

A Perspective on Teenage Magazines and Their Continued Focus on the Superficial

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Abstract

Teenage magazine content, after decades, continues to complicate decision making in the communication of the young, impressionable girls who read them. Previous research has indicated that teenagers can be negatively influenced by the media, including teen magazines (e.g., Redcross, 2003; Milkie, 2002; Durham, 2008; Lamb & Brown, 2006). These magazines are created for teens, so they will read them, believe what they read, and in some cases, base their decisions on the advice of certain articles. Why do editors continue to, despite what the research purports, produce this type of material? Historically, the response has been that it is what the consumer wants, and the more modern response is that it is what the consumer “needs” in a world in which girls are more mature today. While both online and print publications have attempted to address this issue by going outside of the norm publishing content that balances education and entertainment, few have survived, as most popular in the teen world are topics focusing on celebrity gossip, appearance-oriented articles, dating and socialization. This paper explores the case of teenage magazines that to this day, remain largely unchanged in a nation in which young girls are desperate for healthy media guidance.

Keywords: Teenage magazines, girl magazines, youth magazines, teenage media and harmful effects

Introduction

The authors of this paper began research on the effects and impact of teen magazine content on young readers in 2000. Both authors were subscribers to these magazines in the 1970s and 1980s, *Young Miss* and *Seventeen* being the primary reads. The magazines were primarily beauty, appearance and boy-centered and decades later, much of the same content still exists.

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As former readers, the allure is understandable. Young girls crave acceptance, and sadly, girls are often taught to attain this through unearthing the mystery of attracting boys, the art of beautification, deep knowledge of celebrity lives and various forms of submissive behavior that neglect strengthening and enriching the brain (Redcross, 2003).

While many question what the harm is in girls wanting to engage in the very normal behavior of looking nice, liking boys and knowing who's who in the celebrity world, this article seeks to address – despite the numerous research studies and arguments against it – the consistent emphasis on these topics, in which frequency of coverage creates a “girls *need* to know” impression that continues to be sought out by girls. This content, while entertaining, does not serve as an advocate for girls; rather, it supplies them with what editors and publishers claim the girl consumers *want*. Currently, not enough consideration is placed on what girls *need*. This is especially unfortunate, as editors of the most popular magazines are in a rare and unique position to sway girls nationwide to read, and take in content that will entertain and interest, but also propel them in the direction of healthy teenage and womanhood. Agenda Setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1968), defined as the ability of the news media to influence the salience of topics on the public, and Uses and Gratifications (Blumer & Katz, 1974), more of an audience-centered approach to media, assumes that people seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs. Regarding both theories, because young minds are in question and are in dire need of healthy guidance, editors would undoubtedly have the full support of parents, educators, psychologists (who have argued this point for decades), and all that have a stake and interest in the development of young girls if they chose to make drastic changes in the content they publish.

The state of girls is truly a desperate one in which parents (particularly mothers) must “save their daughters” as mothers are in the best position to do so (Lamb & Brown, 2007). While a few publications, both online and print, have attempted to address this issue by going outside of the norm and publishing content that balances education and entertainment (e.g., *Teen Voices*), few have survived. While the content has changed with the times, and is more current in terms of online publications to fit the “modern girl”, the context is much the same.

Teen magazines to this day, remain largely unchanged in a nation in which young girls are in desperate need of healthy guidance from the media to which they are drawn. While there are researchers that argue that today's teen magazines have appropriately changed with the times, and have responded to the needs of the more mature girl, the authors' response is: apart from what the consumer (girls) want, what does the consumer *need*?

