

An Analysis of Mental Health in Women's Magazines

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Abstract

Women's magazines are instrumental in generating a conversation about conditions that affect their readers, including mental health, which often goes untreated or undiagnosed by a doctor. Through content analysis and the objectification theory, this study analyzed how mental health conditions including depression, anxiety, and stress are mentioned in three women's magazines: Seventeen, Cosmopolitan, and The Oprah Magazine. Findings suggest there is an imbalanced representation of mental health conditions, a misuse of mental health terminology, and a stigma surrounding this issue.

I. Introduction

Millions of women read magazines every month, from publications focused on food and home décor to health and fitness. Despite the declining readership of print publications, women's magazines are still well-loved, well-read, and influential in the female space. Women's magazines are more resilient than any other print media in terms of subscription count. Research by the National Magazine Company found that 36% of women trust magazines to inform them about timely and important issues and provide perspective on topics seemingly unknown to them (Saner, 2010).

Mental health has made headlines in recent years due to the lack of public understanding, upsurge of mass violence, and increased political involvement. Mental illness is common and affects 23.8 percent of all women (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010). Women predominate in most mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. Unfortunately, most men and women with mental illnesses are not likely to be treated by a doctor or have their illness diagnosed. Nearly 60% of people with severe mental illness received no specialty care in the last 12 months (World Health Organization, 2016).

Three women's magazines will be assessed to determine how the topic of mental health is being presented in magazines with varying ages of readership: *Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *The Oprah Magazine*.

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This undergraduate project was conducted as a partial requirement of a research course in communications.

II. Literature Review

The literature below examined the definition of mental health, the correlation between mental health and women, the application of the objectification theory in relation to women's mental health, and the influence of magazines on women.

Defining Mental Health in the United States

The World Health Organization defines mental health as a dimension of one's overall condition in conjunction with physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Mental health is the state of well-being, in which every individual realizes his or her potential, copes with everyday stresses, has the ability to work productively, and is able to make a positive contribution to his or her community (Rath, 2009). The subject of mental health is both broad and complex. It does not affect everyone in the same way, nor is everyone susceptible to mental illness.

Under the umbrella of mental health, there are several illnesses including depression and anxiety. Yet within each illness, there are intricacies, controversies, and exceptions (World Health Organization, 2016). Depression, also known as depressive disorder or clinical depression, is a serious mood disorder that affects the actions, feelings, and daily activities of an individual. There are a variety of signs and symptoms including persistent sadness, feelings of guilt, fatigue, and suicidal thoughts (National Institute of Mental Health, 2016). Anxiety is an emotion distinguished by feelings of tension, worry, and physical changes, such as increased blood pressure and sweating (American Psychological Association, 2016). Stress is a reactor to life events and interferes with a person's ability to live normally. It is the most common mental health issue, but is rarely categorized as a disorder (National Institute of Mental Health, 2016).

In recent years, mental health has been a topic of conversation at both the dinner table and in Congressional hearings. President Barack Obama has supported public policies advocating for better access to treatment programs and a universal understanding of the severity of these illnesses. While the mental health discussion is often a result of the horrific acts of the mentally ill, especially mass shootings, it is now more talked-about and accepted than ever before. In a 2014 proclamation during Mental Health Awareness Month, President Obama said, "We too often think about mental health differently from other forms of health. Yet like any disease, mental illnesses can be treated—and without help, they can grow worse" ("Presidential Proclamation," 2014). Mental health is a major health issue in the United States, but due to public ignorance and the negligence of the healthcare professionals and legislators, there has been standstill in the prevention and treatment of such conditions (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2015).

The Relationship Between Mental Health and Women

Women are nearly twice as likely as men to be depressed or suffer from anxiety disorders. The reason for this disparity in mental illness, while unclear, is linked to biology, unique personality characteristics, and a lack of control in society (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). While more men are successful in committing suicide, more women attempt to commit suicide. In 2009, 3.9% of women in the United States had serious thoughts of suicide (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010). Women are suffering from improper treatment because many doctors assume they are being hormonal and prescribe them medication without accurately identifying the mental health issue (World Health Organization, 2016).

