Evolving Themes of Masculinity in Seventeen Magazine:
An Analysis of 1945-1955 and 1995-2005

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Abstract

Among the many roles that teen girl magazines play, one of the most important is that of a boy bible for the millions of female teenagers who read them. Teen girl magazines have contributed to the discourse of masculinity since the beginning of its publication history. This research, through a discursive analysis of the decades 1945-1955 and 1995-2005, examines Seventeen magazine (the longest and largest circulating teen girl magazine) and how the constructions of masculinity have evolved. The analysis of masculinity in teen girl magazines revealed the dramatic shift of masculinities’ representations—from the suave, witty, and intelligent male in the 1940s and 1950s to the callous and insensitive male during the 1990s and the turn of the millennium. The comparison confirms how the constructions of masculinities have shifted over the decades in a way that reinforces the current myths about boys as mean, foolish, and perverted.

Keywords: boys, magazine, masculinity, myths, teen girls, representations, Seventeen

Introduction

Among the many roles teen girl magazines play—fashion consultant, make-up adviser, celebrity reporter—a key function is that of boy bible for the millions of young female teenagers who read them. While some may brush aside these glossy-paged periodicals as silly material, research studies show that teenage girls rely on these magazines for guidance and information (Firminger, 2006; Kaplan & Cole, 2003). This research examines Seventeen, established in 1944 and the longest running girl magazine, with two goals in mind. The first objective is to investigate how the magazine’s portrayal of masculinity has changed after 50 years...
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years. The second objective is to establish what this popular magazine tells girls about contemporary masculinity.

During a time when young girls are reporting high rates of dating violence (approximately one in five female high school students reports being physically and/or sexually abused by a date), it is especially vital to consider how magazines targeting this demographic are presenting and codifying masculinity and depicting heterosexual relationships and gender norms (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). Further, according to 2003 readership data, almost 40 percent of girls between the ages of 12 and 17 in the United States read Seventeen (Mediamark Research Incorporated [MRI], 2003). While certainly not the only influence in a young person's life, media targeting teens, including magazines, have been shown to influence them (e.g., Currie, 1999; Duke & Kreshel, 1998; Kaplan & Cole, 2003).

Further, recent masculinity studies reveals a contemporary hyper-masculinized and increasingly violent construction of boys (Katz, 1999, 2006) and physically dominant men (Kimmel, 1997; Prusank, 2007). Some research illustrates how through the decades images of men continually increase in size and now real men are portrayed larger, stronger, and much more violent than before (Katz, 1999). Katz (1999, 2006) argues that these images influence a culture of violence in American society. Faludi (1999) concludes that contemporary masculinity is about being the master of one’s universe. Mayer (2003) notes that “we’ve returned to an age of rampant chauvinism, where men swagger about in a testosterone rage and women are reduced to sexual ornaments” (p. 512).

This research gathers data in Seventeen to illustrate how the themes of masculinity have shifted in the last 50 years and offers a critique of the construction and consequences of contemporary masculinity. This research inquiry is situated within the context of research showing the influences teen magazines have on girls’ understanding of the world (Currie, 1999; Duke & Kreshel, 1998; Kaplan & Cole, 2003) and discussions about the harmful nature of contemporary masculinity to girls, boys, and culture (Connell, 2005; Katz, 1999, 2006; Prusank, 2007). However, a focus on the effects of contemporary masculinity does not negate recognition of any harmful effects of masculine ideals as they were presented in the 1940s and 1950s. Nor does it insinuate that various forms of masculinity visible throughout the decades have been harmless. This research, however, focuses on the earliest portrayals of masculinity as presented during Seventeen magazine’s first decade and then considers how this construction of masculinity has changed 50 years later.

Using a discursive analysis, the authors examines two decades of Seventeen magazine —1945-1955 and 1995-2005. The period 1945-1955 is an interesting time to consider because it represents the first full decade. It is also worthy of note because the decade represents a unique time for gender relations in American culture (Lloyd & Johnson, 2003, 2004; Ryan, 1992). When World War II ended, women who had been encouraged to contribute to the war efforts by working outside the home were expected to leave the workforce in order to make room for men returning from war (Ryan, 1992). Feminist writers note how the cultural idealization of the housewife occurred during this time. Friedan
(1963) found that women in the late 1930s were portrayed in print magazines as autonomous heroines, but by the late 1940s the “glorified housewife” had surpassed this representation (p. 123). The late 1940s and 1950s were a culturally conservative time, particularly regarding gender and family issues (Breines, 1992). These were difficult years for women, as what was acceptable for a woman was extremely restrictive and centered on home and family (Breines, 1992).