Redcross' 2003 dissertation, "Teenage Magazine Content and Its Impact on Teenage Magazine Readers: A Thematic Approach", found after surveying thirty 18 and 19 year old girls, that while the non-feminist content abounds (and is indeed enjoyed by readers) there is an awareness that the content lacks much, if any, educational value. Two methodologies were used to conduct the study. Content analysis was used to establish the dominant feminist and traditional themes in the two selected teenage magazines, *Girl* (2000) and *Twist* (2000). The second method consisted of a Likert-scaled questionnaire administered to 30 teenage girls to identify their identification with feminist and traditional themes in the selected teenage magazines, their readership of teenage magazines, and their other attributes. Questions concerning preference, reading enjoyment and interest, conversation piece content and self-concept and assessment in relation to the content of the teenage magazine were the focus of this study. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What predominant traditional themes are identifiable in (selected) post-1980s teenage magazines?
2. What predominant feminist themes are identifiable in (selected) post-1980s teenage magazines?
3. To what extent do teenage girls identify with traditional themes in teenage magazines?
4. To what extent do teenage girls identify with feminist themes in teenage magazines?
5. To what extent do teenage girls' identification with traditional or feminist themes suggest high or low self-concept?
6. To what extent do teenage girls' use of teenage magazines address self-concept issues?

The content analysis findings revealed that both magazines examined in the study were highly traditional in content; however upon closer inspection, *Girl* magazine was found to have mostly feminist content within traditional articles, whereas the content in *Twist* magazine was predominantly and exclusively traditional. The most significant finding of this study reveal that the majority of the subjects tested identified with the feminist theme, suggesting they have a higher self-concept.

The majority of the subjects agreed that the information in teenage magazines is generally true, and although they enjoyed and were entertained by the traditional theme, they identified with the feminist theme. This indicates that the subjects had an appreciation for the theme concerning self- and career development as opposed to the theme concerning appearance and male and female relationships. The teenage magazine usage findings revealed that the subjects use or have used teenage magazines for important aspects of their being, such as advice about their lives, boys, fashion and relationships. Scores revealed that the information in teenage magazines is taken as truth, and the advice given is used, suggesting that a self-assessment process does exist. An interesting note: The feminist-themed *Girl* magazine has been out of print since the late 1990s, while the non-feminist themed *Twist* magazine currently lives on, still sold in hundreds of stores.

A *Seventeen* magazine study conducted by Carly Moore (2011) supports this point. Her research consisted of reading every monthly column of *Seventeen* magazine's "Traumarama!" for the years 1994, 1995, 1997, 1999, and 2002. According to Moore:

"Traumarama!" stories are short (75 to 150 words), girl-written, autobiographical, and heavily edited. Created in 1994 out of readers' letters, "Traumarama!" stories chronicle the day-to-day embarrassments of being a teenage girl. "Traumarama!" stories are rarely about empowerment and triumph, but rather shame and humiliation. They are written in a matter-of-fact style, often ending with a punch-line or a joke, but rarely with any commentary.

Through this analysis I argue that the everygirl in "Traumarama!" functions on two levels. First, she serves as the teenage voice of a magazine that has staked its existence on knowing who teenage girls are and what they want. Second, it offers readers a set of behaviors—an etiquette—that prescribe the typical teenage girl's life. This etiquette is as subtle as it is problematic.

On the surface “Traumarama!” stories provide readers with real stories about imperfect girls, but because the girls in these stories are so severely punished for being real and imperfect, “Traumarama!,” in fact, tells girls that it’s never okay to be real or imperfect. (2011, p.1249)

Moore further asserts that advertising plays a major role. Often in the “Traumarama!” columns, girls address their issues of imperfection through the use of products, which conveniently, are advertised in the magazine.

Perspectives on Teen Magazine Studies

Milkie (2002) expounds on an important topic in which there has been little research; an analysis of the cultural gatekeepers, or teenage magazine editors and producers. She interviewed 10 editors at two national girls’ magazine organizations who revealed contradictory responses to requests for depicting and defining “real girls.” Milkie states: “Paradoxically, here, editors claim that they can change images but should not.” (p. 839). The editors acknowledged the need for more worldly, educational and current issue-based content in teen magazines, but asserted that they are also responsible for catering to their target audiences’ desires by publishing the appearance, celebrity, relationship-based content.

In their study of 443 girls in grades seven through ten, Jones, Vigfusdottir, and Lee (2004) stated that a mediated relationship between appearance-based magazines and body dissatisfaction existed in girls. Their research suggested that girls who are more involved with appearance magazines are also engaged in friendships that focus more attention on appearance concerns, as it is in the more interpersonal context of conversations with friends that the peer appearance culture has its clearest linkage to internalizing and body image satisfaction.