Women's Mental Health and Objectification

The objectification theory, coined by Harper and Tiggemann (2007), states that the objectification of women and girls in Western culture contributes to women's internalization of objectification. Typically, objectification of women comes from a sexual approach, with the perpetrator—whether a human being or visual media—treating the woman's body, mind, and soul like an object. The consequences of objectification are influential on women's mental health.

Due to objectification, women are apt to undergo constant body monitoring, creating overwhelming anxiety and shame, a lack of self-positivity, and a misunderstanding of internal bodily conditions. Additionally, women victimized by objectification, through rape, harassment, or other extreme measures, are likely to enter a depressive or stressed state (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Objectification of women, consequently, is a

contributing factor to the poorer mental health of women.

Self-objectification decreases with age but is present all throughout a woman's life, if exposed to objectification on a regular basis. This objectification increases body shame and fosters a greater appearance anxiety, which is likely to produce depression (Henning & Syzmanski, 2006). The 2007 study by Harper and Tiggemann concluded that even subtle cues provoke self-objectification, particularly in young women. For example, women do not have to be outwardly asked about their looks to form opinions or think critically about their own appearance. The objectification of women is ever-present, especially in Western culture. Women are their own worst critics: When advertisements, magazine covers, and other forms of visual media are focusing on sex and physical appearances, their self-objectification intensifies (Harper & Tiggemann, 2007).

Influence of Magazines on Women and Society

Magazines are extremely influential in the lives of women. They produce collective visuals for women to understand their personal experiences in relation to the stories about other women, along with lifestyle and health advice (Fullager, Gattuso, & Young, 2005).

In short, magazines matter. They have the potential to inspire readers and make a positive impact on their lives, if executed wisely. Magazines, while valued by their readers, are not viewed as highly as traditional newspapers. Their credibility is called into question due to the writing style, creative liberty, and mix of opinion (Lorenz, 2015). Yet magazines focus on the same topics, simply following a different format. "There are so many things that we do in *ELLE* or even in *Marie Claire* or *Vogue* that a year later, you'll see it in *Time* magazine, or you'll see it in *The New York Times*. And you think: 'The only reason you think this is news now is because you just decided to look at it,' said Robbie Meyers, editor-in-chief of *ELLE* (as cited in Steigrad, 2015). Meyers supports the notion that magazines are writing about the same important issues as newspapers. Their content is motivated by their readers rather than the competitive news cycle, which requires different writing techniques.

Magazines go hand in hand with national policy, especially in the case of mental illness, because they circulate discussion about the cause, management, and prevention of the illnesses when the illness is discussed for policy making. Magazines write about topical concerns that are relevant to the news media but more importantly, relevant to their readers. *Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *The Oprah Magazine*, while varying in readership and content, all have similar missions: to guide, encourage, and inspire women. Through the discussion of important issues, they are upholding their mission and making a difference.

Using the objectification theory as a basis, this research examined the ways that mental health is discussed in three popular women's magazines: *Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *The Oprah Magazine*. Although researchers have examined how women's magazines mention physical health and body image, there is a lack of information regarding mental health. This content analysis tried to find how differently each magazine presented the conversation of mental health in visual media and fit the needs of its target readers.

Drawing on previous research, this paper sought to answer these questions:

RQ1: To what extent do women's magazines, such as *Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *The Oprah Magazine*, inform their readers about mental health issues?

RQ2: How do the messages surrounding mental health vary depending on the primary readership age of the publication?

III. Methods

Sampling Procedure

This research will rely on content analysis to examine the messaging strategies most frequently used in three women's magazines as the articles discuss mental health. Content analysis is defined as an "observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded communication" (Burnett & Kolbe, 1991). Articles from magazines were collected from November 2015 to April 2016 including six from *Cosmopolitan*, six from *The Oprah Magazine* and five from *Seventeen*,

due to its January/ February combination issue. During this time period, mental health was on the public's radar with numerous addresses from the various political leaders, including President Obama. For example, in January 2016 the Obama administration announced multiple executive actions to reduce gun violence. One of the actions included a \$500 million investment to increase access to mental health care (Office of the Press Secretary, 2016).

