

A SEXUAL EDUCATION:
SEX MESSAGES IN *SEVENTEEN* MAGAZINE

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ABSTRACT

Seventeen magazine has been entertaining and educating teenage girls since its inception in 1944. Since that time, the magazine has remained a popular source of fashion, beauty, relationships, and even sex advice among young women. This study examines the messages that *Seventeen* provides its readers regarding sexuality and sexual health.

A qualitative textual analysis of 20 issues of *Seventeen* magazine from the last five years (2006 to 2010) examine the messages of sexual health, sexuality and romance exhibited in editorial texts. The findings reveal that there are two types of articles: articles about a wide range of sexual health topics, which portray teenage girls in sexual relationships, and articles about innocent romance, which portray teenage girls in non-sexual relationships. Using framing theory, the textual analysis of the articles of *Seventeen* magazine reveals a division between sexual health messages and romantic messages, which leads to a divided portrayal of healthy sexual relationships among teenage girls.

CHAPTER ONE

Expecting the entertainment industry to acknowledge their responsibility to the public health may be naive, but the stone wall is beginning to crumble. Children and teenagers comprise a captive audience for entertainment producers, but they also represent the next and only source of adults in American society.

— Victor Strasburger and Edward Donnerstein

Children, Adolescents, and the Media: Issues and Solutions

Pediatrics Journal, 1999

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to identify the sexual messages in *Seventeen* magazine, whether they are messages about sexiness or sexual health and if they contradict each other or help to educate readers. The World Health Organization defines sexual health as ...

“a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships ...”¹

Sexual health education is important because of the rising number of sexual activities and sexual diseases in young people. According to a 2009 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 46% of U.S. high school students have had sex at least once, and 14% have had at least four partners. In addition,

¹ http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/gender_rights/sexual_health/en/

34% of those students who are sexually active did not use a condom during his or her last encounter. The CDC estimates that each year, there are approximately 19 million new sexually transmitted disease (STD) infections and nearly half of those are people ages 15 to 24 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2010). The younger a male or female adolescent first has intercourse, the less likely he or she is to use a contraceptive method and the higher risk he or she is for teenage pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections² (Brown, L'Engle et al. 2006). Teens are at a higher risk for contracting an STI than older adults; and they make up nearly half of the new STI cases in the U.S. (Kaiser Family Foundation 2011).

In order for teens to learn more about protecting themselves from STDs, there is an outlet in which they can gain information: the mass media. Mass media provide the means for consumers to be entertained, informed, and educated. Increasingly, media offer ways for adolescents to learn about the world around them, but the portrayals of sexuality they consume and lessons they learn from the media might be presented as a mediated-interpretation of reality rather than actual truth. Through television, movies, the Internet, magazines, and even cell phone browsing, teens have access to all kinds of portrayals, descriptions, and explanations of sex and sexuality—they might not even have to look further than the tabloid-like reality show, *Jersey Shore*. Pediatrician Victor C. Strasburger said that media tend to think of their adolescent audience as “hormones with legs” (2005) and appeal to that. The media can sometimes provide stereotypes and sexist images of sexual

² STD and STI are often used interchangeably. This research will use the term originally used in the research from which it was taken.

roles. Adolescents' exposure to sexual content across all media platforms—television, internet, and magazines, for example—has the potential to lead to beliefs that women are sex objects (Ward 2003; Peter and Valkenburg 2007).

However, what is often missing from the media's portrayals of teenage sexuality is sexual health. This inadequate, yet heavy, exposure to sexual messages “may lead to stereotypical or casual attitudes toward sexual relationships, distorted expectations, and irresponsible sexual decision-making,” not sexual health awareness (Ward 2003, p. 363). Researchers and parents alike acknowledge the role media play and how it is a responsibility for all forms of mass media to provide healthy portrayals of sexual roles and responsibilities (Chapin 2000). Specifically for *Seventeen* magazine, it is important that the content provide adolescent female readers with positive portrayals of sexual roles and informative health messages, both of which can contribute to an adolescent's development. *Seventeen* magazine is the oldest American magazine for teenage girls. And the magazine is used as a form of entertainment by teenagers—not educational—so the potential for incidental learning is high (Bleakley, Hennessy et al. 2009).

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Teens and the Media

Adolescence is a crucial stage of human development. Although scholars argue about the exact ways in which an adolescent develops and the proper labels to use for those methods of development, it is commonly accepted that youth are: developing a body image; starting to achieve economic and emotional independence; defining sex roles; developing relationships with the opposite sex; preparing for a future occupation and family roles; and learning civic competence (Chapin 2000). Media (which includes print, such as newspapers, magazines, television, movies, radio, video games and the Internet from computers, tablets and cellular devices) offer potential means for people to learn about the world around them, especially young people in these developmental years. As teens mature, they seek autonomy from their parents, so it is understandable that they would seek out other sources of information, such as the media (Chapin 2000). And media are a huge part of their lives.

In 2009, a study found that young people, ages 8 to 18, consume seven hours and 38 minutes of media daily (Rideout, Foehr et al. 2010). Whether it is music, television, the Internet, video games, social networking, or some other form, U.S. teenagers are spending nearly half of their waking hours engaged in media. Considered over a 7-day period, young people's average media use is nearly equal to or more than the amount of time the average adult spends at work each day. In

addition, with the ability to multi-task and use more than one medium at a time, young people are actually cramming 10 hours and 45 minutes worth of media content into that seven-and-a-half-hour time period (Rideout, Foehr et al. 2010). They are bombarded with images and messages that can impact their physical and mental health (Brown and Walsh-Childers 1994). According to a 2003 study, adolescents who heavily consume all forms of mass media are more likely to engage in risky behavior, specifically sexually risky behavior (Mastronardi). Sexually risky behavior includes having more than four partners, having sex without birth control methods or condoms, and using alcohol or drugs before or during intercourse (Talashek, Norr et al. 2003). It is not clear whether the media are creating reality or simply reflecting reality, but a 2006 study found that adolescents who were exposed to more sexual content in their “media diets” were more likely to be sexually active or have intentions to engage in sexual intercourse in the near future (L'Engle, Brown et al.). A study of teen girls and sexual content in the media, showed “a consistent relationship between earlier pubertal timing and greater interest in sexual media content” (Brown, Halpern et al. 2005). Girls who mature at a younger age are more interested in consuming sexual content in movies, television, music, and magazines, and the interest leads to a greater exposure. Through this exposure, teens are presented with many types of sexual scenarios in the media. And if those scenarios are not sexually responsible portrayals (such as showing use of protection), teens are less likely to be sexually responsible with their own encounters (Hust, Brown et al. 2008).

Media messages are a way for teens to learn about sexuality, but often what is missing from this media portrayal of sex is the health aspect. The media “diet” is lacking: teens have few “answers to questions about what it means to be a man or woman, when is sexual activity appropriate, what a healthy body self-image is, and how pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease can be prevented” (Strasburger 2005). The study does not mention (and often the media does not either) what “appropriate” means for sexual activity—is it according to the teen, parents, peers, etc.? The diet is lacking these answers because the predominate message is that sexual relationships are between heterosexual, unmarried partners without contraception and without consequence of pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease (Mastronardi 2003). Instead the media diet is full of the following themes: how to become a sexual object for men, working in relationships is the woman’s job, men are sexual and women are not (Ward 2003). Often these themes override the healthier themes that only occur sporadically within media messages. One study found that women who read teen-focused magazines, such as *Seventeen*, were “more likely to endorse stereotypical views of the male sexual role;” extended exposure to these themes and messages could lead to adoption of the dominant messages (Kim and Ward 2004).

Media as a Sexual Socializing Agent

Displays and talk of sexual activity are becoming increasingly frequent in media, and these displays often have inaccurate and misleading information about sexual intercourse and the consequences (Mastronardi 2003). Especially for youth,

developing healthy, accurate beliefs about sexuality is important. Because sexual content is pervasive in the media, it has the potential to be a powerful sexual educator and socializer. Sexual socialization is known as the process in which an individual gathers knowledge, attitudes, and values about sexuality over time from a number of outlets—verbally and nonverbally (Ward 2003; Bleakley, Hennessy et al. 2009).

Adolescents might learn sexual attitudes and values through information or observations of parents, same-gender peers, and educational instructors, but no source can be without flaws because of a number of reasons, including timing, inadequacy, or simple naïveté (Kallen, Stephenson et al. 1983). Many teens say that sexual education in school does not prepare them to communicate about sexual topics (Kaiser Family Foundation and *Seventeen* 2002). Media use differs by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic level, but a 2009 survey study found that only age determined whether an adolescent would rely more on sexual information from friends, parents, teachers, and the media for sexual information; as adolescents aged, they relied more and more on the media (Bleakley, Hennessy et al.). However, they did not solely rely on media sources for this information; the study also found that 89% of the youth who use media as sources of sexual information also use their friends as sources of sexual information. This figure suggests that the sources of information are not interchangeable; they go to media for some information and friends for other topics.

Although it might not be exclusive, all forms of mass media, including the Internet, serve as one source of contribution to sexual knowledge, especially for

specific lessons about sexuality. For example, mothers might teach daughters about moral views or virginity, educators can talk to students about STDs or HIV, and peers might learn from one another about sexual norms. Bleakley says that “different sources of information may disseminate different messages about sex, and thus the sources adolescents turn to for sexual information may differentially influence their sexual beliefs as well as their sexual behavior” (Bleakley, Hennessy et al. 2009). And if an adolescent receives inadequate information from parents or educators, those who are sexually active will seek out “information, on a need-to-know basis, from the best sources they can find” (Kallen, Stephenson et al. 1983). Although that conclusion is from 1983, the information teens acquire is still in the same place: they can find it in the media. Television has received a lot of attention as a sexual socializing agent from researchers, parents, and the government, but often other forms, such as magazines, are overlooked. Magazines are full of fiction and non-fiction, stories, tips, and Q&As that can teach a teen how to act, whether it is from an article portraying a healthy scenario of a teenage couple getting tested and using protection or a sexually irresponsible scenario.

While family members and school educators have an interest in adolescents’ acceptance of healthy attitudes and beliefs, the media are interested in making a profit (Chapin 2000). According to a 1997 Kaiser Family Foundation & Children Now Study, teens ranked entertainment media (television programming, magazines, and other forms of media that are consumed for teen entertainment, rather than news) as their top source for information about sexuality and sexual health (Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now 1997). A 2009 study found that the usage of

the media as a source for sexual socializing was most common among females and older adolescents (Bleakley, Hennessy et al. 2009). Because teens are often too embarrassed to ask certain questions about sexuality to their peers or parents, they will turn to the media (Brown, Halpern et al. 2005). The media are always there, even if other sources cannot provide answers.