Five decades later, gender roles significantly changed. No longer are women expected to step back to make room for men. Now women work outside the home out of both desire and necessity (Parker, 2009). Women and girls’ roles are less restrictive too. Witt (2007) argues the 1990s and into the early millennium marked a decade rich in feminist youth culture centered on music and magazines. Feminist musicians of the 1990s, such as Ani Difranco, Eryka Badu, Kathleen Hanna, and Sleater-Kinney, produced subversive music that inspired a feminism relevant to females in their teens, yet these performers are nearly invisible in mainstream teen magazines (Witt, 2007). Instead, mainstream culture, including Seventeen magazine, perpetuates a pseudo-feminist culture (Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman, 1998). Seemingly promoting a sense of strength in women, mainstream culture still ultimately socializes girls to patriarchy and sexist expectations in appearances and demeanor (Firminger, 2006).

**Literature Review**

**Girl teen magazines**

In the United States, teen girl magazines are read by more than 75 percent of teenage girls (Mediamark Research Incorporated [MRI], 2009). Because girls experience significant physical and development change in adolescence, media like teen magazines serve as guidebooks on acceptable appearance, gender roles, and relationship formation, even at times replacing parents and augmenting or surpassing peers as primary information sources (Peirce, 1990). The reading of gender-targeted magazines often begins in the teen years and continues into adulthood, when women’s magazines become influential in many women’s lives (Carpenter, 1998). Women’s magazines promote the “cult of femininity” (Ferguson, 1983, p. 184), give women a basis for addressing concerns, offer support, construct virtual communities (Seneca, n.d.; Shevelow, 1989), and allow the supposed voices of men through the magazines to define how women should look (Winship, 1987).

In 1944, Seventeen the teenage magazine with one of the longest publishing record in the U.S.—nearly 70 years—and the highest circulation, currently over 2 million (Mediamark Research Inc., 2009). Teen girl magazines in general offer information on acceptable and normative behavior and dress (Schlenker et al., 1998). They are also agents of socialization for young girls because the publications convey ideologies about gender to these impressionable females (Connell, 1987; Hess-Bibber, 1996). These teen magazines, however, offer a limited view of what comprises appropriate femininity (Peirce, 1990, 1993; Schlenker et al., 1998).
According to Currie (1999), Hess-Bibber (1996), and McRobbie (1991), not only are these magazines an agent of socialization, they are also a powerful influence, defining what is meaningful to teenage girls and helping shape their attitudes and behaviors. Further, these magazines are read during the adolescent years, when many (heterosexual) girls begin forming their attraction to boys. Editors have clearly understood this interest in boys, as is evidenced by the prevalence of content that attends to boy-girl relationships (Evans, Rutberg, Sather, & Turner, 1991; Signorelli, 1997). These magazines, then, offer constructions not only of appropriate femininity but also of masculinity. Within this context, these magazines play an important role in constructing the norms of masculinity for the millions of girls who read them. This picture of masculinity can lead to unhealthy, unhappy, and harmful relationships and expectations between girls and boys. For this reason, it is important to study how masculinity is portrayed and constructed in girl teen magazines.

Masculinities over time

Masculinity indicates the socially constructed ideas about how men are expected to think and act in cultural contexts. It is a code of conduct. Male social gender roles and behaviors, as understood within this framework, are seen as natural and inevitable and are expressed through the body, personality, and culture (Connell, 2002, 2005). Because masculinity is socially constructed, it has changed in American culture throughout the decades (Faludi, 1999). What has not shifted, however, is the dichotomous construction of masculinity in opposition to femininity, “whereby the masculine is valued over the feminine” (Kivel & Johnson, 2009, p. 110). While many competing masculinities are present at one historical moment and cultural context, men often feel obliged to perform a particular form of masculinity, understood as hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Humphries, 1985; Kivel & Johnson, 2009). Although hegemonic masculinity is not fixed, it is possible to identify certain roles and behaviors. In U.S. culture it has been associated with the physicality of the male body, which is performed through physical violence and heterosexual sexual activity (Gerschick & Miller, 2001). This dominant ideology of masculinity assists in the maintenance of patriarchy (Connell, 2005). More specifically, throughout the 1940s and 1950s—the first time period of this analysis—“urbane, heterosexual masculinity” represented the dominant masculine model for a generation of Americans (Watts, 2003, p. 193). The man of that generation was “strong, confident, competitive, and a decisive patriarch” (Tragos, 2009, p. 545). Cary Grant and Jimmy Stewart, Hollywood actors of the era, signified this hegemonic masculinity: handsome, graceful, elegant, stylish, and witty (Meeuf, 2009; Watts, 2003). John Wayne, another famous Hollywood actor during the 1940s and 1950s, offers another picture of manhood and illustrates the variety of masculinities present in a specific cultural time. The key elements of Wayne’s masculinity were his rugged body and stylish swagger, “his tenacity, his strength, [and] his narrow moral code” (Meeuf, 2009, p. 92).