Authors of Packaging Girlhood, Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mykel Brown (2006), described it well in their book title’s subhead: “Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers’ Schemes”. The book underscores the desperate situation of our nation’s girls, in which parents (particularly mothers) must “save” their daughters, as mothers are in the best position to do so. The authors assert that society must face the fact that most of us are outnumbered by the plethora of media outlets. Most households have perhaps 1-4 parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles or guardians.

Television programs, songs, magazines, Internet, and books are in the hundreds, and they come on strong and with frequency.

Jessalynn Keller, (2011) holds somewhat of a different view based on interview responses of girl magazine editors. If subscribers want it, why blame the magazines? They're serving a purpose, and, according to her research, perhaps it isn't as detrimental as the opposing view maintains. The reading of this material in magazines may in fact, actually be positive, and parents, educators and psychologists who been battling this issue for years, are still in the dark ages and simply don't get it.

Keller hammers this point home with an interesting position; her article, "Feminist editors and the new girl glossies: Fashionable feminism or just another sexist rag?" challenges the assumption of today's magazines for girls deemed harmful, inappropriate and of publishing emotionally damaging content. Through interviews with four New York teen magazine editors, she "unpacks some of the contradictions embedded in editors' identifying as feminists while creating a cultural product often deemed anti-feminist." She discusses a "third wave ethic," (also known as third-wave feminism) which is new-age feminism seeking to challenge traditional definitions of femininity and embraces a change in times, incorporating elements of ethnicity, girl power, individualist feminism, sex-positivity and postmodernism. Her findings suggest that editors combine practical strategies with the concept of third wave ethic to navigate between corporate and cultural expectations in order to integrate a popular feminism into the magazine content.

While Keller's research delves into editor interviews – a world many researchers have not touched – it is the interviews themselves, by the editors' own admission that supports the fact that numerous girl magazines and their non-feminist content, after decades, continue to complicate decision making in the communication of the young, impressionable girls who read them. Past and current research in the field indicates that girls are influenced by the media. Teenage magazines are created specifically for them, so they will read and often believe what they read – and, in some cases, base their decisions on the advice of certain articles. Why do editors continue, despite what the research purports, to produce this type of material?

The response is that because girls are much more mature than they were three decades ago, girl magazine editors are making the necessary adjustments to magazine content to mature along with the girls. Teenage magazines remain largely unchanged in a nation in which young girls are in desperate need of healthy guidance from the media to which they are drawn. Teen magazine editors are in a powerful position to influence and impress upon teenage girls their value and worth. Through their forum, they can impact the lives of young girls. When will they accept this challenge? The authors assert the belief that girls will indeed read what is touted as mainstream and popular if they believe the masses are consuming the information.

Like the Agenda Setting Theory suggesting that the news tells its audience not what to think, but what to think about, especially in the front cover pages and top stories, which are considered the most important. The same rule applies to girl magazines, although not limited to cover stories. Girl magazines, like newspapers, suggest by virtue of its consistency and frequent output of content, that the topics they cover are what girls should be thinking about, because out of the limited number of actual editorial content (these magazines are packed with advertisements), the prominent articles often pertain to celebrity gossip, beauty articles and content about boys. Less prominent and constant are articles focusing on world or national issues, health, education, and future career-related topics. Often, articles that are published harp on sexism disguised as "strength" in young womanhood compared with the glimmer of progress and hope present in the pro-healthy girl magazines.