The problem with media being a sexual socializer is that the media's primary concern is not the well-being of an adolescent as it is with family or educators. "The media are intentionally appealing, compelling, and engaging" in order to draw an audience and making a profit is their bottom line—not education (Ward 2003). In fact, a mixed-method (qualitative and quantitative) content study of adolescents' media (including television, movies, magazines, and music) found that there are three themes of sexuality in the media: (1) sexual health is funny or embarrassing to teens; (2) boys are obsessed with sex; and (3) girls are responsible for pregnancy and STD prevention and contraception use (Hust, Brown et al. 2008). Although these are not new themes, this 2008 study outlined the realities most clearly. To illustrate the first theme, Hust provided the example of *CosmoGIRL!* answering a reader's question about the worry of hair on her breasts and normal hormone changes, but the illustration associated with it was a fur-stuffed monkey. This tendency to poke fun at sexuality through the media could create a conflict between health journalism messages and acceptance of the messages.

Health Journalism

An important function of the media is to provide health information for those who are seeking it and even those who are not. Often, health journalists do not know to what degree the health messages influence audiences toward staying healthy and informed. However, Hinnant and Len-Ríos acknowledged that there are three points or objectives to health journalism (originally posited by Logan) that are commonly accepted (2009). First, health journalists can break down medical language into consumer-friendly language; second, health media information can be an outlet for public health literacy; and third, improving health coverage shows that journalists recognize their role to help with quality of life in consumers (Logan 1991). Although health journalism is criticized for not being as reliable as patient-education material or governmental websites, the role of reporters, writers, and editors does allow for human elements (a conversational tone and photography) to be included and serve in health understanding and comprehension (Hinnant and Len-Ríos 2009).

Although the media can provide sexual messages in these ways, adolescents often do not know how the media and these messages are affecting them. “Learning from media’ is incidental and passive, not intentional and active as it may be with conversations with parents and friends” (Bleakley, Hennessy et al. 2009). Reporting on health is sometimes seen as “soft journalism” in magazines even though it can have a serious effect on behaviors (Hinnant 2009). Brown and Walsh-Childers proposed the best way to report on health messages is through “entertainment-education” (also called “enter-educate,” “pro-social entertainment” or “education-entertainment”) because it is a powerful way to “sell” sexual behavior in a way that

audiences will not resist as they would in Public Service Announcements (Brown and Walsh-Childers 1994). Health messages in teen magazines include body weight issues, weight loss, depression, and sexual health. The messages in the media might be understood by the reader without realizing how she incorporates them into her own developing sense of sexuality (Brown 2002).

Although health journalism is a good way to report on public health messages, it is often missing or misrepresented in forms of media. For example, a study of *Seventeen* and *YM* magazine revealed that even in exercise articles, the content used language that centered on a girl's need to increase sexual desirability through exercise rather than for health reasons, through lines such as "Get a crazy sexy cool stomach!" or "the only three exercises you need to look great from behind" (Durham 1988). The magazines' adolescent audiences might comprehend the ultimate "goal" of exercise as sexual desirability or subtly learn that exercise is for sexual appearance rather than health.

Another example is that sex in mass media is often depicted as fun and risk-free. Sex is represented without what Brown calls the "three C's" of sexual behavior: commitment, contraceptives, and consideration of consequences (Brown 2002). In a survey of 10 women's and teen magazines, Barnett found that the pleasures of sex were removed from the physical consequences of intimacy (Barnett 2006). Young people could make the assumption that unprotected sex (without a condom or birth control method) is spontaneous, natural, enjoyable, and private whereas protected sex requires planning, caution, and work (Chapin 2000). In this instance, the media might serve as a "sexual 'superpeer' for teens, providing models of attractive older

adolescents engaging in risky behavior that might not be condoned in the teens consumer's own peer group" (Brown, L'Engle et al. 2006). For example, if a teenage girl is considering having sex with her boyfriend, but none of her friends have engaged in sexual activities, seeing an example on TV or reading about it in a magazine might give her the confidence because other people her age, outside her peer group, are doing it.

Specifically in magazines, teens are looking for information about sexuality and sexual health. A focus group of 13- to 24-year-old females found that they seek out magazine articles for what they are too embarrassed to ask their parents (Treise and Gotthoffer 2002). Because of the informal nature of magazine language, teens feel as if they are receiving information from a trusted friend. A discourse analysis of British teen magazines *J17*, *Bliss* and *Sugar*, which are similar to *Seventeen*, found that the idioms and colloquial language used (such as "go for it" and "fave") caused teens to read the magazines as if talking to their own peers (Tincknell, Chambers et al. 2003). In addition, the study found that teen magazines use the first person plural to cause the reader to feel included and part of a community (i.e. "We know what boys like, don't we?").

Serving the audience in this "entertainment-education" role is important because media can reinforce or reject the relatively consistent set of sexual and relationship norms and sexually responsible models (Brown and Walsh-Childers 1994).

Seventeen's Role in Adolescent Sexual Socializing

Magazines play an important role in teen girls' lives. They teach them about makeup, boys, fitness, and clothes. They teach them how to mature into women. They tell the stories of peers and celebrities. They entertain, educate, and inform. A 1996 study of the popular teen magazine *YM* showed that the fantasy themes from editorial materials gave teen girls information and advice on how to attract men and achieve beauty (Duffy and Gotcher 1996).

Magazines are different from other forms of media because they allow for private, repeated readings; they can be purchased in stores, obtained in libraries, or handed down from friends (Garner, Sterk et al. 1998). Even if a teenage girl is not allowed to have a computer in her room, she can easily keep reading materials secret (if necessary) from her parents.

As the longest standing U.S. magazine for teen girls, *Seventeen* has a rich opportunity for informing its audience of sex and sexual health. In a narrative analysis of *Seventeen* from 1974-1994, Carpenter found that the mention of sexuality increased over time: from 30.2% in 1974, to 38.2% in 1984, to 52.6% in 1994 (Carpenter 1998). Although the study has not been repeated, in 2000, the magazine paired with The Kaiser Family Foundation to provide "SexSmarts" information online and in an occasional print column.

In *Seventeen* magazine, sex is often seen through the filter of a fictitious or non-fiction account that has gone through an editing process: "teens decide to share their experience and shape their real stories to fit teen magazine genres, editors cull and edit submitted accounts" (Carpenter 2001). (The scripts in *Seventeen* almost

exclusively refer to heterosexual scripts, which in itself is seen through a specific frame. However, for the purposes of this study when referring to sexual scripts, it will always refer to heterosexual scripts unless otherwise noted.) The editorial decisions are often made based on cultural norms or company policies; this bias could cause a division between the information teens learn about sexuality in the magazine and the information they learn in school or at home. This sexy subculture in the media teaches many girls how to behave sexually and feel about the world around them. It can become confusing when female readers read something that is contradictory to what they hear from parents, teachers, or other sexual educators. This can occur in *Seventeen* magazine because of its variety of viewpoints (Carpenter 1998).

The messages can be contradictory, but Durham notes that there are also missing messages:

the absence of recognition of the validity of girls' sexual feelings apart from male sexual aggression, of alternative sexual orientations [and] of the possibility of pleasurable sex that is not related to succumbing or not succumbing to male desire (Durham 1988, p. 386).

In the case of similar British female teen magazines, the style of language and imagery is highly sexualized, but sex itself is not encouraged; instead there are two discourses: "knowing" through innuendos and education frameworks with advice on contraception (Tincknell, Chambers et al. 2003).

According to previous studies, a large part of the narrative in *Seventeen* is devoted to virginity scripts. A qualitative content analysis of the magazine from

1982-2001 found that this heavy emphasis on traditional virginity caused other, possibly risky, sexual acts to be less important (Medley-Rath 2007). In addition to the virginity scripts, Medley-Rath also found an emphasis on girls being pressured by boyfriends, which fails to acknowledge that females might also seek or desire sexual experiences.

There would be a large benefit to an adolescent's health if she could learn about sexual health, not only from parents, peers, and educators, but also from informative and educational media messages, specifically magazines. Studies show that parents rarely talk in a comprehensive manner to their children about sex and programs in school do not either (Brown, L'Engle et al. 2006). The specific medium of magazines is thought to be one of the most accessible forms of gathering knowledge about sexuality because of its "real-life" stories (Garner, Sterk et al. 1998). *Seventeen* magazine is full of information about sexuality via real-life stories and narratives, tips, Q&As, etc.

Research shows that *Seventeen* offers not only traditional sexual scenarios that encourage young women to refrain from intercourse, but also recreational scenarios that imply the opposite (Carpenter 1998). The recreational scenarios can be full of stereotypical images of femininity, which can provide the reader with messages of how to "be sexy," but these scenarios do not provide information on realistic ways to be healthy. In a study of sexual messages in women and teen magazines including *Seventeen*, researchers found that there is a disparity between the stories focused on sexual health versus non-health sex topics.

We find the readers are increasingly likely to have learned that they need to be more concerned about sex per se—for example, 21 ways to ‘make his thighs go up in flames’—rather than sexual health (Walsh-Childers, Gotthoffer et al. 2002, p. 167).

These conflicting messages make it difficult for a young reader to interpret what is actually healthy.

This research seeks to identify messages of sex in *Seventeen* magazine. It will contribute to this growing literature about teens, the media, and how a form of media can be a sexual socializer. The research can also help inform the fields of health journalism and public policy.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Design

Media Framing of Messages: A Theoretical Framework

Framing theory is rooted in a number of disciplinary traditions, but is specifically tied to symbolic interaction and social construction of reality (Baran and Davis 2003). In 1974, Erving Goffman introduced the concept of frame analysis, which attempted to explain how people make sense of their everyday lives (Goffman 1974). Using a frame analysis, a set of expectations is used to help the reader make sense of a social situation. Shifting from a frame that is more or less serious is called downshifting and upshifting (Baran and Davis 2003). The concept of framing is applied to the field of communications to see how mass media reinforce public culture. Framing is about “the way interests, communicators, sources, and culture combine to yield coherent ways of understanding the world, which developed using all of the available verbal and visual symbolic resources” (Reese 2001).

Every story in the media contains information and frames. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2009) define frames as “the devices that build the associations between concepts; information in a news story can cement the link, but it relies on a frame to build the associations” (p. 19). At its core, framing is all about selection and salience (Entman 1993). Entman says to frame is

to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as (1) to promote a particular problem definition, (2) causal interpretation, (3) moral

evaluation, and/or (4) treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman 1993).

Fully developed frames serve these four purposes, but a frame does not have to include all four of these functions.

A frame is organized in a way that gives meaning to the social reality and existing frames within it. It can be organized cognitively, which helps consumers understand a social phenomena a certain way, or frames can be organized culturally (Reese 2001). The product of framing activity is referred to as “collective action frames,” which are constructed to conform to a shared understanding of a problem or condition needing change (Benford and Snow 2000). Communicators make conscious and unconscious judgments by communicating through frames, based on the organization of their belief systems (Entman 1993).