Hegemonic masculinity of more recent decades has become problematic in how the physical body and toughness are constructed (Connell, 1995). This newer form of masculinity is hyper-masculinized, as illustrated in movie characters like Rambo, Masters of the Universe toys, and popular video games such as Grand Theft Auto, all of which...
glorify violence (Farrell, 1975; Humphries, 1985; Nichols, 1975; Segal, 1990). This muscle-bound, destructive masculinity is seen as a reassertion of manhood and is theorized to be a reaction to feminist re-articulations of femininity that began in the 1960s and 1970s and have allowed women to illustrate strength and power (Tragos, 2009). In the 1990s, if a man needed to reassert his manhood, a quick fix was to “picture himself a monarch, pump up, armor himself, go up against the enemy, and prove that he’s in control” (Faludi, 1999, p. 15). Katz (2006) argues violent masculinity pervades contemporary U.S. culture. This hyper-masculinity of the 1990s and into the new millennium, however, sits alongside other masculine codes (for example, the metrosexual) in what Tragos (2009) likens to “dueling banjos, in that competing notions of masculinity pervade pop culture” (p. 544).

**Masculinity in teen girl magazines**

Numerous research studies the content of teen girl magazines and how it affects femininity through the stereotypical gender constructions presented in these publications (Carpenter, 1998; Evans et al., 1991; Kaplan & Cole, 2003; Peirce, 1990, 1993; Schlenker et al., 1998; Willemsen, 1998). Much of this previous research recognizes the heavy content dedicated to topics about heterosexual relationships and boys yet focuses on how the content teaches girls to act and react rather than focusing directly on the framing of masculinity. Only a few studies considers specifically how masculinity is constructed in women’s and teen girl magazines.

Chang’s (2000) study titled “Agony–resolution pathways: How women perceive American men in Cosmopolitan’s agony (advice) column” discusses how advice columns conveyed certain ideas about men. Her content analysis selects agony columns from all issues of the American edition of Cosmopolitan from October 1982 to December 1996. Her random selection of three issues per year yielded a sample of 45 issues. She found women were told they should be the ones who achieve personal transformation, figure out optimum strategies, and make tough decisions. Chang concludes that this construction placed none of the responsibility in sustaining a healthy relationship onto men.

In another study titled “Is He Boyfriend Material? Representation of Males in Teenage Girls’ Magazines,” Firminger (2006) conducted a discursive analysis of five teen girl magazines (Seventeen, YM, CosmoGirl, Elle Girl, and Girls’ Life), looking at two issues of each. The magazines (one each from 2002 and 2003) depicted boys as having a high sex drive and being emotionally inexpressive, insecure, and fearful of rejection. At the same time the magazines depicted a small group of potentially good guys—the “keepers”—who still have a high sex drive but “keep it in check” (p. 303).

Firmly entrenched then is the idea that all boys possess high sex drives. According to Firminger (2006), these magazines invite girls to accept boys with all of the above-mentioned characteristics. Firminger (2006) argues that by skewing the portrayal of males to these girls, advertisers take advantage of gender-specific fantasies, myths, and fears. If boys are presented as such difficult beings and if sifting out the good boys from the bad boys takes so much effort, the magazines serve as a tool to teach the girls how to win the boys’ affections. In the end, it becomes a cyclical relationship, where the girls continue to purchase these magazines.
in order to learn how best to approach and win over their latest infatuation, advertisers persist in promoting their products, and the magazines continue to publish.


The hegemonic male in the adolescent teen magazines can be thoughtful, considerate, concerned with relationships and freely express love and affection—but he is equally likely to be cruel and freely express anger and rage by dominating females, at times physically. (p. 173).

The current study adds to a sparse yet important area of research by examining the construction of masculinity in *Seventeen* magazine during two different decades. The two time frames analyzed together provide a contextual and cultural history of the ways masculinity might have changed during the last 50 years. Within the context of previous research on masculinity and teen girl magazines, the following broad research questions guides our analysis:

**RQ1**: What were the dominant masculine roles and behaviors in *Seventeen* magazine in the decades 1945-1955 and 1995-2005?

**RQ2**: How were these masculinities both similar and different during these? decades?

**RQ3**: Does the contemporary construction of a hyper-masculinized manhood appear in *Seventeen* magazine during the more recent decade?