Author M. Gigi Durham explains in [The Lolita Effect The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and Five Keys to Fixing It](#) (2008) the exploitive and distorted manner in which girls' sexuality is represented in commercial media through five myths. Durham's Myths are used as a springboard to pinpoint how these falsehoods are exhibited and exhorted in girl magazines. In the hopes of educating girls and their parents to become media savvy, media literate and to have candid conversations about media, Durham hopes the book will help girls understand what the myths mean, and what media is leading them to believe. The myths can be used as benchmarks or models for which girl magazines and the psychological impact. Girl magazines have provided a comfortable and profitable home for the Durham's myths to breed and to thrive. Out of the five myths, Myths 1, 2 and 5 are explored:

Myth 1 -- If You've Got It, Flaunt It

According to Durham, Myth 1 suggests that while extremely difficult to attain, if a girl is bestowed with, or is lucky enough to figure out how to look sexy and "hot", to by all means – show it off. This "attribute" should be used to it to attract attention, attract boys, and self- empowerment. If she is unlucky and not born with an acceptable body and features, the girl magazines provide an abundance of instruction. According to Durham:

"The goal of hotness is pervasive in girl culture: recently the *New York Times* profiled a group of accomplished teenage girls: they were varsity athletes, academic achievers, classical musicians, and volunteer workers, all at once. In her classrooms, they wrote essays on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche; away from school, they aced piano competitions and starred in theater productions. Yet they readily admitted that it was much more important to be "hot" than smart. "Effortlessly hot," as one of them explained." Girl magazines frequently use "hot" as the adjective of choice to promote everything from new workouts to fashion to movie idols. To be "hot" is to be sexy.

Durham acknowledges the third-wave feminist theory of the progressive element to being happy with oneself, and understanding that it's not shameful or scandalous to recognize sexuality and to consciously of themselves as sexual beings who find pleasure though sex (p 92). Example: "'Dare to bare,' urges a headline in *Teen Vogue* that features teen girls in minuscule mini-skirts, their body-baring bodaciousness contrasted with a little girl wearing a frumpy mid-calf-length plaid skirt. The message there is that exhibitionism is daring, while conservative clothing is childish and boring." (Durham, 108-109)

Myth 2 -- Anatomy of a Sex Goddess

Few girl magazines model "normal-looking" girls, meaning, make up-less, curve-less girls without sex appeal. A "normal" look can be girls who may have long, short or medium length hair. They may be tall and lanky, short and round or wiry and petite. They wear little make up or, makeup that doesn't mask their young age, and their clothes aren't more mature that they are. Most significantly, while one may not be able to guess exactly how old they are, it's obvious that they young girls.

What is photographed often, are girls who look mini models. The common look: long, flowing, lustrous hair; full, colorful make up; revealing or tight-fitting “sexy” clothing; a “posed” shot, often sexy or alluring.

Myth 5 -- It's all about what boys like

Headlines: (*Seventeen*) “Stay on his mind over break!” “What he really wants for the holidays” “Everything guys wish you knew” all in one issue (Dec 2011/Jan 2012).

A large percentage of the articles, such as the prior examples, focus on how to appease, adapt to, and in some cases, play manipulative games with boys, which could be encouraging to readers giving them the feeling of being privy to the tricky minds of boys after reading the expert advice of the writer.

Adolescent Development and Teen Magazines

We believe that the physical, psychological, and social development of adolescent girls will be negatively influenced by repeated exposure to the content of teen magazines. Because the typical teen magazine tends to focus on the promulgation of stereotypical images, ideas, and subject matter, we believe these magazines will cause more harm than good to the adolescent girls that read them.

Despite their mature appearance, adolescents continue to develop throughout the teen years. Recent studies reveal important details about the development of adolescents. For example, Sowell (2007) found that the limbic system, which controls emotions such as fear and excitement, matures before the prefrontal cortex, which controls emotional regulation, planning, and impulse control. This means that although adolescents are able to experience very intense emotions, they do not have the analytical ability to properly interpret or control them. Studies by Luna (2010) and Van Leijenhorst (2010) reveal differences in the brain functioning of young adolescents (14 & 15 year olds) as compared with the brain functioning of older adolescents and emerging adults (18 – 23 year olds). Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) scans in these studies found that the reward centers of 14 and 15 year olds show greater arousal than the reward centers of 18-23 year olds. These fMRI studies confirm that the limbic system (emotion center) of younger adolescents matures before the prefrontal cortex (analytic center), causing emotions to rule adolescents’ behavior rather than rational thought.