Analyzing a frame helps to illuminate the depth of media discourse and the subtle nuances of a topic. These nuances can change based on the way in which the topic is framed. Framing is often studied as a way to construct and process news discourse or as a characteristic of the discourse itself. There are three key figures in the news discourse process: sources, journalists, and audience members; they all behave in their socially defined roles (Pan and Kosicki 1993). In the field of mass media, framing theory is used to offer suggestions for practicing journalists, planners of communication campaigns and social activists (Tankard 2001).

A frame has the power to educate, inform, and persuade. Because of this possibility for influence, framing theory is often applied to research of mass media and political issues. Tankard said that “political poll watchers have long known that

wording a question in a particular way can frame the issue in a specific way” (Tankard 2001, p. 95). Although researchers often discuss framing with political issues, framing stretches to all areas of mass media. For any topic, a frame selects and draws attention to aspects of the reality and hides other aspects by exclusion (Entman 1993). Entman says “exclusion of interpretations by frames is as significant to outcomes as inclusion” (1993, p. 54).

A media producer, editor, etc. does not invent a frame, but rather draws on ideas in its surrounding culture. For example, an editorial staff might not make decisions on how to educate adolescent girls about sex, but instead the magazine’s content is driven by pervading culture and meanings. Articles in magazines adopt specific frames that intentionally or unintentionally recommend their readers to act in a certain way (Johnson and Sivek 2009). For example, an article might tell a girl to dress a certain way, with the underlying meaning that she can impress a guy. Additionally, a magazine might draw from individual-level frames. Scheufele proposes that journalists, as frame builders, draw from journalist-centered influences, selection of frames due to political orientation of the medium, and external sources of influence, such as “political actors, authorities, interest groups, and other elites” (1999). Often magazines will use elements of drama or timeliness, which unfairly frames the important aspects of a particular issue, such as the “horse race” of a political campaign (Andsager and Powers 2001). This draws from the journalist’s influences of writing, not necessarily the political or external sources. Although journalists strive to be “objective,” frames arise because of ongoing social debates or cultural influences (Andsager 2000).

Concerning issues of health, media reporting must be understood as being socially, culturally, and economically influenced (Andsager and Powers 2001). This is because journalists do not simply report on what is important and newsworthy, but they frame news in a way that tells the public what opinions, interpretations and definitions are valid (Pan and Kosicki 1993). The media tend to reinforce conventional definitions of health problems and the legitimacy of various solutions (Andsager and Powers 2001). Previous studies cite policy changes, particularly relating to breast cancer, because of the awareness raised by the media. Also, health message frames can be a good way to synthesize and simplify complicated scientific information (Barnett 2006). This is especially true in magazines because it allows for personalized storytelling.

The habit of framing everything as related to sex ... may be partly a storytelling routine that allows for a quick and easy interpretation of the topic—by the writer and, perhaps, the reader—that fits with the magazines' ongoing themes from issue to issue (Johnson and Sivek 2009).

The tone of teenage magazines allows for messages to be told as if to a friend, allowing the reader to be a part of a community (Tincknell, Chambers et al. 2003).

Research Questions

In order to determine what information *Seventeen* magazine is providing its readers about sex, the following research questions are proposed:

*RQ1: What messages about being “sexy” does *Seventeen* magazine provide?*

*RQ2: What messages about sexual health does *Seventeen* magazine provide?*

RQ3: Do these messages from RQ1 and RQ2 conflict with each other?

Explication

The key concepts from the research questions that must be identified in order to answer them and understand the research are “sexy,” “sexual health,” “messages,” and “*Seventeen* magazine.” The explication of these terms will help to understand the terminology of the research questions, which then makes it possible to answer them and see how “sexy” messages and messages about sexual health might contradict in *Seventeen* magazine.

Sexy

For the analysis of *Seventeen* magazine’s text, “sexy” refers to anything that informs the reader about romance, sexuality, and male appeal. Romance includes scripts, such as kissing, flirting; and any type of non-sexual relationships, dates, etc. Sexuality refers to any kissing, flirting, or other forms of intimacy, excluding sexual intercourse, oral sex, etc. Male appeal refers to topics such as “getting” a guy, how to please a guy, etc. These scripts could provide messages or themes that contradict the health messages.

Sexual Health

In the context of this study, “sexual health” refers to any information provided on sexual behavior, such as masturbation and coitus; sexual-related topics, such as sexual orientation, fantasies, and virginity; sexual health issues, such as pregnancy, contraception, and STDs; and sexual violence, such as rape and harassment (Carpenter 1998). “Sexual health” will also include relational topics such as gender equity, emotional health, consent, peer pressure, education from other sources, and support. Although some of these topics might not seem like platforms for sexual education, they all have the potential to inform readers about mental and physical sexual well-being.

Messages

For this study, “messages” can be anything in the text that is prepared by *Seventeen’s* editorial staff such as editorials, advice columns, or features that the consumer reads. This does not apply to images or advertising. A previous study of the sexual scripts in *Seventeen* magazine showed that there were “traditional sexual scenarios urging that young women refrain from sexual intercourse but also recreational scenarios recommending the opposite” (Carpenter 1998). Therefore, it is important to analyze both fiction and non-fiction content in the magazine. The editorial part of the magazine gives direct sexual advice or relationship advice. The columns and features can provide a picture for the readers of what sex and sexual relationships should be like, often provided by “experts” (Garner, Sterk et al. 1998).

There are four common genres of articles where sex and relationships are common topics: the survey, a what do men think/want review, a how-to discussion, features, quizzes, advice columns, etc. (Gill 2009).

Seventeen magazine

Magazines as a medium are important in this field of research because studies show that the combination of news and entertainment in a magazine might have a greater influence on women's perceptions of health than newsmagazines or newspapers; the entertainment aspect of the media is positively related to perceptions of personal risk (Andsager and Powers 2001). Teen girls turn to them as a valued source for informing their personal lives. They want the magazine to reflect their lives and teach them about current trends (Kaiser Family Foundation 2004). Whereas newspapers and many websites are seen as vehicles for news or current events, magazines are where teens turn to for fun, lifestyle content. Therefore, the impact that a health message has might be different because of the source. Many scholars believe that women's magazines can play a role in shaping health debates and even improving the health of its readers (Barnett 2006).

Seventeen magazine was selected for this research because it is the most popular, and sometimes the only, magazine consumed among this teenage demographic (Kaiser Family Foundation 2004). Because *Seventeen* is the oldest magazine for adolescent girls in the U.S., it is useful for analyzing messages over time (Carpenter 1998). According to *Seventeen* magazine's most recent media kit, *Seventeen* has 4.7 million readers in the 12- to 19-year-old bracket, in contrast to the

next highest read magazine in that demographic, *Teen Vogue*, with only 2.8 million 12- to 19-year-old readers. And although the following four magazines are aimed at adult audiences, *Cosmopolitan* has 2.1 million readers in the same age bracket, *Glamour* has 1.8 million, *Allure* has 1.4 million, and *US Weekly* has only 1.2 million. Additionally, many of *Seventeen* magazine's readers do not read the other magazines mentioned. Specifically, 84% of *Seventeen* readers do not read *Allure*, 84% do not read *US Weekly*, 78% do not read *Cosmopolitan*, and 63% do not read *Teen Vogue*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Method

Because young people are at a higher risk for acquiring STIs than adults (Kaiser Family Foundation 2011), it is important to analyze what messages youth are receiving about sex. In order to look at this and answer the proposed research questions, this research used media framing theory to look at the messages about sex that adolescent girls receive from *Seventeen* magazine.

Framing theory looks at how a topic, in this case sex to adolescents, is portrayed in a specific medium. In order to determine the sexual health messages in magazines, this research used qualitative textual analysis. Entman posits that textual analysis is better for analyzing frames than quantitative content analysis because of quantitative analysis's lack of attention to salience and influence (Entman 1993).

Textual Analysis

History and Themes in Textual Analysis

Content analysis is one of many methods used for analyzing text data. Research using this method looks at the characteristics of language as the form of communication, specifically noting the content and context of the language (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Although historically content analysis is a quantitative method, textual analysis can be used for qualitative study. Qualitative content analysis, or textual analysis, has its roots in literary theory, the social sciences, and critical

scholarship (Krippendorf 2003). Often called “interpretive approaches,” qualitative analyses allow the researcher to do close readings of small amounts of text (Krippendorf 2003). Em Griffin says the “aim of textual analysis is to describe and interpret the characteristics of a message” (2003). A qualitative approach to content analysis takes the content beyond simply coding and counting words and investigates the language and categorizes in way that the content represents similar meanings (Weber 1990). A qualitative analysis allows for more description and deeper analysis of content and themes.

Using this textual form of qualitative research allows for the researcher to look for themes and draw theoretical conclusions from the analyzed themes (Creswell 2009). These categories can allow for analysis of both explicit and inferred communication. Hsieh and Shannon define qualitative content analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (2005). Additionally, the researchers note that qualitative content analysis can be a valuable method of research for health messages (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

Hsieh and Shannon propose a specific qualitative textual analysis, called conventional textual analysis (2005). This type of analysis avoids using preconceived categories and allows the data to define new categories from what emerges; It is also referred to as inductive category development (Mayring 2000). This is a common way for qualitative methods to approach design. After reading the data, codes are formed based on the researcher’s interpretation of the texts. The

research interprets the text through first impressions, thoughts, and personal analysis. Codes begin to emerge as a pattern develops. Depending on how much and what type of information emerges, subcategories can be combined or organized differently. After selecting categories and/or subcategories, the researcher then defines each set and builds the identification of data and relationships. Hsieh and Shannon note that the advantage to the conventional approach is gaining direct information for the research material “without imposing preconceived categories or theoretical perspectives” (2005).

Using a qualitative method allows for themes or texts outside the realm of a strict, coded quantitative analysis to be included. For example, a qualitative researcher might find content that is not an overt health message, but would be consumed by the reader and contribute to her knowledge of sexual health. Using a qualitative approach allows the researcher to include that information, whereas the quantitative approach would usually exclude such data. Therefore, the conventional content analysis method provides holistic analysis of the textual messages in *Seventeen* magazine, which allows for an analysis of the contradictions between “sexy” content and sexual health content.

Study-Specific Textual Analysis

This study used qualitative analysis to examine the nature of sex messages in *Seventeen* magazine. Textual analysis was the proper method for this research because it uses textual material and classifies it, “reducing it to more relevant, manageable bits of data” (Weber 1990). With any analysis, it is important to use a

method that synthesizes the information in a way that is feasible. The study of *Seventeen* magazine drew on conclusions about what types of sex messages are present regarding being “sexy” and sexual health.