**RQ4**: What was the hegemonic masculinity that most dominated each era in *Seventeen*?

### Method

**Sample**

With the goal of identifying and illustrating how portrayals of masculinity in *Seventeen* magazine articulated a particular theme about masculinity in two distinct decades, the researchers used a stratified sample of the magazines from the decade 1945-1955 and the decade 1995-2005. The stratified sample was used to ensure that the magazines’ content would best represent the most common themes during the two decades. According to Lacy, Riffe, and Randle (1998), a stratified sample of monthly magazines yields far more accurate results compared with a random sample. Stratification is presumed to control sources of systematic variation that includes quarterly, monthly, or seasonal publications (Lacy et al., 1998). For example, a random sample of *Seventeen* magazines could have resulted in two
February issues and no December issues. A stratified sample ensures that every month is represented in the sample for each decade.

A total of 2,124 pages were identified for analysis from 1945-1955 and a total of 2,195 pages from 1995-2005. The stratified sample yielded 12 issues per decade that represented a different month from 1945-1955 and 1995-2005. For the 1945-1955 decade, two issues were selected in 1947. For the 1995-2005 decade, two issues were selected in 1999. (See Appendix 1.) This research did not record the numbers for separate content categories (i.e., advertisements, editorials, articles, and fiction stories) in the magazines as these designations at times are difficult to identify and problematic. The content in these magazines is presented in such a way that the editorial, advertising, and formatting boundaries often intersect, making it difficult to categorize much of the content. That is not to say, however, that we do not see important differences in the types of content, but that within the context of this study, which includes analysis of all content in each issue, there is no need for categorization. Further, our goal is to comprehend the intertextuality of the content and to view the magazine holistically. For these reasons the researchers feel that records of differing categorical totals would not have been a logical contribution in this study.

This decision to analyze both editorial and advertising stems from an understanding of the intertextuality of media texts. In other words, every text gains meaning in relation to other texts (Bakhtin, 1986; Thibault, 1991). Further, Schlenker et al. (1998), who investigated Seventeen magazine feature stories over six decades, note that neglecting to analyze advertisements is a limitation of their study. The authors say this is particularly true considering “for most issues, a larger number of pages are devoted to advertising than to editorials” (p. 148). Including advertising in the analysis of the current study offers a greater contribution to the field of teen magazines and themes of masculinity.

**Discursive analysis**

To examine how the constructions of masculinity have changed over 50 years, the researchers conducted a discursive analysis of all content, looking for themes and illustrations of masculinity (brought to light by previous research and analysis) in the selected issues of Seventeen magazine. Discursive analysis identifies themes in data (Lafrance, 2007). Part of discourse analysis, discursive analysis is a flexible term with no strict guidelines that steer the analysis. The process for analyzing the study depends greatly on the “epistemological framework being drawn upon” (Graham, 2005, p. 2).

Discursive analysis looks at how particular “versions of reality” as well as particular “regimes of truth” and power relations are produced in a particular context (Malson, Marshall, & Woollett, 2002, p. 478). A discursive view looks at bodies, identities, and surroundings and through these elements emphasizes the role of history, culture, and dynamic social practices (Pitts, 2003).

Inspired by Prusank’s (2007) methodology on teen magazines, the researchers used Strauss’ (1987) three coding passes to extract specific themes in the description of
masculinities. In the first pass, known as open coding, general themes were identified to organize the findings. The researchers did a close, careful initial reading to identify all material that contained any topics, inferences, or portrayals of boys or men. In the second pass, axial coding, the researchers focused on connections between the dominant themes that were identified. After an initial round of identifying materials that contained any male references, the researchers analyzed those pages again several times to look for recurrent themes and identified the dominant patterns of masculinity as portrayed in the magazine.

In the final pass, known as selective coding, the data that had been collected were examined for specific cases that illustrated the themes. This entire procedure was repeated across each issue to provide a complete picture of the content analyzed for this study.

Analysis

*The evolution of masculinity*

From the analysis it is clear that masculinity in the pages of *Seventeen* magazine is neither monolithic nor stable. Dominant portrayals of masculinity, however, appear during both decades, offering distinctly different constructions of hegemonic masculinity. Following is a description of how the two decades of content depict boys to girls and ultimately construct a dominant masculinity for each era. The researchers extracted the three most dominant themes from each decade to discuss the hegemonic masculinity present during the different eras.

*Masculinity circa 1945-1955*

During this decade, themes of masculinity were systematically associated with positive ideals and enjoyed a glorified position in society. Masculinity was consistently associated with intelligence, success, and authority.