Seventeen, *Cosmopolitan*, and *The Oprah Magazine* were chosen based on their varying readership ages and high circulation rates. All magazines appeal to women and have health/wellness sections.

Seventeen is the most popular magazine for teenage women. The magazine is an engaging, informative, and entertaining "how-to" guide for adolescent girls as they face pressures and troubles throughout their teenage years. More than 3 million girls are subscribed to the monthly publication with their median age of 16.5 (Seventeen Media Kit, 2016). *Cosmopolitan*, a magazine for "fun, fearless women," reaches more than 14.5 million women each month with their median age of 34.7. The largest young women's media brand works to empower women to own who they are and have a successful future (Cosmopolitan Media Kit, 2016). *The Oprah Magazine* strives to connect with real women about everyday issues, with a special focus on personal growth. The magazine reaches nearly 11 million readers each month and their median age is 50.5 (The Oprah Magazine Media Kit, 2016).

Coding Structure

The author analyzed all feature articles, health and lifestyle advice columns, letters from the editor, and personal narratives for specific keywords. Coding of these articles was based on the work by Fullager, Gattuso, and Young (2005). The categories in the initial content analysis were: *depression*, *anxiety* and *stress*. Depression and anxiety are the two most common mental health issues among women, and stress is the most common condition linked to women and their well-being (World Health Organization, 2016). Key words for this category included depressed, depression, anxious, anxiety, stressed, and stress. From there, the items were sorted into secondary categories, which were: *reasoning*, *management*, *consequences*, *co-existing conditions*, and *personal experiences/ narratives*.

Cancian and Gordon (1988) also influenced the structure of the coding sheet used in this study. In their research, Cancian and Gordon analyzed the patterns of emotion norms in a random sample of articles in popular magazines through a content analysis and qualitative study. By using a similar structure, the trends of mental health in magazines emerged. Each article was categorized as a particular mental health disorder and then, the subject matter of the article was analyzed to better understand how the mental health topic is being communicated to the reader.

The same coding sheet was used for all three publications. (Refer to the coding sheet in Appendix for more details.)

The results showed how three popular women's magazines conveyed the subject of mental health to the reader. Content analysis showed how distinctly each magazine communicated mental health disorder to their audience and whether there were any trends.

IV. Findings

The three publications in this study showed notable differences in their approaches to mental health. The most common mental health subject mentioned by *Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *The Oprah Magazine* was stress (44%), followed by anxiety (33%) and depression (23%), as shown in Table 1. The most common approach to the subject was through the proposed management of the mental health issue. The magazines differed in the message portrayed and the number of times mental health was mentioned in each issue.

Table 1. Mental health themes found in content for three women's magazines

	<i>Seventeen</i>	<i>Cosmopolitan</i>	<i>The Oprah Magazine</i>	Total mentions
Depression	4 (15%)	9 (18%)	24 (41%)	37 (27%)
Reasoning for	0	3	2	5
Management of	2	3	6	11
Consequences of	0	1	4	5
Co-existing condition	0	2	4	6
Personal narrative	2	0	8	10
Anxiety	11 (42%)	14 (28%)	21 (36%)	46 (34%)
Reasoning for	1	1	3	5
Management of	4	6	7	17
Consequences of	2	4	1	7
Co-existing condition	0	1	5	6
Personal narrative	4	2	5	11
Stress	11 (42%)	27 (54%)	14 (24%)	52 (39%)
Reasoning for	2	5	3	10
Management of	3	10	4	17
Consequences of	3	7	1	11
Co-existing condition	0	0	2	2
Personal narrative	3	5	4	12
Total mentions	26 (19%)	50 (37%)	59 (44%)	135 (100%)

In total, there were 135 mentions of mental health in the 17 issues examined. The content covered more than one illness category and theme. *The Oprah Magazine* (42%) printed more articles on mental health than both *Cosmopolitan* (37%) and *Seventeen* (19%). *The Oprah Magazine* and *Cosmopolitan* were fairly comparable and nearly doubled the mental health mentions of *Seventeen*.