A total of 20 issues—four issues (one from every quarter) of the last five years (from 2006-2010)—of *Seventeen* magazine were analyzed. The quarters were defined as the following: first quarter—January, February, and March; second quarter—April, May, and June; third quarter—July, August, and September; and fourth quarter—October, November, and December. This allowed the researcher to determine the content from year to year and see how health messages changed over time. Also, this was a reasonable amount of data to analyze for a qualitative content analysis. Advertisements and photos were excluded from the sample. Certain editorial material, such as beauty, fashion, home tips, diet, exercise, and entertainment were excluded also unless they had sexual, romantic, or relationship overtones (Johnson and Sivek 2009). Each article was pre-analyzed for inclusion based on those overtones. The magazines typically had 20 articles per issue, and each issue analyzed had three to eight articles selected for inclusion in this research. A total of 110 articles, from all 20 issues, were included in the research based on the initial assessments.

Before analyzing the 110 articles more thoroughly, the researcher started with two broad content/thematic categories: Sexuality/Romance and Sexual Health. The Sexuality/Romance category referred to articles or themes that: direct or encourage readers to “be sexy” and “get the guy” or discuss kissing and other forms of intimacy. The Sexual Health category included texts about contraception, STD and

pregnancy prevention, emotional support, or other sexual well-being topics. After selecting the 20 magazines for inclusion, the researcher analyzed the 110 articles' texts and collected numerical and narrative data based on these two broad content/thematic categories. When new areas arose during the analysis, the qualitative approach allowed the researcher to introduce new categories or sub-categories. No new categories emerged, but the researcher noted several recurring themes and topics, which were then divided into several sub-categories within both Sexuality/Romance and Sexual Health. The sub-categories that emerged and were categorized within the Sexuality/Romance category were: Pleasing Guys, Confidence, and Flirting. The sub-categories that emerged and were categorized within the Sexual Health categories were: Consequences, Gender Equality/Responsibility, and Support. And finally, the sub-category of Hooking Up emerged within both Sexuality/Romance and Sexual Health categories.

Through these categories, it was possible to see themes and trends emerge. In addition to the collected numerical data, the researcher tracked and noted words, themes, and key thoughts that appeared in the magazine over time. In order to identify conflicts between "sexy" and "sexual health," the researcher noted the numerical and narrative differences between the two categories.

Limitations of the Approach

Using qualitative content analysis, there are a few things that the research will not find. This method of research does not produce information on how the consumer interprets the text (McKee 2003). It will not predict if the reader will

actively engage or enact the messages she consumes. This method of research also does not analyze why a message is or is not presented in the text. Because of that, the research will not determine why editorial decisions are made. A problem with conventional qualitative analysis, as Hsieh and Shannon noted, is the failure to identify key categories (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). This can result in findings that are not accurate representations of the data. In order to combat that, the researcher must thoroughly analyze the data and seek to identify as many categories as possible.

CHAPTER FIVE

Findings and Discussion

This chapter will examine the qualitative findings of the textual analysis of *Seventeen's* sex messages. It will also discuss the findings within the context of the literature reviewed within Chapter One.

Summary of Research Question and Findings

The findings address all three research questions. The first question asked, "What messages about being 'sexy' does *Seventeen* magazine provide?" The second research question asked, "What messages about sexual health does *Seventeen* magazine provide?" And finally, research question three asked if the first two research questions conflicted.

The textual analysis of 110 articles from 20 issues of *Seventeen* magazine began with the two broad categories of Sexuality/Romance and Sexual Health. The qualitative study allowed for the creation of sub-categories as new themes emerged during the textual analysis. The researcher noticed recurring themes and topics within both broad categories, and so sub-categories were assigned to help break down the data better. The sub-categories that emerged within the Sexuality/Romance category were Pleasing Guys, Confidence, and Flirting. The sub-categories that emerged within the Sexual Health categories were Consequences, Gender Equality/Responsibility, and Support. And the sub-category of Hooking Up emerged within both categories.

Teenage girls receive all kinds of messages from friends, parents, teachers, television, movies, and magazines; and when these messages contradict, it can be confusing. Based on its messages, *Seventeen* magazine seems to be a purveyor of advice for these confused adolescents. The textual analysis showed the messages of advice and otherwise in *Seventeen* can be confusing and contradictory, too. The findings will look at the ambiguous terms and messages associated with the category themes of Sexuality/Romance and Sexual Health and the sub-categories within those two areas.

Sexuality/Romance

The Meaning of "Sexy"

The first research question asked what messages about being "sexy" *Seventeen* provides. Many articles and themes within the analyzed texts imply that a girl should be appealing to a guy, but the word "sexy" is not used very often. While the word "sex" is used about 170 times, the word "sexy" (or variations of the word, such as "sexier" or "sexiest") is only used approximately 20 times in the 110 articles analyzed. And as little as the term is used, it is explained even less. One article says that girls should not try to fit into "one narrow definition of sexy," but that definition is not explained, although it seems to be related to a girl's appearance.³ Girls are told

³ "The Rules of Attraction," July 2008, p. 103

to not be ashamed of big or small butts. It says: “Any little flaw can become sexy if you are confident.”⁴

The word “sexy” is also used to refer to objects or things that are sexual; an article about online pornography refers to them as “sexy” videos.⁵ Objects can be sexy (high heels). Even simple acts are referred to as sexy, such as splitting a dessert: “It’s like a nontouchy-feely way to show you’re into him. And it can lead to a cute fork fight for the last bite!”⁶ Many articles advise readers about sexy actions: have a sexy smile;⁷ do not be sexy only in text messages;⁸ do not let a guy put you down for being too sexy;⁹ and do not drink alcohol at a party just to be sexy.¹⁰ (The story about drinking has a note that says: “If you’re under 21, it’s illegal to drink alcohol. And never drink and drive!” However, *Seventeen’s* demographic is 12- to 19-year-old readers, none of whom are of legal drinking age.)

“Sexy” is used in editorial content, but it is also used in quotes in two ways: in a quote from a guy saying what he likes about girls or in a quote from a girl referring to a guy. For example, the article “Love Lessons from TV’s Hottest Hotties” provides

⁴ “What Guys Really Think of Your Body,” February 2010, p. 70

⁵ “The Real Deal About Dirty Movies,” November 2010, p. 81

⁶ “Secrets to the Best Date Ever, September 2010, p. 215

⁷ “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Guys,” November 2009, p. 66

⁸ “Flirtexting,” November 2009, p. 110

⁹ “Love Hurts?,” February 2009, p. 122

¹⁰ “College Parties,” April 2010, p. 130

tips from television actors on what girls should do to attract a guy.¹¹ The subtitle of the story refers to the stars as “sexy guys.” The word is also used to characterize a person in another article, when 20-year-old Ishmael says that Alicia Keys is sexy because of her piano playing and passion.¹²

Sexuality/Romance Themes

As stated previously, the word “sexy” is not used frequently. And although the articles coded as sexuality/romance do not directly say, “Be sexy,” there is a clear message of how readers are suggested to act around males. In the 20 issues analyzed, every issue has three to six articles with messages coded Sexuality/Romance. Within that category, three subcategories emerged: Pleasing Guys, Confidence, and Flirting.

How to Please a Guy

The first sub-category Pleasing Guys emerged from content saying that girls should be eager to please their boyfriends or romantic interests. Often these articles say the female should be responsible for the relationship and has the pressure of planning dates, maintaining stability, and shouldering the emotional problems in a relationship. A perfect illustration is the article “Be the Ultimate Girlfriend.”¹³ The article says to be a good girlfriend readers should do the following: support his

¹¹ October 2007, p. 100

¹² “Who’s the Perfect Girl?,” May 2007, p. 96

¹³ February 2009, p. 64

interests by going to all of his games or shows; plan surprises for him; hang out with his friends sometime; embrace public displays of affection (PDA), “so he feels like a stud;” cook or bake for him; and wear his favorite outfit. Overwhelmingly, articles that fit into this sub-category are about what girls should “do” for their boyfriends or crushes to keep them happy and interested.

Another example of an article that tells girls how they should behave in a relationship is “Love Lessons from TV’s Hottest Hotties,” where television actors give girls tips.¹⁴ The first tip is “Be up for anything.” Zach Gilford from *Friday Night Lights* says he wants to do something active and random (not dinner and a movie), so the girl should be willing to do those things and just have fun. He also says girls should show up on time. Another example is a story with 17 tips for girls to show a guy that she is into him, such as buying him things that he likes, making things for him, and asking him to kiss in public.¹⁵ Another article tells girls to do special things for her guy: plan a picnic, and bring strawberries because they are “romantic,” but avoid onions, tuna and pesto because they’re stinky and he will probably want to “finish the meal with a thank-you kiss.”¹⁶ Something as simple as the food on a picnic is made romantic and part of the pressure girls are given to impress their boyfriends.

Many of the articles about how to please a guy are how-to articles, tips and quotes from celebrities, readers of *Seventeen*, doctors, experts, and *Seventeen*

¹⁴ October 2007, p. 100

¹⁵ “17 Ways to Say I Love You,” February 2006, p. 75

¹⁶ “Plan a Dream Spring Date,” May 2007, p. 98

writers. However, there is one exception to this in a fictional story submitted by a *Seventeen* reader.¹⁷ The story is about a teenager named Julia who finds out that her boyfriend, Nigel, cheated on her. The story is all about their conversation after she learns what he has done and how she can't let go. She eventually forgives him because he asks for it and because "she loved him." The story does not show any consequences of Nigel cheating or how it will affect their future relationship. Again, it just seems like a scenario where the girl, Julia, will do anything—in this case forgiveness—for her boyfriend.

Confidence

The second sub-category within Sexuality/Romance is Confidence. Readers are told to have "kick-butt confidence, a sexy smile, poise and charm, bold energy and friendly playfulness."¹⁸ There are instances when stories with this theme seem to contradict with stories of the "pleasing guys" theme —instead of pleasing the guy, this narrative theme is more about the girl having control and getting what she wants out of a relationship.

Confidence is almost always associated with a girl not being hurt by a guy. For example, in one article *The Love Doctor*¹⁹ gives readers advise not to get too worried when a guy does not call because not all guys want love or even a date

¹⁷ "To Devotion," June 2006, p. 154

¹⁸ "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Guys," November 2009, p. 66

¹⁹ Identified in small print at the bottom of the page as Ian Kerner, Ph.D., author of *DSI—Date Scene Investigation*

when they ask for her number.²⁰ The Doctor says, “If you keep that in mind, you automatically project more confidence, because you’re not pinning all your hopes on the guy (and guys think that’s hot!).” So even though it is empowering for the girl to have confidence, it is seen in relation to how she will appear to the guy. There is one article where this is not the case.²¹ The writer, Jess Weiner, talks about how guys sometimes “grade” girls’ breasts and butts, but girls should only care about how they personally feel. Girls should take control and be confident with their bodies, no matter what guys say. The article gives Drew Barrymore as an idol for this type of real-girl style. “Her self-confidence and sparkly personality are precisely what makes her hot.” However, within the same issue, another article talks about how to use body confidence to get a guy: “[At the beach] don’t hide your body or try to cover up with a towel.”²² This article is full of other suggestions for readers to be overly confident and attract male attention.