*Intelligent and successful.* Men are shown to be smart and successful in the earliest decade of *Seventeen* magazine. Although a publication for girls, it typically included the masculine perspective when discussing areas of success in the academic field or workforce. Examples of this type of masculine construction include a story titled “Most likely to succeed,” which describes scholarships won by both a boy and a girl but emphasizes the boy’s success (“Most likely,” 1954). The coverage of the boy includes a quote from him, though there is none from her, and the article has almost double the word count describing his success.

In another example, a caption in an article states, “Maybe you didn’t get into college this year. That happened to a lot of people—especially girls” (“College,” 1954, p. 79). The constant portrayal of males as the brainy ones reinforces the gender stereotype that men are naturally smarter than women and the natural leaders in the public sphere. It is the naturalness of these types of comments—without critical questioning about why women are enrolling less in colleges—that makes these articles damaging to women.
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Authoritative judge. Boys are constructed as authoritative figures in judging acceptable standards for girls’ behavior and appearance, which offers an explanation for why girls in Seventeen’s pages sought to please them. In several advertisements promoting beauty products, girls were offered ways to fix themselves to appeal to boys, who were constructed as the authoritative judge. For example: “Smelly hair turning him away? Use Packer’s pine tar shampoo!” (Packer’s Pine Tar Shampoo ad, 1954, p. 141), “Nobody loves a fat girl!” (Ry Krisp ad, 1947, p. 235), “Don’t let smelly underpants ruin a chance for you at romance!” (Lux soap ad, 1945, p. 108), and “Scalp odor is offensive! Don’t risk offending personal closeups!” (Fitch’s Saponified Coconut Oil Shampoo ad, 1948, p. 238).

In addition to the threats in these advertisements, the bait tactic was another common-strategy in which girls were encouraged to live up to an ideal standard set for boys. For example, in a December 1948 advertisement, “For the pale hands he loves, try…” (Kotex ad, 1948, p. 14, added emphasis). In a similar ad for hair color, the text reads: “In the Spring, a young man’s fancy turns to...girls with bright, sparkling hair” (Nestle Colorinse ad, 1945, p. 132, added emphasis). Both the scare and bait tactics emphasize the importance of girls ensuring that their physical attributes are maintained for the pleasure of boys/men. But this consistent thematic portrayal of boys establishes a hierarchal order of masculinity over femininity.

In addition to being aesthetically pleasing to boys, girls are often taught the importance of behaving properly around boys/men. These texts further establish the notion of masculine authority in which boys are set up to be the ultimate arbiters of good taste and good sense. For example, an article advises girls the “right” way to send a picture to her serviceman boyfriend:

A guy is very particular about the way his girl looks to other men. When he passes around your picture to his buddies, he will be ultra sensitive to the sly glances they exchange if the dress you were wearing is too lowcut...be as good-looking as all get out…but not at the expense of your dignity and charm. (Send your picture, 1953, p. 45)

If a girl overdresses to go bowling, she will be classified as high maintenance and the boy’s admiration becomes “less than whole” (Moench, 1950, p. 109). If a girl is too talkative, that also turns a boy off (Moench, 1950). If a girl does not want to participate in an activity that the boy invites her to join, she is a “wet blanket” (Moench, 1950, p. 109). While these are all examples of how the texts instill in girls the idea that they must please boys, the result is the solidification of masculine authority. More common advice for girls in behaving around boys included the following (Leavy, 1955):

Don’t, all in a rush, try to worm your old friends in on your date...otherwise you run the risk of exiting him out. (p. 109)

If you haven’t been dancing with this fellow before, accept any excuse he makes as to why he can’t be with you that night. (p. 109)
If you absolutely won’t ask first, you run the risk of seeing very little of this man. (p. 109)

You’ve got to buck some new competition, that’s sure. (p. 114)

You’ve got to be just as bright as ever against a new background. (p. 114)

You’ve got to keep the spark showing to its best advantage. (p. 114)

The constant discussion of how to behave around men contributes to the discourse of how prized a masculine presence and opinion is in a girl’s life. From beauty to behavior, a girl must maintain her absolute best for boys and, in turn, masculinity is set up as an authoritative judge wise to what is important.

Dichotomous gender constructions. One of the most visible constructions of masculinity in this early decade was how it was defined as anything but feminine. This created a clear gender dichotomy by instilling the idea that masculinity is a set of traits reserved for boys. Girls are cautioned within the magazine against possessing any masculine traits, particularly related to having strong bodies and strong opinions. In one example, a story features this caption: “Natalie could swim, play tennis, do most things better than any boy, which, as every girl knows, can create a problem” (Stoutenberg, 1949, p. 34).

The message is clear: If a girl is good at sports, or worse yet, better than boys at the sport, it will lead to trouble. Girls are taught that they should never be better than boys in anything except activities deemed too menial for men, like cooking, cleaning, and gardening. Through this thematic presentation of girls’ and boys’ space and capabilities, femininity and masculinity are firmly established, and a hierarchy is reinforced. The message is clear: Boys are better than and more important than girls.

