# Adolescent Magazines

## Hair, Nails, Clothes and Boyfriends—is there anything else?

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Adolescent magazines are a modern source of information for adolescents. The information found in these magazines can be crucial to young readers who are beginning to make major choices about how to distinguish themselves by gender. If society and individuals judge female adolescents by their hairstyle, apparel, makeup and jewelry, these judgments can have many effects on youth as they determine their gender roles. Magazines can play a profound role in the socialization of young females. But what content is found in magazines? Is it skewed and stereotypical and if so, does it limit the context in which an adolescent female may define herself?

Generally, the gender of an individual is very closely related to his/her sexuality. Because of this, it is important to talk about the effects that social ideals about sexuality portrayed in magazines have on a female's gender. The following are some questions that need to be answered to protect the overall well being of young females. Are adolescent females getting information that will create a positive self-image? Will their sense of self empower them in the future? What are the underlying messages sent to young women about their roles in society and are these roles highly valued? In addition, what are the underlying themes regarding sexuality? This study examined articles found in current magazines in an attempt to answer these questions.

It is crucial for society, to find out where young females get their sense of self-worth. It is a distressing fact that teenage girls often suffer from very low self-esteem and depression and a general dislike of their bodies (Thorne 1993). These could be products of the way in which young females are portrayed in magazines and other forms of media. The focus on outward, superficial traits can be damaging to anyone, especially to an adolescent whose body is changing in such a rapid and unfamiliar way.

The medical and psychiatric fields often intervene in problems related to teenage self-esteem. Treatment of depression and eating disorders, like anorexia nervosa and Bulimia, costs consumers and insurance companies and society undeterminable amounts of money each year. These phenomena do not seem to be subsiding. The costs to young females are even greater. They are left with a sense of insecurity that isn't likely to be cured by medication or psychological treatment, because of the underlying ideals in society, which express the need for females to be young and flawless. These insecurities could be directly related to a sense of imperfection, because these ideals can not be accomplished.

A good example of this underlying ideal of perfection is shown when advertisers continuously display flawless models. These models push products that are supposed to have the same effect of beautification and perfection on consumers. The average model usually weighs 30 pounds less than and is almost six inches taller than the average adolescent girl (Hesse-Biber, 1996). No wonder teens see themselves as inadequate.

Hesse-Biber (1996:97) claims that teen magazines define "what young girls are supposed to be doing with their lives, what . . . is important . . . and valued". She believes that teens are being socialized into being obsessed with their bodies. Other researchers want to maintain that readers have agency. I tend to agree with Dawn Currie (1997) when she states, "while 'gender' is an individual accomplishment_expressing compliance or resistance—it is not carried out in a context of women's making". In other words, teens can comply with or resist stereotypes found in magazines, but do not control the limited information found in them regarding their gender and sexuality.

## Methods & Procedures

I conducted a content analysis on the articles found in adolescent magazines. Predetermined coding sheets were used to assist in the analysis. Nine magazines were analyzed with the following titles and dates: *Campus Life* 11/97, *Campus Life* 10/97 (special college edition), *Breakaway* 8/97, *YM* 8/97, *Seventeen* 4/97, *Seventeen* 8/97, *Teen* 8/97, *Teen* 4/97, and *YM* 3/97. A total of 80 articles, 60 from secular magazines and 20 from Christian magazines were examined. The number of articles in each category was counted to locate specific trends. Some articles contained information that fit into more than one category.

Five different categories involving four subcategories were used. The first category is Sexuality. Within sexuality, I examined information on prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, preventing pregnancy, different sexual practices and how to be "sexy" (or sexual attractiveness). The second category is Occupation, subcategories include information on stereotypical careers (sec-

retarial, teacher, nursing), non-stereotypical careers (doctor, pilot, chemist), and skills needed, and apparel required for certain jobs. Thirdly, Academics included college information, present academic success, foreign academia and scholarship information. The category Beauty includes information on makeup and nails, hair, apparel, fitness and diet. The last category Spirituality includes topics of, methods of prayer/meditation, self-esteem issues, psychological issues and another category for items such as ESP, intuition and dreams.