In another article, readers are given advice for different dating situations. One is when a boyfriend dumps a girl before a big dance.²³ She is told to not show that it bothers her when he shows up with someone else and to cry later in private. Also, for girls who ask out a guy and he says no, they say to feel proud they were confident enough to ask. Sometimes it is said or implied that guys like girls with confidence. In a quote from a guy about what he likes in a girl, he said he asked a girl

²⁰ “Why Didn’t He Call?,” August 2007, p. 129

²¹ “What’s He Thinking About My Body?,” June 2008, p. 70

²² “Get Any Guy at the Beach,” June 2008, p. 72

²³ “Dating Drama,” October 2007, p. 149

if she Facebook-stalked him.²⁴ She said, “I don’t care what other girls post on your wall. I know I could have you any time I want.” His quote said that made him feel lucky to be with her because she was so confident. There is a whole article devoted to quotes from guys who were won over by girls who made the first move.²⁵ Over and over articles tell girls to look guys in the eyes, pull him away from a crowd or open up more—all in hopes of getting the guy. However, sometimes that’s not always seen as a good thing. “Your confidence makes it easy to meet guys, but sometimes they see you as a flirt and not as love material.”²⁶

Flirting

The third sub-category in the Sexuality/Romance category is Flirting. Over and over, flirting is encouraged, but it is also advised to walk the line between being flirty and being overly sexual or “trashy.” An article called “Summer Love” has a perfect example of this concept.²⁷ The story encourages girls to have a “flirt-a-thon” by talking to many guys, keeping things “fun and flirty” without telling personal stories. They should do physical things together, such as a water park, because the “physical excitement you feel will transfer to each other, making him totally hot for you (and vice versa).” However, it advises girls not to kiss every guy in this flirt-a-thon because it is not about hooking up. Another good example is in an article that

²⁴ “Bitchy Moves Guys Secretly Love,” November 2010, p. 84

²⁵ “Make the First Move,” June 2006, p. 125

²⁶ “Where Will You Find Love This Year,” September 2010, p. 158

²⁷ August 2007, p. 166

teaches girls “how to make every guy want you bad,” *Seventeen* gives advice on sending signals to guys.²⁸ They should catch a guy’s eyes, but then avert them so she seems a little shy and he will approach. Then, they should push their hair back with palms turned outward so they will seem receptive to his attention. Finally, they should point to their lips so he will imagine kissing her. “You can use your hands to highlight features you want guys to notice. Also try lifting your hair off your neck to show a sliver of skin, you minx!” The story goes on to give tips for appealing to each of his five senses (i.e., using lavender perfume for attraction). But with all of these confident, flirty tips, come the “unwritten rules:” do not show off a lot of skin because he might think you’re just wanting to hook up, do not talk about hooking up because it seems “slutty,” and do not touch him too much.

Simple acts such as eating chicken fingers or playing with a guy’s keys are even seen as acts of flirting and ways to be romantic with a guy in the article “Secrets to the Best Date Ever.”²⁹ Flirting seems to be the cure-all in many situations, such as recovering from a break-up,³⁰ learning to talk to guys,³¹ having a good date,³² and making a move on a crush.³³ But one of the most common ways girls are advised to flirt is through text messaging. One article says, “Your phone is a flirting

²⁸ “The Rules of Attraction,” July 2008, p. 103

²⁹ September 2010, p. 215

³⁰ “Your Break-Up,” November 2008, p. 113

³¹ “Talk to Any Guy,” August 2009, p. 112

³² “Secrets to the Best Date Ever,” September 2010, p. 215

³³ “The Crazy Way I Found True Love,” February 2010, p. 122

secret weapon.”³⁴ An article called “Flirt texting” advises readers how to send texts that have fun, flirty banter.³⁵ “But to keep it sweet, not skanky, you’ve got to tone it down once in a while. If everything you say is an innuendo, your crush will assume you’re just after a hookup.” Even with that advice, the article continues to tell girls to be bold and have a flirty tone within their texts so the “crush will return the favor.” But a similar article, just a year earlier, gave similar advice about being creative, brave and flirty in texts gave no mention of being too sexual.³⁶

Sometimes this theme appears to warn girls about being embarrassing to themselves or their boyfriends with their flirting. One tip provided is to keep public affection “sweet and PG (No Tongue!)” because a boyfriend might be embarrassed or teased by his friends.³⁷ Another article says girls who “flirt by taking shots, showing off at beer pong, or drinking a ton” only get attention for being party girls.³⁸ (Again, the story notes that readers under 21 shouldn’t drink, but the age demographic is 12 to 19 year olds.) A February 2007 article features guys who work at Abercrombie and say what is hot and what is trashy.³⁹ They think fitted pants or tight jeans, natural make-up, messy-looking hair, and being lightly touched on the chest or waist are “hot.” But going too far with those things makes a girl become

³⁴ “Be His Best Text,” November 2010, p. 82

³⁵ November 2009, p. 110

³⁶ “How to Send the Flirtiest Txt Msg,” July 2008, p. 70

³⁷ “Are You Secretly Embarrassing?,” August 2009, p. 116

³⁸ “College Parties,” April 2010, p. 130

³⁹ “Are You Hot or Trashy?,” p. 59

“trashy:” low-cut jeans that show a thong, too much powder, fake blonde hair and hanging on a guy.

The Ambiguous “Hookup”

The sub-category of Hooking Up is in both Sexuality/Romance and Sexual Health categories. The phrase “hook up” is used in articles about sex education, true-story narratives and many types of romance stories. Whereas the word “sexy” is rarely used, the magazine makes up for it with the use of “hook up.” “Hookup,” “hook up,” “hooking up,” and “hooked up” are used approximately 80 times within the 110 articles analyzed. Of the 20 issues analyzed, only two issues do not include the word “hookup.” Although the term is used frequently, its meaning is often vague (which leads it to be a sub-category within both broad content categories). It can appear in articles about a girl getting pregnant (sexual health) and articles about flirting with guys (sexuality/romance). In fact, in a June 2006 article, *Seventeen* analyzed what it meant to “hook up.”⁴⁰ The article says that everyone has a different definition of hooking up, but many people agree that it means “no commitment.” The phrase is used as a verb and a noun. A 2009 article says that guys tend to consider making out to be hooking up.⁴¹ In another article, guys say that girls who are fun and outgoing are just a “hookup,” but girls who are more serious about things are girlfriend material.⁴²

⁴⁰ “All About Hookups,” p. 82

⁴¹ “Your Hookup Cheat Sheet,” February, p. 68

⁴² “Guys Talk: Are You Just a Hookup ... or More?,” September 2006, p. 147

The June 2006 analysis of hooking up says that more girls lose their virginity in June than any other month. Atoosa Rubenstein, then-editor-in-chief, even wrote a special note on the article's page saying how she wanted to give girls information to help them feel in control over decisions about their bodies. Therefore, even though it is not defined, in this instance, "hook up" seems to be connected to a girl losing her virginity. In a story about sexual myths, a question is asked about "hooking up with your guy in the sand."⁴³ The article advises against it because it can irritate skin and create microscopic cuts in genital areas, which can lead to infections or STD contraction. Although in many situations, hooking up is referred to as casually kissing, in this context it refers to an action that will lead to some type of genital contact or exposure. Again, in a November 2010 article, hookup is connected with sex, when it says that some guys feel the need to watch pornography to gain confidence when hooking up.⁴⁴

The word "hooking up" is often used when discussing emotional responses. According to the same June 2006 analysis article, 48% of *Seventeen* readers think a girl is a "slut" if she hooks up with a new guy each month, but only 19% of readers think the same is true of guys. Similarly, one in four readers felt "bad" after their last hookups, suggesting that it is not without emotional risk. There are a few reasons that readers say they hookup: 68% say it is for fun; 49% do it to get pleasure; and 48% need to do it to feel wanted. There are tips provided in the article about what to do before hooking up; one tip is to set a limit of how far the reader will go with a

⁴³ "Summer Sex Myths," July 2008, p. 70

⁴⁴ "The Real Deal About Dirty Movies," November 2010, p. 81

guy beforehand. Again, this suggests that every girl has a different definition of what hooking up is, but that does not seem to affect the use of the word in various articles.

The term is commonly used in light-hearted ways: a “summer hookup with a classmate;”⁴⁵ a guy being “over” his girlfriend because he does not want to hook up;⁴⁶ summer hookups leading to gossip;⁴⁷ and trying to get an ex back by hooking up with him.⁴⁸ But it is also used to point out consequences. In one instance, hooking up is connected with getting drunk and/or partying. The article says that 25% of readers have hooked up with someone they wouldn’t have if they hadn’t been partying.⁴⁹ Another time, *Seventeen* tells girls to avoid dressing in clothing that shows lots of skin because “it might look like you’re just trying to hook up.”⁵⁰ The magazine also advises readers against “a fake relationship with casual hookups.”⁵¹ Finally, the term is used in a real-life narrative to show how one reader went from hooking up and “in the heat of the moment” having sex (and becoming pregnant).⁵²

⁴⁵ “Get Guy-Confident,” September 2010, p. 156

⁴⁶ “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Guys,” November 2009, p. 66

⁴⁷ “Love Problems Solved,” September 2006, p. 154

⁴⁸ “Make Your Love Last!,” February 2007, p. 61

⁴⁹ “Out of Control Parties,” June 2008, p. 103

⁵⁰ “The Rules of Attraction,” July 2008, p. 103

⁵¹ “Guy Secrets No One Ever Told You,” May 2009, p. 90

⁵² “I Hid My Pregnancy,” December 2006, p. 104

Sexual Health

Sex in Seventeen

Dictionaries ambiguously refer to sex as anything pertaining to sexual activity. In the 20 issues analyzed, the words “sex,” “sexual,” “sexually,” and “sexuality” were used approximately 170 times. Nearly all of these circumstances were referring directly to vaginal sex. Although the word “sex” is used often, it is rarely mentioned in articles about sexuality or romance. It is almost always reserved for sex education columns or true-story narratives about sexual abuse, pregnancy, or some other traumatic experience. “Sexual” is almost never used when referring to a girl being sexual to entice a guy. Rather, it is used in the sense of: “If you are sexually active ...”