Masculinity circa 1995-2005

Fast-forward 50 years, and there was a dramatic shift in the themes of masculinity in Seventeen magazine from 1995 to 2005. No longer the positive portrayal of masculinity in the forties and fifties, masculinity is rearticulated as the sex-obsessed callous and foolish boy.

For this decade, the emphasis on boys (and masculine themes) in the magazines is heavily present in the advice columns (“The boyfriend clinic,” “Boy answers”), including an advice column written by a boy (“Dear Answer Boy”), as well as personal stories from readers (“Trauma-rama,” “Can you believe this guy?”), feature articles (“50 little clues he’s crushing on you,” “Romance Roadblocks”), and quizzes (“Do guys rule your life?” and “Is he a keeper?”).

Boys are foolish. In the more recent decade, masculinity as idiotic is a common theme that contrasts greatly with the earlier image of boys. Examples of this theme include, in an advice column, a girl trying to understand why a boy will not stop asking her out, and the columnist writes: “It could be that he’s just a stubborn, thickheaded boy (one of millions,
trust me)” (Delbanco, 1998, p. 86). This contrasts greatly with the earlier theme of masculinity in which boys were held up as smart and possessing good judgment.

In more recent themes, girls are repeatedly taught that boys are foolish. This finding confirms Prusank’s (2007) argument that teen magazines show boys as incapable of appropriate behavior in personal relationships. The inappropriate behavior is extended to their overall demeanor as well. Below are a few examples of how boys are often presented as the infantile idiot:

A little adult interaction may be just the tickler to getting Mr. Dense to chill. (Delbanco, 1998, p. 86)

Do they know him by name at West Coast Video? Tell your boyfriend to put down the remote and show you a good time. (Christino, 1999, p. 148)

Whenever your crush and his buddies get together, it seems as if they develop the intellect of five year olds. (Parris, 1999, p. 148)

When you get there he’s with three of his (uninvited) friends, trying to see who can eat the most wasabi without drinking water. (Christino, 1999, p. 149)

It has been five weeks, six days, four dates and 35 phone conversations since you met—it’s time for him to meet your parents. After thinking about it overnight, you decide it’ll be fine as long as he doesn’t belch, fart or tell that story about how he and his friends put a cherry bomb in the Porta Potti downtown. (Christino, 1999, p. 151)

Examples of this type of masculine construction dominated the contemporary magazines. An article titled “50 little clues he’s crushing on you” featured signs to tell if a boy is interested in a girl. Some of the points for recognizing the attraction include the following:

He’s nicknamed you Melvin, Fleaona, Spleen, Gayleen the Chicken Pox Queen or some other awful (but affectionate) thing. (Rigaud, 1999, p. 76)

He’s been known to grab your tampons out of your bag and wave them around in study hall (nice!). (Rigaud, 1999, p. 76)

He pretended he was going to pull down your pants at the roller rink but you know he’d never, ever humiliate you like that. (Rigaud, 1999, p. 76)

This theme, in stark contrast to the capable masculinity of the 1940s and 1950s, is not harmless to girls, even if on the surface it seems to simply denigrate boys. Prusank (2007) points out that “this constant portrayal of males as interpersonally incompetent simply reinforces an existing gender regime which allows for women to assume responsibility for the unpaid and often invisible work of maintaining personal relationships” (p. 169).
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Boys are callous and sex obsessed. Apart from the theme of the immature fool, the representation of the callous male has emerged as one of the norms in the representation of masculinity. Insensitivity and cruelty contribute to the more sinister representations of the new masculinity, confirming what many scholars of contemporary masculinity have seen (Kimmel, 1997; Katz, 2006). The ways in which boys assert their cruelty are not necessarily the focus of Seventeen articles but are found throughout the texts in snippets. For example, in one article, a reader writes:

This guy had been telling everyone that! [telling everyone that he and this girl were dating.] But today I heard he’s been saying I’m ugly—but that he’s planning on asking me out if another girl turns him down. (Dear Answer Boy, 1998, p. 55)

This is one of many examples of this callous theme of masculinity. Another equally disturbing feature of the representation of boys is the shift to sex-obsessed boys. But oftentimes these two attributes—sex obsessed and callous or cruel—are combined, making the theme more troubling. Boys are presented as lying to girls, cheating on girlfriends, and only wanting sex from girls. For example, in one article, a female reader states:

I’ve been going out with my boyfriend for more than a year, and I love him so much—I gave up everything for him, including my best friends. But he flirts with other girls. I cry every day and night. I try to love him less, but I can’t. What should I do? (Delbanco, 1999, p. 54)

