen* magazine is ambivalent.

Future Research

This research leads to a question about the messages girls are receiving from *Seventeen*. It would be interesting to study this because most of the research only focuses on the messages sent. Another topic of interest is how much more likely *Seventeen* readers are to become readers of adult fashion magazines (*Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, etc.) than are teenage girls who do not consistently read *Seventeen* (or any teen fashion magazine). In a broader way, it would be fascinating to study the effects of reading *Seventeen* on life in general, both while girls are teenagers and later in life. *Seventeen* will do everything it can to continue to be a top magazine, so it would also be interesting to replicate this research after some time and see how the magazine has changed and what changes in society initiated these changes. In the meantime, *Seventeen* magazine will continue to tell girls what the editors believe being a teenage girl is all about.

Appendix

Articles

Issue	Physical Appearance (+)	Physical Appearance (-)	Sex (+)	Sex (-)	Dating	Relationships	Responsibility	World	Health	Media	Attitudes	Other
1/04	11111 5	11111111111 11	111 3	1 1	1111 4	11 2	111111 6	111 3	111 3	11111 5	1 1	1111 4
2/04	111111111 8	1111111111 9	11 2	1 1	11 2		11111 5	1111111 7	111 3	1111 4	111 3	11111 5
3/04	111111111 8	1111111111111 12	1 1	1 1	11111 5	1 1	1111 4	111111 6	11 2	1111 4		11111 5
4/04	111111111 8	1111111111 9	1 1		1111 4	11 2	1111 4	111111111 9	1111 4	111 3	111 3	1111 4
5/04	111111111 9	1111111111111 11 14	1 1		11111 5	1 1	11111 5	111111 6	11111 5	1111 4	11111 5	1111 4
8/04	1111111111111 11 14	1111111111111 11 14	111 3	111 3	1111111 7	11 2	111 3	111111 6	1111 4	11 2	11111 5	1111 4
9/04	1111111111 9	1111111111111 11 14	1 1		1111 4	11 2	111 3	1111111111 10	11111 5	111 3	11 2	1111 4
10/04	11111111 7	111111111 8	11 2		1111 4	11 2	11111 5	1111111111 10	11 2	11 2	1 1	11 2
11/04	1111111 6	1111111 6	11 2		111 3	1111 4	111 3	1111 4	11 2	11 2	111 1	11 2
12/04	1111111111 9	1111111111 9	1 1	1 1	111 3	1 1	1111 4	11111111 7	1111 4	111 3	11 2	11 2
1/05	1111111111 9	111111 5	1 1	111 3	1111 4	1 1	111111 5	1111 4	111111 6	1111 4	1 1	11111 5
2/05	111111111 8	11111111 7	11 2	111 3	1111111 11 10		1 1	11111111 8	111 3	1111 4		11 2
3/05	11111111111 10	111111111111 11	1 1	1 1	111 3		11 2	11111 5	11111 5	1111 4		11 2
Totals	110	129	21	14	58	18	50	85	48	44	23	45

Advertisements

Issue	Physical Appearance	Hygiene	Media	Service	Food	Other
1/04	11111111111111111111111111111111 1111111 32	1111111111 10	1111 4	111 3	1 1	1 1
2/04	11111111111111111111111111111111 24	111 3	111 3	11 2	1 1	1 1
3/04	11111111111111111111111111111111 11111111111111111111111111111111 41	1111111 6	1111 4	11 2	11 2	111 3
4/04	11111111111111111111111111111111 11111111111111111111111111111111 42	11111111111111111111111111111111 12	11111 5	111 3	11 2	111111 6
5/04	11111111111111111111111111111111 11111111111111111111111111111111 36	11111111111111111111111111111111 10	1111 4	1111 4	11 2	1111111111 9
8/04	11111111111111111111111111111111 11111111111111111111111111111111 37	11111111111111111111111111111111 1 13	1111 4	1111 4	111 3	111111 6
9/04	11111111111111111111111111111111 11111111111111111111111111111111 44	1111111 7	111 3	111 3	111 3	11111111 8
10/04	11111111111111111111111111111111 25	1111111 7	11111 5	11111 5	111 3	11111 5
11/04	11111111111111111111111111111111 23	1111111 8	111111 6	1 1	1111 4	1 1
12/04	11111111111111111111111111111111 21	1111111 6	1111 4	11 2	11 2	1111 4
1/05	11111111111111111111111111111111 11 27	11111 5	1111 4	11 2	1 1	11 2
2/05	11111111111111111111111111111111 11111 30	1111111 7	11111 5	1 1	1 1	

Fuller 31

Issue	Physical Appearance	Hygiene	Media	Service	Food	Other
3/05	11111111111111111111 17	11111 5	111 3	11 2	11 2	1111 4
Totals	399	99	54	34	27	50