This range of topics was chosen because I believe they are representative of what a young female should know about in order to succeed in life and plan for a future. These categories include stereotypical information like beauty and sexuality, as well as other pursuits which make up a well rounded person like academics, occupation and spirituality.

This study concentrated on the three major, secular, female teen magazines on the market. There are other magazines, yet they do not receive the consumer interest that these three magazines do and have for around three decades. The Christian magazines studied were different. The magazine *Breakaway* is written for young male readers and *Campus Life* is written for both genders. Secular male magazines were not represented because there are no exclusively male magazines in this form.

## Results and Discussion

### Secular Magazines

Content analysis of the data found in secular magazines clearly shows that articles are concentrated in two main areas: sexuality and beauty. Magazines show teenagers that looking sexy and acting in ways in which to attract the opposite sex is the norm. In this study, information on "being sexy" was found eight times within the 60 secular magazines, which was more often than any other sexuality subcategory. Information on sexually transmitted diseases was given six times, information on pregnancy four times and information on other sexual preferences five times (abstinence 4 out of the five).

Yet the double standard still exists prohibiting young women from being sexually active (Wolf, 1997). This was clear in an article written by a young girl. She writes that she totally enjoys sex with her boyfriend and has a stronger sex drive than he does. She wants to know "Am I weird?" (YM, 3/97). While young men who are sexually active are accepted, if not encouraged, young women are rejected and discouraged. Society, especially through the media, has trapped young people into believing that they should look sexy, indeed be sexy but not be sexually active.

A feminist theoretical approach to female adolescent socialization claims

that the "traditionally socialized teenage girl" will learn that her looks are what's important about her especially when used to attract a male to take care of her. She also realizes that her place is in the home with the children. Also, her job will not pay as much or be valued as much as her husband's. These differences will appear naturally linked with her gender (Peirce, 1990). The content in magazines which young females read seems to support this theory.

The content almost exclusively covers beauty, sex, and heterosexual relationships. There is also a definite slant toward the Caucasian, middle to upper class, as the norm. And homosexuality is certainly not considered a norm, indeed it is rarely mentioned at all. There are exceptions to some of these rules found in teen magazines designed for consumers of a subculture within our culture namely, Christian magazines. Differences between secular, or main stream, magazines and Christian magazines will follow.

Adolescent females receive a clear expectation from secular magazines. They are to be young, thin, and attractive to males. Beyond that they are given little or no room for deviation. Little instruction is given regarding the future either, which leaves these young people in a present where they are not able to measure up. We should be concerned that these young people are going to be women soon and that they are getting very little guidance about what it takes to succeed in life.

Of course, in order to come across as sexy one must pay heed to the hundreds of advertisements found in magazines. The themes: beauty through makeup, nail polish, hair-products, colorings, accessories, clothing and the list goes on and on. Not only are the advertisements saturated with "beauty" products, but reference to beauty is found more often in each magazine than any other subject. I found a total of 44 articles in secular magazines concentrating on beauty. In fact they are found nearly twice as much as subjects on sexuality which is a common theme, by it's own right. Many articles are even entitled Beauty, Hair Info, or Your Looks.

Another way to appear attractive to boys is by being fit through exercise or diet. I found fifteen articles on this topic, which was more than any other subcategory under beauty. (Other categories: makeup/nails-9 occurrences, hair-12 occurrences and fashion-8 occurrences) However, exercise was also lauded as a way to relieve stress and menstrual discomfort in many instances. Yoga was suggested as a way of exercise, not a way of obtaining inner strength (although it fit in the spiritual code of meditation it was not usually promoted in that way).

For the most part, girls were encouraged in several ways to attract males. In all of these articles stereotypical views of both females and males were

maintained. Girls were supposed to attract a boy and boys were usually portrayed as "wanting to go too far". Flirting was a major function for girls. One picture representing the article in *Teen*, The rules of flirting, (Appendix A) read "Flirt until you're this close." The heterosexual couple is front to front in what appears to be a naked pose.