Much less often in Seventeen are there stories about good boyfriends. Common complaints by girls in Seventeen are often voiced in statements like the following ones found in an article titled “Can you.” Leah from San Francisco writes:

Later I realized he dumped me so he could be single and free to kiss other girls at the party. Ugh! (Can you, 1996, p. 58)

Claire from Lancashire, England, writes:

I went looking for my boyfriend and finally found him snogging my best friend! (Can you, 1996, p. 58)

Michelle from Slave Lake, Alberta, Canada writes:

I returned to find my crush making out with my best friend. And I had been gone only a minute! (Can you, 1996, p. 58)

Though these are readers’ personal experiences and may not intend to be indicative of all boys, the consistent publication of such similar experiences from readers issue after issue produces a pattern that contributes to the discourse of a mean and callous masculinity, similar to contemporary hyper-masculinity and in contrast to the suave, smart boys with manners found in the pages of Seventeen during the 1950s.
Not only are girls contributing to this mean boys discourse, but the boys’ personal voices also reinforce their mean traits. For example, in a feature article titled “Are you just a hookup?” (Daly, 2003), a boy says, “I’ve hooked up with girls just to get them to stop talking” (p. 68, added emphasis). This becomes a pull quote highlighted in bold and centered in the middle of the page. A few quotes from the same article include the following:

I mean, if someone’s a good hookup, then you’ll hook up with them again. Then you check out if she’s interesting or not. (p. 68)

After the first night, if I had a good time [after hooking up], I always call her to go out to dinner or something. I mean, unless she was an awful hookup—learn somewhere else; I’m not a training camp. (p. 69)

Also throughout the magazine during the later decade, girls complain and lament about boys being sex obsessed, and boys themselves confirm it. While the above article serves as an extreme example, the notion of sex-obsessed boys in contemporary content was abundant. This theme of masculinity might be the most harmful to boys and girls in contemporary society as it reifies long-held views of male lust that excuse boys’ behavior and put girls in harm’s way.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The authors are aware that numerous events over the decades have caused shifts in masculinity and that it is neither fixed nor monolithic. This research is not intended to explain the reasons behind the changes but instead to show how these changes are evident in *Seventeen* magazine. This research illustrates the very different ways that *Seventeen* has presented themes of masculinity over the years and adds to a body of literature that examines both magazines and masculinity. The masculinities in *Seventeen* during the two decades the researchers examined reinforce cultural norms of the time, drawing images of boys that are present throughout the popular cultural images. For example, the Cary Grant image of the 1940s and 1950s versus the tough, callous image seen in the movies and video games of today. The images of masculinity in *Seventeen* magazine then are not seen as shocking. But what the researchers found surprising was the near completeness and narrowness of the dominant image during each of the decades examined. The researchers posit that while the themes of masculinity in the 1940s and 1950s as demonstrated in *Seventeen* magazine are far from ideal, it was less damaging and dangerous than contemporary themes of masculinity. Within the context of research that shows the influence teen magazines have on girl readers, it can be assumed that girls learn something about boys and what to expect of them from their pages.

The themes of masculinity in the later decade evolved into a more toxic one as the ambiguity (as agreed by experts in masculinity like Jackson Katz, R.W. Connell, and Sut Jhally) of what it means to be a man has given rise to a more violent, callous, and muscle-bound version of a man. This new masculinity is harmful to our society at large but is especially dangerous for girls and women. When girls are considered sexual conquests rather than potential homemakers (not an ideal but a less physically dangerous role), the stage is set
for violence against women, including rape and abusive relationships. While we found nothing in the pages of Seventeen magazine to illustrate extreme and blatant physical harm to girls at the hands of boys, it is dangerous as a culture to set girls up to believe that callous, sex-obsessed boys are simply a norm of masculinity.

The representation of boys as callous and insensitive within the context of the entire magazine presents other troublesome issues for girls too. Masculinity is associated with much negativity, but yet girls are taught that it is still a presence they should desire in their lives—at least according to Seventeen magazine. In the earlier decade analyzed, the lure of having a boy around made more sense. Who would resist having a bright, intelligent, and competent boy around? In the recent decade, boys are more often represented as sex-obsessed fools, but flip the page and another article aims to coach girls on how to win boys’ attention. The contradiction of such messages is unfortunate.