Stress (39%) was the most mentioned mental health issue, followed by anxiety (34%) and depression (27%). Both *Seventeen* and *Cosmopolitan* followed this pattern, but *The Oprah Magazine* was an exception with anxiety mentioned most (39%), followed by depression (34%) and stress (27%).

In all three publications, the management of mental health was the most common article topic: *Seventeen* (35%), *Cosmopolitan* (38%), and *The Oprah Magazine* (29%). After that, the magazines differed in their approach to the subject.

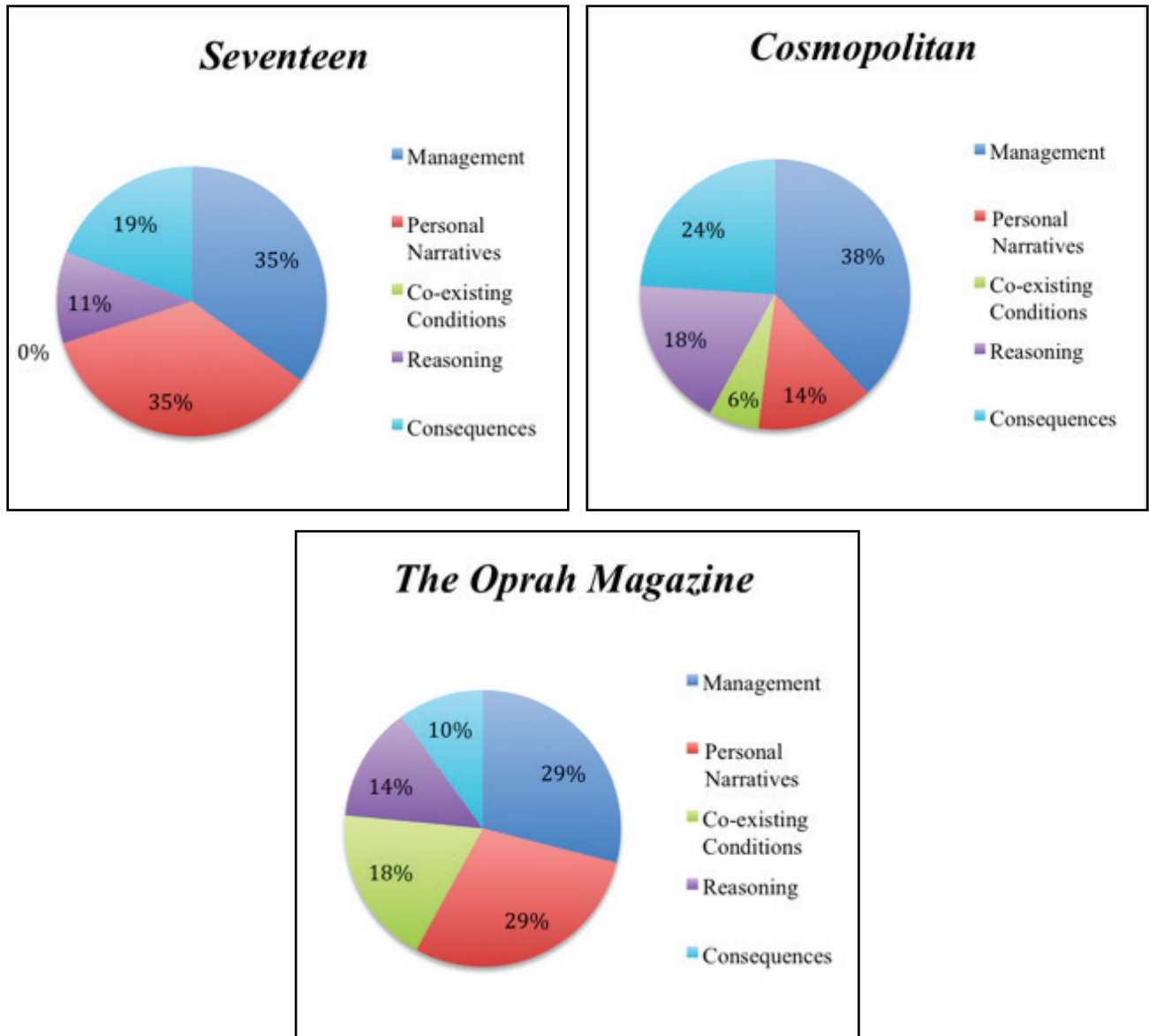


Figure 1. Method of presentation of mental health in three women’s magazines

Seventeen had the highest number for personal narratives about mental health (31%), equal to management, followed by the consequences of mental health (19%) and reasoning for the disease (12%). There were no articles relating a particular mental health issue to a co-existing condition. In *Cosmopolitan*, the articles were focused, in descending order, on the consequences of mental health (24%), reasoning for (18%), personal narratives (14%) and co-existing conditions (6%). Similar to *Seventeen*, *The Oprah Magazine* had a similar distribution for personal narratives and management of the mental health condition (29% each). The other articles featured subjects in the following order: co-existing conditions (18%), reasoning for the mental health issue (14%), and consequences of (10%).

Seventeen

Article topics in *Seventeen* ranged from survival guides for family holiday parties, adolescent acne, and the SATs, as well as the serious profile story of a transgender teenager. While mental health was absent from many articles, the emphasis on confidence and fearlessness was clear. Stress and anxiety went hand-in-hand, but depression was only mentioned two times in total, in the December 2015 and April 2016 issues. Coincidentally, both articles that highlighted depression were personal narratives by actors emphasizing how

creativity and pursuing their art helped them combat depression including “How I Became the Funny Girl” (Dec. 2015, pp. 24).

Seventeen focused on how mental health issues can be managed. Various management tactics included humor, music, meditation, and breathing techniques. There was no medical evidence or statistics to support their claims. In “Your Cheat Sheet to . . . The New SAT,” *Seventeen*’s solution to reducing anxiety during test taking was to use tools and calculators, a suggestion made by the founder of PrepMatters, a test-prep service in Washington, D.C. (Jan. 2016, pp. 98-99). This is a stark contrast to