References

- Children and the media (2000). Retrieved on February 20, 2005, from Children Now Web site: <http://www.childrennow.org/m,edia/mc97/ReflectSummary.cfm>
- Currie, D. (2001). Teen magazines: Will they harm her? *Daughters Magazine*, 3(6), 6-8.
- Featherstone, L. (1998). New mags put the real back into girls' reality. Retrieved on February 20, 2005, from MetroActive Web site: <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/sonoma/02.19.98/girlsmags-9807.html>
- Gibbons, S. (2003). Teen magazines send girls all the wrong messages. Retrieved on February 23, 2005, from Women's eNews Web site: <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1580>.
- Holm, G. (1994). Learning in style: The portrayal of schooling in *Seventeen* magazine. In Farber, P., Provenzo, E., and Holm, G. (Eds.), *Schooling in light of popular culture* (pp. 59-77). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hymowitz, K. S. (1996). Regrets on teen sex. Retrieved on February 23, 2005, from City Journal Web site: http://www.city-journal.org/html/6_3_sndgs03.html
- Lee, C. (2002) Teen mag editor promotes healthy body image. Retrieved on February 23, 2005, from Women's eNews Web site: <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/833/context/journalistofthemoth>
- Lovely (2003). Self-esteem. Retrieved on February 20, 2005, from Teen Unit from Web site: http://www.momsandkids.org/momskids/teenunit/topic_esteem.html

Margesson, E. (2005). Magazines for teenage girls: Is their bark worse than their bite?

Retrieved on February 23, 2005, from Evangelicals Now Web site:

<http://www.e-n.org.uk/2005-04/2927-Magazines-for-teenage-girls-is-their-bark-worse-than-their-bite.htm>

Massoni, K. (2004). Occupational messages in *Seventeen* magazine. *Gender & Society* 18(1), 47-65.

New studies on media, girls, and gender roles: Media reinforces some gender

stereotypes, breaks others (1997). Retrieved on February 20, 2005, from

Children Now Web site: <http://www.childrennow.org/newsroom/news-97/pr-97-4-30.cfm>

Scanlon, M. (1997) Reading for real: Magazines for girls and young women.

[Electronic Version] *Feminist Collections*, Spring, 8-14.

Secor, S. (2003) 'Girlie' magazines: What today's teenage girl reads. Retrieved on

February 23, 2005, from Obscenity Crimes Web site:

<http://www.obscenitycrimes.org/espforparents/espforparents2003-08.cfm>

Seventeen's "faith" section opens the door for religious expression (2004). Retrieved

on February 23, 2005, from The Voice Web site: <http://www.teenmania.org/articles/seventeen.htm>

Spataro, J. (2003). Where's the girl power in girl magazines? Retrieved on February

20, 2005, from FreshAir Teen Zine Web site: <http://www.families-first.com/freshair/girlpower.htm>

Teen magazines: Are they as good as they seem? (2002). Retrieved on February 20,

2003, from University of Texas Web site: <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/>

~onderdonk/306fall02/teen/history.html

Torpey-Kemph, A. (2004). Quick takes. [Electronic Version] *MediaWeek*, 14(38), 20-23.

Teens vs. the media: Teen image and advertising (2000). Retrieved on February 20, 2005, from School News Network Web site: <http://www.snn-rdr.ca/snn/decissue/mediaandteens.html>

Tweens, teens, and magazines (2004). *Key Facts* (The Henry A. Kaiser Family Foundation), Fall, 1-4.

Zoll, R. (2004, September 2). *Seventeen* magazine, the girls' fashion bible, gets religion. Retrieved on February 23, 2005 from *The Detroit News* Web site: <http://www.detnews.com/204/books/0409/02/religion-262166.htm>

SOUTHERN SCHOLARS SENIOR PROJECT

Name: Cheryl Fuller Date: 12/8/04 Major: Public Relations

SENIOR PROJECT

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 three weeks prior to graduation. Please include the advisor's name on the title page.
The 2-3 hours of credit for this project is done as directed study or in a research class.

Keeping in mind the above senior project description, please describe in as much detail as you can the project you will undertake. You may attach a separate sheet if you wish:

Signature of faculty advisor Louaine Ball Expected date of completion 3/30/05

Approval to be signed by faculty advisor when completed:

This project has been completed as planned: L Ball

This in an "A" project: Louaine Ball

This project is worth 2-3 hours of credit: L Ball

Advisor's Final Signature Louaine J. Ball

Chair, Honors Committee _____ Date Approved: _____

Dear Advisor, 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.

Cheryl Fuller

My research project will consist of a content analysis of *Seventeen* magazine to find the messages it is sending to teenage girls. I want to gather a full year of issues, and carefully consider the messages each of the articles and advertisements is sending to teenage girls. I also want to discover whether the articles send mostly positive or mostly negative messages. Messages from the articles will be divided into themes using the inductive method of grounded theory to discover the most common themes and compare the articles with the advertisements.

Cheryl Fuller's Southern Scholar Project
Faculty Evaluation

"A Content Analysis of *Seventeen* Magazine and the
Messages its Articles and Advertisements are Sending to Teenage Girls"

Cheryl chose a topic that was not only of interest to her, but is related to her public relations degree. Media messages are an important element in marketing and public relations. Researching current trends in media messages are not only be useful in applying her communication knowledge, but will help her

Cheryl chose a quantitative content analysis of the teen magazine *Seventeen* and analyzed more than a year's worth of messages and advertisements for her project. She thoroughly explored the good and bad portrayed by this medium, and supported her project with a literature review of the topic.

The project includes a detailed compilation of her research. She has worked many hours on the collection and reporting of her research findings and I believe her project warrants 2 hours of credit, and a final grade of A.