The researchers are not arguing that the constructions of masculinity and femininity in the 1940s and 1950s were without problems. But the researchers do think the consequences of these representations were different. There is no denying that girls were deemed second-class citizens. Girls were expected to be attractive for boys, accept that boys were naturally more intelligent, and be grateful to have boys in their life. A girl’s entire meaning of existence depended on if she managed to achieve a permanent masculine presence in her life. Further, the texts reiterated the gendered ideologies of the time, dictating women’s place in the private sphere, where they were expected to master all that was associated with the home. Men (and masculinity) belonged in the public sphere, where they were expected to succeed in the workplace in order to provide for the home. The representations left little room for variance, which is an unfortunate construction of gender norms. But the construction of masculinity included a degree of respect and kindness toward girls. Girls needed to look and smell good for boys, who were expected to behave in a well-mannered way.

The recent decade’s themes of masculinity are overwhelmingly unkind, sex obsessed, and foolish. In 1984 Mosher and Sirkin measured the traits of hyper-masculinity using three components: Calloused Sex Attitudes, Danger as Exciting, and Violence as Manly. The results of this analysis shown that the calloused sex attitudes (sex-obsessed) and the violence as manly trait (callous and cruel) are perpetuated in Seventeen magazine. Our research confirms what Scharrer (2005) argues, that the media play a role in perpetrating the development of hyper-masculinity. But it is important that the transformation of these themes is recognized, because in the 1940s and 1950s, when masculinity was understood as the almighty, some young female readers of the magazines were convinced of that as well. Now that masculinity is presented as mean, foolish, and perverted, girls reading Seventeen magazine are conditioned to believe that these are normative masculine traits and, in turn, may not expect more from the boys in their lives.

Society needs to consider the consequences of such contemporary constructions of masculinity aimed at our youth. If meanness is presented as being a natural part of young masculinity, could it escalate to pure violence as masculinity matures? If it is acceptable for
Evolving Themes of Masculinity in Seventeen Magazine

younger boys to be unkind, why is it unacceptable for men to be violent? More than 90 percent of violent crimes in the U.S. are committed by men (Katz, 2006). According to a U.S. Surgeon General’s Report, “being male” is listed as a contributing risk factor for violence in those 6 to 18 years old (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Of course, it is much more complicated than a simple causation hypothesis to assume that mean male teenagers evolve into violent men, but it does provoke some thoughtful possibilities as to when and where the violence begins. In light of statistical data on the numbers of rapes and violence perpetrated by boys and men against girls and women, constructions of masculinity cannot be ignored. As Katz (2006) argues, as a culture we need to offer expanded possibilities for masculinity that challenge the narrowly defined tough, mean, and violent male of today. Teen magazines have the power to take part in this redefinition of masculinity.

Further, it is worth reiterating the dangers associated with accepting and tolerating the idea that boys have naturally higher sex drives. This myth simply offers an explanation or excuse for sexual irresponsibility and violence. If it is always brushed aside as a “guy thing” to be driven by raging hormones, then boys are excused for acting on sexual impulses. If it is accepted that boys act out on their sexual drive, then where is the line drawn between accepting it as a boy’s characteristic and condemning it as sexual assault? We must teach our boys and girls to demand responsibility for boys’ actions. With the negative construction of masculinity, not only are girls shortchanged, but boys are too. Boys have more potential than simply being sex obsessed, foolish, and mean. Yet through this constant pattern of negativity that represents masculinity, boys are not being offered the chance to live up to higher standards or allowed the room for growth and excellence, and they are not permitted to show so-called feminine attributes and emotions that allow them to be a full human beings. Girls suffer in that they grow accustomed to accepting that these are common masculine traits. If girls want to attract boys, they have to learn to accept these characteristics. This can in the long run lead into more dangerous territory, such as accepting sexual violence as part of a “boys will be boys” explanation.

With so few studies focused on the construction of masculinity in magazines targeting teenage girls, this research adds to a sparse but very important area of study as teen girl magazines socializes teenage girls to the “hypervulnerability to media portrayals of masculinity” (Prusank, 2007, p. 162).

As illustrated, it is significant to explore masculinity in teen girl magazines because these magazines serve as a springboard for young female readers into an array of ideologies about masculinity. In fact, Firminger (2006) argues that these young readers are not supplementing the information they are acquiring from the magazines with more reliable sources. Most of their frames of references about boys rely on the information offered by teen magazines. This is crucial because through the themes of masculinity presented on these pages, girls learn clues about how to act around boys, react to boys’ behaviors, and understand hegemonic masculinity.
Although this study produces compelling results, it is limited only to one teen girl magazine. Future studies should include a wider selection of teen girl magazines to examine if the results are able to be replicated. This research can be further explored by interviewing teen girls who read Seventeen and gauge if their perception of boys mirror the content that they consume. Interviews with editors at Seventeen magazine would also contribute to an interesting angle to explore the articulations of why certain content was selected over others.

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