the clinical psychologists quoted in *The Oprah Magazine*. A commonality found in *Seventeen* is the need to survive. Several articles have “survival guide” in the title or imply that the tips and tricks mentioned in the article will help the reader “survive.” This is evident in “The Shy Girl’s Guide to Fitness Classes” (Mar. 2016, pp.77-79) and “Your Acne Survival Guide” (Mar. 2016, pp. 64-69), where the writers give advice on how the first-timer can “actually have fun” at a fitness class and “how to deal” with breakouts.

Cosmopolitan

Cosmopolitan had a different take on mental health. This magazine encourages the “fun, fearless female,” which was evident in the content. With a clear emphasis on stress-related articles, *Cosmopolitan* diluted the harsh reality of mental health by explaining how stress results in a poor sex life and acne. For example, stress was mentioned in the February 2016 issue, “When Did Food Become So Scary?” as the reasoning for a “panic-attack inducing nightmare.” *Cosmopolitan*, however, did highlight issues that are relevant to its readers, including the struggles of menstruation, body image, career dilemmas, and drug use. When anxiety or depression was discussed, it was typically linked to stress, with the exception of the article “Hot and Hilarious: Jessica Williams” (Mar. 2016, pp. 48-49), in which anxiety was the sole focus. *Cosmopolitan* paid attention to topics that are often associated with mental health including sexual assault, violence, and suicide, but the mental health keywords were not used.

The Oprah Magazine

The Oprah Magazine was the leader in mental health discussion with the help of its three-part series beginning in February 2016—“The State of Our Minds.” Prior to that, *The Oprah Magazine* averaged 3.3 mentions in each issue, from November 2015 to January 2016. The articles focused on mental health in a lighter fashion, such as the benefits of vanilla for reducing anxiety in an article titled “Feeling Good: Scents of the Season” (Dec. 2015, pp. 121). Following the implementation of this three-part series, the discussion of mental health more than doubled with an average of 7.6 mentions each issue from February 2016 to April 2016. The content of the articles in “The State of Our Minds” was candid and recounted personal experiences from women of varying ages, races, and backgrounds. It was diverse in its discussion of mental health issues and had a fairly equal distribution of anxiety, depression, and stress. Headlines included “8 Steps to Inner Peace” (Feb. 2016, pp. 100) and “My Bipolar Opposite” (Feb. 2016, pp. 112).