Based on the premise of this research it was a surprise that thirteen articles had information relating to college. However it was not surprising that the college information given had nothing to do with academics. There was a monthly run article in *Seventeen* entitled "College". However, no academic information was found within it. It did not mention courses, grades, expenses or procedures of college life. The only thing mentioned was socializing. One "College" article focused on all of the types of people you can meet in the halls of the dorms.

Only one article satisfied all of the codes for occupation. This article interviewed a female in a traditional role of fashion designer and a female in a nontraditional role, as a cargo plane pilot. While this nontraditional approach was encouraging, one article from 6 secular magazines did not make a big enough impression.

This narrow set of information found in adolescent magazines gives young females information on their external features that are presently important to them mostly because society deems it so. But again, what about their futures? What about being well rounded people? What about the young female's self-esteem? This is where some important new insights about gender roles appeared.

Even though the framework of the magazine articles had a biased view of norms being Caucasian, middle/upper class with a major focus on beauty and heterosexuality, they encouraged young females to be independent. Teens were inspired to make demands from their male friends, to stand up for what they believe in and put themselves first. Suggestions included knowing yourself and your boundaries and sticking to them; don't give into boys or other friends on things that you really don't want to do. These findings are heartening. Possibly society is moving away from the expectations of passivity from females.

Once again, however, no direction is given on how to become independent and learn to know and trust your boundaries. Another way to look at it could be in the framework of the double standard mentioned earlier. Girls are still defined by how well they can attract and maintain a relationship with a boy. Telling them to keep their boundaries sacred could just be another way of saying be sexy, but don't have sex.

## Christian Magazines

It was easy to draw stark comparisons between secular and Christian magazines. Those topics, education and spirituality, which were missing in the secular magazines were prominent in the Christian magazines. Beauty and sexuality, the bulk of the secular magazines, were totally absent in the Christian magazines. The topic that was missing from both types of magazines was that of occupations. There were one or two advertisements, regarding job positions, in the Christian magazines to match the single article found mentioned above.

Secular data supports the perception that adolescents should be obsessed with their bodies. While external appearance is somewhat important there certainly are other attributes about people that are more important. The concern that young girls are receiving too much beauty information and not enough, or any, information on being a well-rounded, successful person. Christian magazines address this problem by focusing on spiritual and intellectual achievement.

Prayer was mentioned nine times in the twenty articles analyzed from the Christian magazines. It was not used in the way that secular magazines used suggestions of yoga. Prayer was proposed as a way to call on a higher power, in this case God, to increase inner strength. Inner strength is needed in everyday life to resist involvement in things such as, drugs alcohol and sexual activity. These activities are creating social problems among teens. News reports and social service organizations can report the exact numbers of teenage pregnancies, death by overdose and accidents caused by drunk driving. Teaching young people direct ways in dealing with these problems are favored by the general public. Christian magazines are doing just that.

Education is another way to create a complete person. Formal education is generally seen in a positive light, in society. The Christian magazines studied mentioned such information. One of the magazines studied was a special college edition, where 10 articles were specifically about college information. Articles included information on dates and deadlines, visiting college fairs, four mistakes you don't want to make, how to write a great application essay, the college interview and college sports. These articles were insightful and gave accurate information on preparations for entering college. However, the predominant advertisements concentrated on Christian colleges across the country. Other advertisements included Christian books, music and concert information. There were no advertisements or articles for beauty tips or products!

Christian magazines, espcially *Campus Life*, differed from secular in that

they included articles that were representative of both genders. The pictures accompanying articles represented both males and females. Advertisements were gender inclusive as well. Also, it was found that a real effort was used in including all major races. Pictures for articles and advertisements included African-Americans, Latin-Americans, Asian-Americans and Caucasians. The young people were much more representative of the general public.

The fact that articles found in Christian magazines were more gender inclusive probably has to do with the fact that it was written for both genders. However, this doesn't explain why the different ethnic groups were so represented. It also doesn't explain the narrow context of the secular magazines in regards to race and body sizes. The Christian magazines are concerned with a wide variety of readers and do not want to appear exclusive. They seem to celebrate diversity and individuality.