This is additional confirmation that adolescents experience arousal quite intensely, and that their attitudes and behavior are often guided by impulses they find difficult to control.

Adolescent magazines play on this neurological vulnerability by continuing to focus on content that adolescents find stimulating without providing guidance about how to manage the emotions triggered by reading the material. What is the purpose of teaching adolescent girls how to look “hot” and “sexy” if we do not intend to encourage their sexual behavior?

The adolescent brain is not mature enough to balance the need for “sexiness” with the need for sexual caution. Rather than focusing on young girls’ budding individuality, the average teen magazine pushes the reader into a highly aroused, neurological tailspin in an effort to achieve a standard of beauty and alluringness that is actually impossible to achieve. While adult women may understand that photographs of models in magazines have been edited to create maximum attractiveness, adolescent girls seek to emulate these distorted images, and often lose their self-esteem, self-worth, and uniqueness in the process.

In his seminal research on adolescent development, Erik Erikson (1968) proposed that the psychosocial crisis of adolescence is to form a sense of identity. As part of the process of forming their own identity, adolescents must consider the goals and values of their families, peers, and the larger culture to which they belong and decide upon the identity that is right for them (Berger, 2012). According to Cote (2009), adolescents reject or accept various aspects of these identities in the process of forming their own. Most magazines for teen girls focus on superficial aspects of identity (e.g., clothes, shoes, make-up, hair styles, dating, famous individuals, and gossip), and reinforce unrealistic Western cultural mores about beauty, including the thin feminine ideal. Adolescent girls who read these magazines are presented limited options of acceptable potential identities. It is likely that these limited options directly influence teen girls’ choices about who they can and should be as adult women.

The situation is even more dire for ethnic minority adolescent girls. Ethnic minority girls must confront the fact that they are members of groups that are traditionally both under-represented and devalued in society and teen magazines.

In their examination of the impact of media images, some authors postulate that over-sexualized stereotypes of African American women in the media have helped to shape the sexuality of African American women and girls, the way African American girls view themselves, and the way in which other people value and interact with them (e.g., Stephens & Phillips, 2003 and 2005; Sinclair, Hardin & Lowery, 2006; Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010).

If objectification theory is correct, all adolescent girls become aware that their bodies are examined and evaluated by others and consequently internalize these views to evaluate their bodies (e.g., Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This helps to explain why media has such a powerful impact on the self-evaluation of adolescent girls.

Because African American women and girls are not considered the prototype of beauty in Western culture (Townsend et al, 2010), media images are postulated to have an even more detrimental effect on the psyche of African American girls.

The deleterious effects of teen magazines on the development of adolescent girls may also be understood by looking through the lens of self-awareness theory. According to Mor and colleagues (2010), self-awareness allows us to compare our behaviors to our internal standards and values. Since those values are most often a reflection of the values society and our environment have instilled in us, we judge ourselves most harshly when we do not live up to those internalized standards. Mor et al. indicate that external triggers, such as seeing ourselves on video and looking into a mirror can trigger a focus on the self, or self-awareness. We propose that images in teen magazines can also trigger self-awareness, making adolescent girls acutely aware of the ways that they do not live up to internalized societal ideals of appearance and "success". According to Aronson, Wilson, and Akert (2012), self-awareness is detrimental when it reminds people of their shortcomings. This awareness of shortcomings can trigger mechanisms for reducing self-focus, including drug use, binge eating, and sexual masochism (Baumeister, 1991; Leary & Tate, 2010). Given adolescents' propensity to engage in risky behaviors because of the brain immaturity previously discussed in this article, reading teen magazines may actually trigger detrimental behaviors by encouraging teen girls to "fix" themselves to fit societal standards, or to engage in self-focus reducing behaviors that help them forget that they are not "ideal".

According to Berger (2012), adolescents rely on their peers to help them navigate the physical changes of puberty, the intellectual challenges of high school, and the social challenges of leaving childhood. Peers are the adolescent's comparison group, setting the benchmark for judging the appropriateness of their own attitudes and behavior. Adolescent girls often rely on teen magazines to determine what is "normal" and acceptable for their appearance, interests, and behaviors.