The word “sex” is used when talking about pregnancy, but in some cases it seems the word is almost avoided. For example, in a two-page story called “The Pill: Is it Right for You,” the word “sex” is used only once and “sexually active” is used once.⁵³ The article skirts the issue of sexual activity, and instead refers to the pros and cons of clear skin, period pain, weight retention, etc. It is not until the final tip (taking the pill properly) that being sexually active is mentioned as a reason for using a backup method if a pill is missed. And in a small info box at the end of the article, it says, “The only 100% fail-safe way not to get pregnant is to not have sex.”

⁵³ February 2006, p. 56

Some issues have the word “sex” mentioned at least 24 times,⁵⁴ and other issues it is mentioned zero times.⁵⁵ A few issues have content using the word “sex,” in which the articles refer to how guys feel about sex. The article “Get to Know His Body” is a Q&A series with questions from girls, an answer from a doctor and an answer from a guy.⁵⁶ Some of the questions and answers are quite detailed and explicit. Lauren-Elizabeth asks about erections; Kristin asks about signs of STDs; Malzino asks about pre-cum; Monica asks about guys liking naked women; Larissa asks about guys going to a gyno-equivalent doctor; and Hyacinth asks about guys getting a guy turned on and not “finishing.” The words “sex” and “sexual” in all of the answers are referring to the guy’s impulses and needs. They never address how the girl feels in the same situation.

In November of 2009, the word “sexting” was used for the first time.⁵⁷ Sexting, which is the relatively recent phenomenon of teens and young adults sending suggestive word or picture texts, is not recommended by *Seventeen*. The article, which is about how to properly flirt via text messages, advises girls to never sext because it can be damaging to self-esteem and can even be illegal.

Most of the references to sex are very clinical: what is defined as losing virginity,⁵⁸ what tests every girl should take before or after having sex,⁵⁹ the rates of

⁵⁴ June 2006

⁵⁵ November 2008, August 2009, November 2009

⁵⁶ May 2007, p. 90

⁵⁷ “Flirtexting,” November 2009, p. 110

⁵⁸ “Are You Sure You’re Still a Virgin?,” August 2007, p. 126

teen pregnancy,⁶⁰ sexual education questions too embarrassing for school,⁶¹ sex myths about STDs and contraceptives,⁶² and online pornography.⁶³ In nearly every instance the word “sex” or “sexual” is used, it is highly cautionary. The phrases are used to express problems (rape or abuse), show potential concerns (STDs or pregnancy) and illustrate negative consequences (emotional turmoil). In the issues analyzed for this research, not one example is provided of a teen in a sexual relationship without consequences ... or even an adult relationship for that matter. The only time a reference is made to the possibility of teens having sexual relationships without consequences is in a statement about how mothers can help advise daughters if their heart and mind are ready for the emotional aspects of sex.⁶⁴

Sexual Health Themes

Of the 110 total articles, only 21 were articles coded into the Sexual Health category. Nearly all of these articles came from the recurring sexual education column/department of *Seventeen* called Sex Ed. The other articles coded Sexual Health were from true-life stories of girls who had been abused, raped, become

⁵⁹ “Tests You Need to Take,” October 2007, p. 94

⁶⁰ “Why are so Many Girls Still Getting Pregnant?,” February 2008, p. 110

⁶¹ “Sex Ed: Your Most Personal Sex Questions,” February 2010, p. 70

⁶² “Scary Sex Rumors,” September 2010, p. 152

⁶³ “The Real Deal About Dirty Movies,” November 2010, p. 81

⁶⁴ “The Most Important Talk You’ll Ever Have,” May 2009, p. 86

pregnant, or suffered some other negative outcome of sex. Out of the 20 issues analyzed, only six issues were without sexual health content. Within the Sexual Health category, three categories emerged: Consequences, Gender Equality/Responsibility, and Support.

Consequences

The first sub-category within the Sexual Health category is Consequences. Articles in this sub-category show the consequences of sexual intercourse—not just pregnancy and STDS—but also emotional consequences; the articles also show how to use protection or planning to avoid these consequences of sex.

The June 2006 issue mentions sex up to 24 times, almost every time is in a negative light. A statistic in the story, “All About Hookups,” says that 1 in 4 teenagers who are sexually active get an STD.⁶⁵ It also says that condoms help prevent STDs, but the only way to stay 100% safe is to not have sex. The other articles in that issue are “Terrifying Sex Stories”⁶⁶ (a compilation of reader experiences of rape and sexual assault), “She Had Sex with Her Daughter’s Friends”⁶⁷ and “I Got an STD.”⁶⁸ The stories told in all these articles represent teen girls (and in one case an adult) who had sexual intercourse—voluntarily and involuntarily—with negative consequences. Although, there is information provided on how to get testing from

⁶⁵ June 2006, p. 82

⁶⁶ June 2006, p. 84

⁶⁷ June 2006, p. 86

⁶⁸ June 2006, p. 89

Planned Parenthood and how to protect against STDs, there are no consequence-free portrayals of sex. A September 2006 article further illustrates this with a first-hand account of a girl who had sex and then was forced into an abortion by her mother.⁶⁹

In other issues, there are real-life narratives that provide sexual education, and nearly all of these stories are related to some negative consequence, such as female genital mutilation.⁷⁰ In one story, Lauren, a 21-year-old reader, tells how she was molested by her nanny at age 12.⁷¹ It started when her nanny began touching her inappropriately. The nanny told Lauren it was to teach her how to be with boys, so Lauren thought it was okay. Then when it started happening all the time, she was too embarrassed to tell her parents. The story tells quite graphically some of the things that Lauren endured. The molestation continued for four years before Lauren told anyone, and now the nanny is in jail. An info box at the end of the story provides a hotline phone number for children who are abused, but there is no information provided for what girls should do if they are in a similar scenario. Similarly, in an article about sexual or emotional abuse from boyfriends, readers are given a list of red flags to watch out for, but there is not any information on how to get help in a similar situation.⁷²

⁶⁹ "My Mom Made Me Get an Abortion," p. 156

⁷⁰ "I Was Sexually Violated in a Dangerous Ritual," June 2008, p. 80

⁷¹ "My Nanny Molested Me," February 2006, p. 58

⁷² "Love Hurts?," February 2009, p. 122

Another real-life article tells the story of Paige, a reader who contracted HIV when she was 20 years old.⁷³ The narrative tells the story through Paige's viewpoint of meeting a guy, having sex without a condom, and then learning about her disease. But there is also a lot of information about HIV: how the virus originated, how it is contracted and the statistic that teen girls make up one-eighth of all new cases diagnosed in 2006. *Seventeen* provided tips for readers to protect themselves, such as abstinence, testing, condoms, and monogamy.

Often these articles serve as an open-forum for teen girls to ask questions they have about sex or female health and learn how to avoid the consequences of sexual activity. These sexual-health-education articles provide answers to rumors or myths that teen girls have about sex. In one article, *Seventeen* addresses the possibility of getting pregnant by having sex in the water.⁷⁴ A reader says she thinks it is impossible to get pregnant in the water, but the column explains that any form of unprotected sex can lead to pregnancy or STDs. And yet another article about sex "rumors" describes three misunderstood health topics: the HPV vaccine and how it can protect girls from cervical cancer and genital warts; Plan B's purpose and how to get it for readers younger than 17; and when and why to get a Pap smear.⁷⁵

Another open-forum-type article is "Are You Sure You're Still a Virgin?"⁷⁶ It is a very frank account of what 15,000 teen girls think "losing it" means and shows

⁷³ "I'm Like You But I Have HIV," December 2006, p. 145

⁷⁴ "Summer Sex Myths," July 2008, p. 70

⁷⁵ "Scary Sex Rumors," September 2010, p. 152

⁷⁶ August 2007, p. 126

some of the emotional consequences of losing it. The percentages for how many girls think certain actions make someone not a virgin: 15% say getting fingered or giving a hand job; 29% say giving or receiving oral sex; 60% say engaging in anal sex; 76% say if a penis enters the vagina at all; and 99% say vaginal intercourse with ejaculation. After each percentage, there is a quote from a reader explaining why she thinks that action causes someone to lose her virginity. In addition, two lesbian readers say what they think it means to lose virginity with another girl. A “17 Expert”⁷⁷ follows up the article, saying:

Sex is complicated and there’s no ‘right’ definition of virginity—only what’s right for you. The truth is that instead of worrying too much about fitting into everyone else’s definition, you should ask yourself, What am I comfortable with right now? That’s more important than any label.

Gender Equality/Responsibility

Gender Equality is the second sub-category within the Sexual Health category. An underlying tone in the Sexuality/Romance category that it is okay for the male to be sexually interested and curious, but the same for a female makes her “trashy.” Within the Sexual Health category, the underlying theme is that the female must take responsibility for sexual intercourse prevention and protection within a relationship. In addition, there is often a more positive message that the female be responsible for her own sexual health.

⁷⁷ Identified in small print at the bottom of the page as Nora Gelperin, M.Ed., the director training and education at Answer, a national sexuality education organization that is part of the Center for Applied Psychology at Rutgers University

In a feature investigating teen pregnancy, *Seventeen* provided statistics for the growing problem in the U.S. of teen girls who are having sex and getting pregnant.⁷⁸ They provide the following reasons for why girls become pregnant: a couple just “end up” having sex in the heat of the moment or by being spontaneous; a girl thinks she’s on birth control; and a girl didn’t insist on using condoms. Each reason lists ways to avoid those pregnancy traps. Nearly all of the “traps” and responses to avoid them are responsibilities or actions for the female.

In order to help girls take responsibility for their own sexual health, the information provided can be very detailed and direct. For example, in the article “The Pill: Is it Right for You?” there are five points that *Seventeen* says each girl must learn.⁷⁹ The first is a thorough explanation of what the pill actually does (stopping the ovary from releasing an egg into the fallopian tube). The second is a list of pros and cons to taking the pill. The four pros are: clear skin, eases period pain, improves mood, and prevents cancer. Although the article is prefaced with the statement, “Birth control pills are 99% effective in preventing pregnancy when used properly,” preventing pregnancy is not listed as a pro for taking the pill. The third point is about what type of pill to take, and the fourth is getting a prescription. It is not until point five that sex is even mentioned. The fifth point is about how to take the pill properly, and it describes using a backup birth control method if the reader is sexually active. In parenthesis, it tells the reader they should always be using

⁷⁸ “Why Are So Many Girls Still Getting Pregnant?,” February 2008, p. 110

⁷⁹ February 2006, p. 56

condoms to prevent STDs. And the story ends with the statement, “The only 100% fail-safe way not to get pregnant is to not have sex.”