The Oprah Magazine differed from *Cosmopolitan* and *Seventeen* in the amount of medical language and expert dialogue used. The latter magazines did not have any articles written by medical professionals, whereas *The Oprah Magazine* had several articles and quotes from psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and mental health professionals. *The Oprah Magazine* also had statistics by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Screening for Mental Health, and the National Alliance for Caregiving. *The Oprah Magazine*’s mental health content was primarily written in first-person through a personal narrative, but intertwined facts and figures to give the content more depth and credibility.

Three Magazines, Three Approaches

Seventeen and *Cosmopolitan* shared more similarities in their content than *The Oprah Magazine*. The two incorporated similar language in their articles, while mostly focusing on stress, followed by anxiety and depression. They, of course, took different approaches. *Seventeen* relied heavily on personal narratives, and *Cosmopolitan* seldom used first-person narratives to explain mental health issues.

V. Conclusions

This study set out to examine how mental health is discussed in three women's magazines: *Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *The Oprah Magazine*. The content analysis showed that anxiety and depression are not mentioned to the same extent as stress.

Imbalanced Representation

As highlighted in these three popular women's magazines, stress is the most mentioned mental health issue. Anxiety and depression are still not well-represented in women's magazines, especially with younger target audiences. Despite the mention of stress, it is not often used to describe a mental health condition. Rather, stress is a description of an emotional state and perceived as a condition that can be easily managed. Anxiety is generally used in conjunction with stress and is seldom defined as a serious mental health condition. The words "anxious" and "stressed" are used interchangeably and depression is still stigmatized in women's magazines. While the magazines used these keywords, it is apparent that the terms were misused and diluted, lessening their impact and mental health association.

Presentation and the Objectification of Mental Health

Mental health is perceived as a condition that can be managed. Magazines present simple solutions including meditation, healthy diets, and solid friendships. Medication and psychiatric aid are rarely brought into the picture, with the exception of *The Oprah Magazine*. Personal narratives and potential consequences of the condition are another strategy employed by women's magazines to inform readers about these heavy subjects.

The objectification theory was present in all three women's magazines. Mental health was most often linked to sex, appearance, and relationships. While objectification was not explicitly mentioned as the reason for a poor mental health condition, the content suggested this to be true through the notion of managing current mental health conditions and the association between emotional wellbeing and sexual partnerships. Mental health is a personal experience fueled by self-objectification and the relationship between personal narratives and mental health mentions in the magazines supports this notion (Harper & Tiggemann, 2007).

Destigmatizing Mental Illness

Mental illness is prevalent in women, but many fail to receive treatment because they are viewed by society as being an "emotional woman" (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010). Many articles related to the mental health in *Seventeen* and *Cosmopolitan* were linked to menstruation, relationships, and sex. This implies that a woman's hormones are at fault for her poor mental health, as previous research suggests. These findings are significant because it suggests that the stigma surrounding mental health has yet to be shattered. Mental illness is still viewed as taboo and does not align with being fun, fearless, or confident. Mental health conditions among women, such as anxiety or depression, are often treated like a secondhand condition of being a woman, but they are serious conditions that can affect both men and women alike.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations to this study. A combined issue of *Seventeen* for January/February likely affected the findings. Another limitation is related to the number of coders. Because the author performed this study alone, it is likely that interpretation bias may arise, especially in determining the methods used to discuss mental health by the various publications.

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Appendix

Trends in Mental Health in Seventeen: Number of Articles Supporting Depression, Anxiety, and Stress

Illness	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
Themes	Article title/ Month, Year	Article title/ Month, Year	Article title/ Month, Year
1. Reasoning for			
2. Management of			
3. Consequences of			
4. Co-existing condition			
5. Personal narrative			