Since some data indicate that 81% of teen girls use peers and 68% of teen girls use fashion magazines to determine the latest trends (Teen Consumer Spending Statistics, 2014), adolescent girls face a double whammy of pressure to live up to cultural standards of beauty and behavior. This trend toward using teen magazines as the gauge of "normality" is not without consequence.

The impact of the emphasis on the thin feminine ideal in teen magazines has probably contributed to the increased body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, depression, shame, and guilt evident in women and girls in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (e.g., Cattaran, Williams, Thomas, & Thompson, 2000; Crouch & Degelman, 1998). Although a few studies do not support this finding (e.g., Halliwell, Ditmar, & Howe, 2005), the vast majority of researchers have found a consistent relationship between exposure to the thin feminine ideal and issues with body image among women and girls.

With this in mind, we believe that society must begin to take a closer look at the impact of teen magazines on adolescent girls. The potential deleterious effects of long-term exposure to these magazines is just as important as teen smoking, drinking, sexuality, or any other issue that negatively impacts the health and well-being of adolescent girls. In a perfect world, the publishers of teen magazines would voluntarily change their content so that it is more conducive to the optimal development of the young girls who read these magazines. However, since teens spend \$157 billion dollars each year on food, apparel, personal care items and entertainment, including teen magazines (Teen Consumer Spending Statistics, 2014), it is unlikely that the industry will be motivated to change magazine content without some push back from parents and other community advocates. We believe that there are two possible mechanisms for achieving this change: the use of inoculation, and use of media advocacy.

In 1961, psychologist William McGuire proposed that people can be taught to resist persuasive messages through a process called inoculation. In short, inoculation involves training people to resist attacks on their beliefs by giving them practice with resisting weak arguments. This type of attitude inoculation has proven to be successful in helping adolescents resist peer pressure to smoke and other risky behaviors (Perry, Killen, Slinkard & McAlister, 1980).

By helping girls understand the power of teen magazines' persuasive messages, parents, teachers, and others who interact with adolescents on a regular basis can help adolescent girls avoid (or at least reduce) the negative impact of constant exposure to these magazines. This is the strategy proposed by Lamb and Brown in *Packaging Girlhood* (2006). We recommend this book as guide for parents, teachers, and others who are interested in helping adolescent girls resist the images and messages promulgated by teen magazines.

Media advocacy is defined as the strategic use of media and community advocacy to create policy or environmental change (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2003). The Centers for Disease Control has produced several sets of guidelines for groups who are interested in using media to change public opinion and behavior that is related to negative health outcomes. The CDC and local community groups have successfully used media advocacy to impact both public opinion and industry behavior with regard to such problem behaviors as alcohol use, sexual behavior and cigarette smoking. An example provided in their chapter, *Media Advocacy*, provides compelling evidence of the success of this strategy. The California African American Tobacco Education Network, a community-based organization, succeeded in pressuring a cigarette company into reneging on its plan to distribute a cigarette it called, "X". The community group shamed the company by emphasizing that the cigarette's name defamed Malcolm X and was targeted directly at the young, African American community. The media advocacy campaign organized by the California African American Tobacco Education Network spread the word about the issue by using the media, including African American and corporate owned media outlets, and through over 100 newspaper articles that were distributed nationwide. The company felt the pressure and withdrew the "X" brand cigarettes from distribution. (Centers for Disease Control, 2003).

Conclusion

The root of the authors' concern about teen magazines is that they have potentially detrimental effects on the development of adolescent girls. The images presented to young girls in teen magazines continue to focus on the superficial aspects of life and present limited developmental pathways for girls to pursue. It is our belief that resistance to the messages presented in teen magazines is essential for the healthy physical, psychological, and social development of young girls.

With that in mind, we encourage parents, educators, community organizations, and progressive media outlets to provide adolescent girls with the tools they need to resist media messages that make them feel inferior, and to begin to use media advocacy to address this important health crisis. The authors also recommend continued study of the most effective strategies to influence magazine companies to set agendas that promote the long-term health and well-being of the adolescent girls who purchase and read their magazines.

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