Another example of the Sex Ed column being detailed and helpful for girls taking responsibility in their own health is the article “Tests You Need to Take” in the October 2007 issue.⁸⁰ The article starts with the statistic of 48% of people who get an STD are younger than 25. *Seventeen* encourages readers who are planning to have sex or already having it to get tested as a “crucial part of caring for your sexual health.” First, the article explains a Pap Test—what it is for, what it feels like, and what it tests for. Then, it explains that for readers who didn’t use a condom during sex, they should also get tested for gonorrhea, chlamydia, and HIV because they do not exhibit symptoms. It goes on to say, “If you’ve hooked up without a condom (including naked genital-to-genital contact, oral sex, or anal sex), do not know your guy’s history, or just want to be sure you’re safe, ask your doc to run these tests.” It then goes through the steps of these tests. For readers experiencing symptoms, it is advised to also have a doctor check for genital warts and herpes. It explains the symptoms that readers might experience and how the doctor can test for those diseases.

There are also times when the Sex Ed column helps to teach the readers about a guy’s body and sexuality, but often these times are when, again, the girl is given responsibility for sexual intercourse in the relationship. An example of this is

⁸⁰ p. 94

in the story “Get to Know His Body.”⁸¹ Kristin, 20 years old, asks if she can tell if a guy has an STD. A “17 Expert”⁸² answers, saying sometimes there are warning signs. The expert advises her to look for unusual bumps, sores or rashes around his groin area or discharge from his penis (implying not during sexual intercourse, but does not explicitly say). If these things are visible, the expert says, she should not have sex with him. However, many symptoms takes months to appear, or never show at all, so it is important to ask the guy to get tested and use a condom every time. Hyacinth, 16, asks about when a guy gets turned on but does not finish. The doctor says this is what is referred to as “blue balls,” where a guy is sexually aroused, gets an erection, and does not have release through ejaculation. He says that the ache subsides shortly after sexual activity, so the guy just needs a break. “If a guy uses it as an excuse to push you sexually, stop all sexual activity—his discomfort will go away soon.”

Support

The final sub-category within Sexual Health is Support. This theme is divided into two parts: showing girls where to get advice and help for sexual health-related problems and being the support for girls when they can’t get the answers elsewhere.

It seems in all of the health articles, *Seventeen* wavers between advising readers to talk with parents about sex and to talk with a doctor so parents do not

⁸¹ May 2007, p. 90

⁸² Identified in small print at the bottom of the page as Diane F. Merritt, M.D., a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis who specializes in pediatric and adolescent gynecology.

have to learn about the reader's sexual activity. There are two articles that are dedicated just to where to get information about sex. The first article advises readers to ask their parents sex questions.⁸³ The article acknowledges that it can be difficult for readers, but that it is the best place for advice. *Seventeen* recommends that readers talk to their parents before becoming sexually active. The story says if a reader is too embarrassed to talk to her parents, then she is probably not ready "to do the deed." It goes on to say even if the reader is worried her parents will be upset, it is better to talk about sex with them than to end up pregnant or with an STD. A 15-year-old reader, Anneka, said she was happy her mom gave her "the talk" because she learned about the emotional side of sex, rather than just the physical aspect that her friends had told her. This article also includes a "cut-away" portion that readers should give to their parents. It includes tips for parents on how to guide their kids through "the talk." A few years later, the article "The Most Important Talk You'll Ever Have" has a similar message, but this time "the talk" is suggested to be just with the mother.⁸⁴ The article stems from a survey conducted by *Seventeen* and *O, The Oprah Magazine* on mothers and daughters. It says that 60% of the girls who talk to their moms about sex say it affected their sexual decisions. Neither of these articles address the possibility of mothers being wrong or dishonest with their daughters.

Although often the narrative stories are told without any tips or advice given for readers in similar situations, there are some stories where information on how

⁸³ "Where to Get the Best Sex Advice," December 2006, p. 82

⁸⁴ May 2009, p. 86

to get help is provided. In an article called “How to Protect Yourself,” *Seventeen* gives very detailed advice to readers on what to do if an adult is harassing or making them feel sexually uncomfortable.⁸⁵ The story tells readers to always speak up and tell the person to stop, and then talk to a trusted adult. It advises the reader to keep a journal of when and where these events happen then to call the police and explain the situation. There are many articles about readers being victims, but this story has a sense of empowerment. It tells the reader that she has control when it comes to her body.

In one article, the Sex Ed column is presented as an open forum for girls to learn things they might be embarrassed to ask anyone else, and therefore provides a sense of support. In a February 2010 article, readers ask questions that they can’t ask their family, friends, or teachers.⁸⁶ One question is about female masturbation. The answer says it is natural for girls to have sexual urges and exploring the body through masturbation is a way to learn about it. It also says that masturbating will not tempt girls to want to have sex. Another question is from a girl whose boyfriend wants her to have anal sex. She wants to know if that will cause her to lose her virginity. *Seventeen* answers, “There’s no ‘right’ definition of virginity—it comes down to what’s right for you. Just remember: While you can’t get pregnant from anal sex, it can be just as physically and emotionally intimate as vaginal sex, and it’s no safer when it comes to STDs.” The answer goes on to give a detailed explanation of how it is easy to catch viruses, such as HIV, from anal sex. It says whatever she

⁸⁵ February 2007, p. 74

⁸⁶ “Sex Ed: Your Most Personal Sex Questions,” p. 71

decides to do, to always use a condom and make sure her boyfriend has been tested for STDs and HIV. Another question is asked about how to know what an orgasm is. Again, there is a detailed explanation, and also a word of encouragement: “Don’t stress if you think you haven’t had one yet—it’s more important that you’re doing only physical things that you enjoy and that you’re comfortable with, and paying attention to what does and doesn’t feel good for you.” The last question is about what it means to have a cherry “pop.” The answer talks about the hymen tearing and how the reader might experience bleeding during her first intercourse, but the text says that it is nothing to worry about. It says to let her doctor know so she can help with condoms and birth control, and the doctor “can’t tell your parents unless you say so.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine what types of messages about sex, specifically educational, *Seventeen* magazine was providing its readers and how those messages were framed. Because a frame’s construction helps consumers learn about a social phenomena (Reese 2001), frames has the power to help inform, educate and persuade consumers in that area of phenomena. Analyzing these frames helps to look at the subtle nuances within the sex messages of *Seventeen*. The following discussion will look at the frames within the first two research questions and how they contradict to answer the third research question.

The first research question asked, “What messages about being ‘sexy’ does *Seventeen* magazine provide?” The majority of these messages were found within articles full of tips and advice. Referring back to Entman’s four parts of developed

frames (idea promotion, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and recommendation), it is easy to see how these messages function (Entman 1993). First, the messages of “being sexy” are framed to promote the idea that teen girls must act and behave in a way that satisfies boys. Second, the casual interpretation of the framing show girls can find romance and satisfaction by following a prescribed behavior. Third, the moral evaluation is that these actions will most likely not lead to sexual behavior and there are no consequences. Finally, the recommended treatment for these messages was framed in the following three major themes: pleasing guys, confidence, and flirting.

In order to please her boyfriend, a reader is encouraged to make dinner, wear a certain outfit, say the right things, and go to all of his activities. Lining up with the same findings as Ward, the *Seventeen* “media diet” seems to be full of themes of women being objects for men, being the worker in the relationship (Ward 2003). While she is doing the work in the relationship, she should appear confident and not worry about what the guy is thinking about her. But at the same time, she should flirt and say just the right things to give the guy the right impression. Over and over, the reader is bombarded with ways to be the best possible girl in the eyes of a guy. As stated in the literature, extended exposure to this kind of media content can lead adolescents to believe they are simply sex objects for men (Ward 2003; Peter and Valkenburg 2007).

Although there are not many outright messages of “Be sexy,” there is a definite sense of what a girl should do—and it is always through the lens of what is appealing to guys. What’s missing from these articles is sex. The relationships

portrayed through the “sexy” messages appear to be innocent, non-sexual, romantic teen relationships. Kissing and hooking up are regarded as positive and normal aspects to relationships in all of the sexuality/romance articles. The scenarios in these messages never go beyond passionate kissing. Barnett said that pleasures of sex were removed from the consequences, but in these articles, sex was omitted completely (Barnett 2006).

The second research question asked, “What messages about sexual health does *Seventeen* magazine provide?” The articles analyzed for this research found that there is quite a bit of sexual education material provided for readers, but mostly within the Sex Ed column/department. Articles outside that department had very little, if any, sexual health content. Again using Entman’s four-part approach to messages, it is apparent what the frames are in messages of sexual health. The overall problem defined in these messages is that teen girls are engaging in sexual relations, which leads to negative consequences. The cause for this problem seems to be framed as young girls not taking enough responsibility for their sexual health and the sexual health of their partner as well. A study referenced in the literature review said that sexuality in the media often portrays girls being responsible for pregnancy and STD prevention (Hust, Brown et al. 2008). The moral judgment is framed to show that engaging in sexual behavior leads to negative consequences, such as pregnancy, STDs, or emotional distress. Most research from the literature showed that consequences of sex were removed from media portrayals (Mastronardi 2003). However, in the articles analyzed for this study, that was not the case. Finally, the framed recommendation is to seek support among friends, a

doctor, parents, Planned Parenthood, and even *Seventeen* magazine. These frames within sexual health message were part of three major themes that emerged: consequences, gender equality/responsibility, and support.

Nearly every article coded Sexual Health told the story of a girl who had sex and then suffered a negative consequence. The underlying theme was that girls are responsible for sexual health. Time after time, articles said that girls should ask their boyfriends to wear condoms, which is not a bad message, but it lays the responsibility of contraceptives on the girl. From the care-free portrayals of sex in most forms of media, young people might assume that unprotected sex is spontaneous and enjoyable whereas safe sex requires work and planning (Chapin 2000). And while this may have been true of *Seventeen* in the past, this research shows that is no longer true.

The last research question asked if the messages about being “sexy” and sexual health messages contradict one another; and the simple answer is yes. The textual analysis found that there is indeed a conflict between messages of romance and messages of sexual health, but not in the way that previous literature has stated. For example, Carpenter’s research showed that traditional sexual scenarios in *Seventeen* encouraged girls to refrain from intercourse, but the recreational scenarios reflected the opposite (1998). However, the findings of this research did not show contradicting recreational scenarios vs. scripts encouraging girls to refrain. Rather, the messages showed contradicting frames. Articles of a sexual health nature portray scenarios of girls who engage in sexual relationships and face

consequences, while articles of a romantic or “recreational” nature portray girls who are in non-sexual, romantic relationships that are risk- and care-free.