The only exception to this inclusive representation was homosexuality; there was no reference to homosexuality. However, sexuality was only a theme in one article. Abstinence was promoted when sexuality was discussed in the article, "Love, Sex and the Whole Person." Pregnancy was discussed in only one instance in a question and answer format where a young man had a pregnant girlfriend who wanted an abortion. He didn't want to tell her she couldn't, but was still concerned for the baby. Advice included talking with her and his parents and a Christian counseling center about the problem.

## Conclusion

The hypothesis of this research, that adolescent females are being socialized to believe that external appearance is the most important attribute they have and their value is obtained through this attribute, seems to be supported by the data found in secular magazines. Heterosexuality was also found to be a main theme in secular magazines. Other research has obtained similar results. The emphasis on a female's beauty and how it attributes to heterosexual relationships is distinct. Peirce (1990) found that the media perpetuates the ideas that physical beauty is the standard by which females are being valued through advertisements, stories and commercials about beauty products, as well as, using only very attractive people as models for products.

Although studies done on adolescent magazines have been limited, findings agree that these magazines are not keeping up with the societal changes created by feminist ideology (Currie, 1997). "adolescent magazines . . . are . . . characterized as promoting the socialization of girls into traditional womanhood through messages that emphasize physical beautification and heterosexual romance" (Currie, 1997:456). In other words, young female magazines are perpetuating ideals that are influenced by the underlying patriarchal

system in America. The position taken is that females are defined by the relationships they hold with males, with beauty as the catalyst for these relationships. This is not the case for males, who are defined through sports and careers.

This patriarchal philosophy is limiting for females. Females are not encouraged enough to choose their own path in life. They are not encouraged to set goals and define steps toward those goals. With the emphasis on an obsession of physical attributes young girls do not get enough information on internal attributes. Education is seen as a social time. Spirituality or a good self-esteem is not affirmed as a part of what gains access to future opportunities. Through secular magazines and other media, young females have no insight to the future.

The female adolescent is receiving information that could create a good self-esteem from both secular and Christian magazines. There is difference found between the emphasis and realistic nature of this advice, in the secular and Christian magazines. In the secular magazines advertisements and articles bombard young girls with ideals of beauty and sexuality as measurements of their self-worth. In the Christian magazines self-worth is defined through internal strength and educational aspirations.

Secular magazine emphasis on physical beauty is not practical for young girls because girls don't stay young forever. Physical beauty fades (if one has it to begin with) and the flawless beauty portrayed in magazines is unobtainable anyway. Christian magazines concentrate on traits that will strengthen a person's sense of self in a way that is lasting. The strong and secure inner self and improving the mind through knowledge create a sense of self that can be carried into the future. The empowerment gained from these traits are long lasting and more realistic.

The theme here is not to say that the Christian religion has all the answers to the problem of the lack of self worth found in adolescent females today. But the underlying messages from the Christian magazines are important. What would it be like if the two types of magazines would merge? At least half of the beauty and heterosexual, how to get a boyfriend, information could be cut from magazines and replaced by an emphasis on inner strength and improving the mind, for both genders and all races.

It is recognized that most females of this age are interested in males. This is the age where the definition and guidelines of sexuality are forming. It is not advisable to ignore the attraction that males and females feel at this time. Christian magazines seem to do just that. Education, regarding a girls physical body and a respect for her whole self, is key in dispelling some of the major social problems surrounding teenage sexuality like pregnancy, date rape

and sexually transmitted diseases. However, if teens have long-term goals that are built around a strong sense of self they will be less likely to take risks, on feelings that may interfere with long term goals.

There has been very little research done on adolescents and media influences. More research must be done in order to have concrete theories about this topic. Important studies could include the influence of role models and mentors found in teen magazines, like musicians and actors, on young female's self worth. Another interesting study might be done on magazines that are being read by male adolescents. Which magazines are they reading and what are the underlying messages for males? It would also be interesting to find out how females are portrayed through these mediums? Children's magazines would also be important. Discovering how early gender norms and socializations of people begin and what kind of influence that has on people could be a starting place for social change, or at least awareness.

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