While texts on sexual education show that adolescents are engaging in sexual activity, texts of romantic or a “sexy” nature avoid the concept of adolescents in sexual activity completely. The articles coded sexual health presented educational lessons on STDs, birth control, etc., with stories or examples of teen girls who were involved in sexual relationships. And the articles coded sexuality/romance presented messages of teen love, with no mention of sex, ignoring the fact that many teens’ romantic relationships are sexual. A study from the literature review said that many of the non-health sex topics were things such as “make his thighs go up in flames,” but this study found that the non-health articles were quite PG (Walsh-Childers, Gotthoffer et al. 2002). In fact, the most “salacious” article is about kissing tips.⁸⁷ Guys and girls weigh in on what they think is the best way to kiss: swirling tongues around each others, sucking on lips, sitting on a guy’s lap and nipping his neck. Hardly indecent when compared to the things explained in the sexual health articles, which have detailed explanations of erections,⁸⁸ gynecological exams,⁸⁹ and anal sex.⁹⁰

Other studies have shown that teens don’t have the answers to how to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease (Strasburger 2005), but that is

⁸⁷ “The Ultimate Guide to Kissing,” November 2008, p. 74

⁸⁸ “Get to Know His Body,” May 2007, p. 90

⁸⁹ “Tests You Need to Take,” October 2007, p. 94

⁹⁰ “Sex Ed: Your Most Personal Sex Questions,” February 2010, p. 71

not the case in the articles analyzed for this research. The literature review stated that inadequate exposure to sexual messages can lead to distorted sexual attitudes and irresponsible sexual decision-making (Ward 2003). And even though the findings of this research showed a different type of “distorted” exposure to sexual health, the same outcome is possible.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

The final chapter will discuss the implications of the collected data. In addition, limitations and areas of future research will be discussed.

Implications

Be sexy. But do not be too sexy. Go after the guy you want, but do not be too forward. Spend time alone with your guy. Do group dates instead of being alone. Some guys might hate it if you wear pajamas to school, and other guys love it when you wear causal clothes. Do things with your guy like playing video games or sports, but do not become “one of the guys.” Contact Planned Parenthood to get birth control so your parents will not know, but always talk to your mom about sex. Be flirty with your texts, but do not use exclamation marks because it could seem as if you are shouting.

These are the messages that readers are receiving from *Seventeen* magazine. Bottom line: it can be confusing for readers to know what to believe about themselves, relationships, boys, and sex. And most readers (adolescents) are just starting to develop body image, define their sex roles, and develop relationships with the opposite sex (Chapin 2000). Receiving these mixed messages from *Seventeen* could cause the reader to incorporate ideas into her own developing sense of sexuality and image without even knowing it (Brown 2002).

As stated in the literature review, Brown says sex is represented in the media by the “three C’s”: commitment, contraceptives, and consideration of consequences (Brown 2002). The second two C’s are the ways in which sex is portrayed in *Seventeen* magazine. However, it is only portrayed that way in the Sexual Ed columns. There are explanations of birth control, STDs, virginity, etc. in these columns. The only exception to where sex is discussed outside of those columns is in the real-life narratives. However, in any reference to sex—spontaneous or otherwise—in *Seventeen*, there were consequences. Almost always, these are stories, told through the teen girl’s eyes, which tell of pregnancy, STDs, HIV, or abuse. There is not one account of a girl who has a sexual relationship that is free of consequences or guilt. And what is worse, there is not always advice from *Seventeen* following these accounts. Often all that’s included is a phone number and website for Planned Parenthood or a hotline phone number for an abuse center. Just as Bleakley said that learning from the media is incidental and passive, these narratives would be a perfect place to integrate health messages into a relatable experience (Bleakley, Hennessy et al. 2009).

One example of a narrative that would benefit from a health message is the article “My Mom Made Me Get an Abortion.”⁹¹ The story is of Christy, who was from a Christian home and explains the first time she had sex with her boyfriend. It began happening multiple times, and she says they often didn’t use a condom. When she became pregnant, her mother forced her to have an abortion. This would be a

⁹¹ September 2006, p. 156

perfect place for an explanation of options for pregnant teens and even a reminder to use condoms to prevent pregnancy and STDs. A similar example comes in the form of a compilation of stories from teens who were charged with sexual assault because they dated or hooked up with people just two to three years younger.⁹² The article lacks any tips or information on what to do in a similar situation. Another example is a narrative that tells the story of Briana who had sex with multiple guys for attention.⁹³ The conclusion of the story tells how Briana realized she was only getting temporary attention from sex and now she focuses on making real friends. However, there is not any word from *Seventeen* on how other girls should get out of or avoid a similar situation.

Seventeen does occasionally include information after the real-life narratives, such as an account of a reader getting an STD.⁹⁴ Alex told the story of how she contracted the STD, and then gave three tips for avoiding her outcome: Don't rush sex; Get tested; and Always use a condom. This example shows that it is possible to integrate information and entertainment to bring about learning about sexual education.

What is also interesting to note about the messages in *Seventeen* is the age demographic of its readers. The media kit states that the demographic is ages 12 to 19, but the majority of anecdotes, stories, and quotes in the analyzed texts come from readers aged 16 or 17. The sex messages seem to be targeted at the older end

⁹² "I Was Charged with Sexual Assault of My Boyfriend," October 2007, p. 115

⁹³ "I Slept with Guys for Attention," December 2006, p. 88

⁹⁴ "I Got an STD," June 2006, p. 89

of the age group, but 12 year olds are receiving the same advice as 19 year olds. And often, 12 year olds are consuming media, such as *Seventeen*, with the hopes of aspiring to be like older teens portrayed within it.

According to Hearst Corporation's website (*Seventeen's* publisher), *Seventeen* is a monthly magazine that "reports on the latest in fashion, beauty, health and entertainment, as well as information and advice on the complex real-life issues that young women face every day."⁹⁵ Although its main purpose might be financial, the content provided in *Seventeen* has set the magazine up to be a source of sex information for young girls. Some studies have shown that forms of "edu-tainment" are the best ways to report on health messages because they would not be resisted by the audience as they would in Public Service Announcements (Brown and Walsh-Childers 1994). And *Seventeen* is a perfect place for these types of messages because teens are often too embarrassed to ask sex questions of parents or peers, but they will turn to magazines (Treise and Gotthoffer 2002; Brown, Halpern et al. 2005).

It was noted in the literature review that no source of sexual knowledge can be without flaws, whether it be due to timing, inadequacy, or simple naïveté (Kallen, Stephenson et al. 1983). *Seventeen* does not claim to be the go-to source for sexual health advice for teenage girls, and true to the literature, it is also flawed. However, based on previous research, it has much more sexual health content provided than in previous years. The contradictive portrayal of girls in sexual relationships and girls in strictly romantic relationships might be confusing for readers, but they are

⁹⁵ <http://www.hearst.com/magazines/seventeen.php>

receiving more information about sexual health and consequences from *Seventeen* than other forms of media. Television, for example, continues to portray sex as fun, easy and consequence-free (L'Engle, Brown et al. 2006).

As a magazine editor, it is easy to understand how these divided portrayals in *Seventeen* can occur. For one, the content of sexual health and sexuality analyzed came from two different magazine departments. It's possible that the editors of each department have no idea what else is in the magazine until it's printed, and therefore have no recognition of the contradictions. Also, the magazine is trying to appeal to a wide variety of readers, including parents. There are readers who need support from the magazine, who need to know about Planned Parenthood, or who need to know that it's possible to have a romantic relationship without sex. There are also parents who read the magazine and want to know that their child is being informed, but not overly educated in sexual scripts. Overall, the magazine does a good job of providing sexual health knowledge to its readers, but a better portrayal of teens and sex is needed. Sex stories that imply teens are engaging in intercourse, and romantic stories imply teens are refraining from intercourse. These two areas need to have the same portrayal in order for teens to truly understand what is culturally "normal" and healthy sexual behavior.

Limitations

The research in this study has certain limitations that might have affected the findings. The first limitation is that the study was limited to four issues per year for the last five years. More comprehensive conclusions could have been gathered by

examining each issue for the past five years instead. However, the current sampling was a reasonable amount for the researcher and provided sufficient information to answer the research questions.

The second limitation is the scope of the magazine. The analysis for this study only included editorial text. Each article was selected because the content within them is shaped and controlled by the editorial staff of *Seventeen*. Also, they were chosen because they have the most direct and identifiable information about sex and sex education. However, advertisements and photography could impact how readers gain information about sexual health or sex in general. An examination of these two areas could have allowed for additional information about how *Seventeen* informs readers on sex. Also, media framing does not look at the effects of the content—this research examines the incentives magazines provide for comprehension of the content using framing.

Another limitation is the qualitative “coding.” The articles were selected by the researcher during a precursory examination of the magazine cover, table of contents and issue’s content. Then those articles were placed into categories of Sexual Health or Sexuality/Romance based on a deeper reading of the texts. Although this is an acceptable method of qualitative research, it is possible that the subjectivity of the process could allow for error.

Future Research

There are a few possibilities for additional research, which would expand upon the study’s findings. As stated in the limitations, the study was restricted to

editorial text. Future studies could include advertisement and photography. Looking at the messages of sexuality and sexual health within these categories would provide additional context to the findings of this study and provide more information on how teenage girls are learning about sexual health from *Seventeen* magazine. A quantitative method, such as a content analysis, could be used to help gain a wider understanding of the messages in the current research.

In addition to the themes mentioned in the findings of this research, another theme that arose during the research of the analyzed articles was a contradiction between talking about sex with parents and keeping parents out of the discussion. Out of all the articles analyzed, only two mentioned having a discussion with parents about sex and sexual advice. The first, "Where to Get the Best Sex Advice," is an explanation of the type of sex talk that readers should have with their parents.⁹⁶ The second, "The Most Important Talk You'll Ever Have," cuts out the father and discusses why it is important for mothers to discuss sex with their daughters.⁹⁷ Other than those two articles, nearly every sex article says to call or visit Planned Parenthood, where information can be kept private. Even in the story about watching online pornography, there is no mention of whether it is acceptable to access the content without parents' knowledge.⁹⁸ A textual analysis of the way parents are portrayed in messages of sexual health could contribute to the research.

⁹⁶ December 2006, p. 82

⁹⁷ May 2009, p. 86

⁹⁸ "The Real Deal About Dirty Movies," November 2010, p. 81

Another possibility for how this research topic could be expanded is with the changing role of editors. In January 2007, Ann Shoket replaced Atoosa Rubenstein as editor-in-chief of *Seventeen* magazine. Because the issues analyzed for this research began in 2006, there is not enough reference to determine whether acting editors have a role on what is allowed about sex in articles. However, a similar textual analysis with a different time frame would help to expand the research and see if that causes a change in the results.

Finally, a study that compared to *Seventeen's* sex messages to other popular teen magazines, such as *Teen Vogue* and *J-14* would help to expand the research in this area of health messages and the media. Comparing the messages from one magazine to another in the same time period would reveal if sexual health and sexuality/romance topics are always divided or if other magazines integrate the topics better. However, a study of that nature could also support this research in that sexual information is not being presented to teens in a comprehensive manner.

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