

Deconstructing the Empowering and Disempowering Messages in *Seventeen* Magazine

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Abstract

Women's magazines have long struggled to balance their desire to empower women with their financial need to disempower them—thus providing readers with ambivalent messages. This research examined the ways in which a popular teen magazine, Seventeen, navigates this balance. Through a two-part critical analysis grounded in feminist theory, this study analyzed empowering and disempowering messages the magazine sent its readers in two of its most recent issues. Findings suggested the magazine is more empowering than it is disempowering, but it could improve by increasing inclusion of diverse readers and halting its perpetuation of conventional beauty standards.

I. Introduction

Women's magazines have long presented a conflict between building women up and cutting them down. Situated at the intersection of well-intentioned media outlet and vessel for publishing advertisements, women's magazines have struggled to balance their desire to empower women with their financial need to disempower them—thus providing readers with ambivalent messages. Flipping through the pages of *Cosmopolitan*, *InStyle*, or *Glamour*, an individual can expect to find messages about being confident in one's own skin on one page and instructions on how to get "flat abs" or a "hot body" on the next.

While considered trivial by many, women's magazines are vital to creating an empowering space for women to inhabit in society; when much of American culture is men-oriented, women need an outlet that features women-oriented content written by women, and women's magazines fill that void. As journalist and activist Naomi Wolf explained, "The relationship between the woman reader and her magazine is so different from that between a man and his that they aren't in the same category. A man reading *Popular Mechanics* or *Newsweek* is browsing through just one perspective among countless others of general [men]-oriented culture ... A woman reading *Glamour* is holding women-oriented mass culture between her two hands" (Wolf, 1991).

Perhaps the most interesting case study of dissonant messages in women's magazines is *Seventeen*, an American publication marketed at teenagers. Targeting one of the most vulnerable and malleable demographics in the country (Siebel-Newsom, 2011), *Seventeen* does not just have the responsibility to instill confidence in women; it has the responsibility to instill confidence in fragile, adolescent women who are enduring a multitude of transitions in their physical, emotional, and social lives (Bergland, 2013).

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This magnifies the potential effects of the magazine's content on its readers, thus amplifying *Seventeen's* responsibility as a media outlet.

Historically, *Seventeen* has taken this duty to its readers seriously. In August 2012, the magazine pledged to stop digitally altering photos as part of its "Body Peace Treaty." This decision was the result of a Change.org petition created by a 14-year-old girl receiving more than 80,000 signatures. Ann Shoket, *Seventeen's* editor-in-chief at the time, emphasized that the magazine "never has, never will" digitally alter(ed) the bodies or faces of the models it features and will only use photos of "real girls and models who are healthy" (Hu, 2012). The magazine has also consistently framed itself as the reader's older sister—its mission being to "talk about the tricky stuff you [readers] don't want to discuss with anyone else" and to keep its readers from being embarrassed. "Don't worry, it's just us girls," Shoket (2013) wrote in her October 2013 Editor's Letter.

Despite this positive step forward, *Seventeen* still publishes content perpetuating conventional beauty standards—running pieces that emphasize looking smaller, being tan, and attracting boys. This paper will critically investigate two of the most recent issues of *Seventeen* magazine, carefully weighing the empowering content against the disempowering content through a two-part analysis, to draw conclusions about how *Seventeen* has succeeded and failed to instill a sense of confidence in its readers.

II. Literature Review

The following literature review shows how society and mass media influenced woman to respond to beauty in a disempowering way.

"Beauty" as a disempowering concept

Feminist philosopher Bartky (1997) draws on the Foucauldian concept of the "panopticon," a cylindrical prison structure, to illustrate patriarchal power structures at work in society. Women are the prisoners of this panopticon, constantly self-disciplining by dieting, exercising, shaving, waxing, applying makeup, etc. Bartky argues that women commit these actions not because they want to—many of these activities are painful and time-consuming—but because they are expected to by an amorphous disciplinarian: the "male gaze." Furthermore, these behaviors have become so internalized and deeply engrained in women's day-to-day activities that it is hard to pinpoint the source of the "male gaze;" the disciplinarian is "everywhere and ... nowhere," in Bartky's words, and tied to a variety of institutions—school, family, friends, the workplace, the anonymous patriarchal "other," etc. This nebulousness further disempowers women as it obscures their notion of where the power actually lies (Bartky, 1997, p.95).

This Foucauldian notion of normalization through self-discipline is reiterated in the work of feminist philosopher Heyes (2007), who counters the contemporary conception that the outer body is an expression of some kind of core inner self. Heyes rejects the philosophical model of the self as an "object with a [unique] inner essence," saying this model ignores the greater, intersubjective context surrounding the embodied self. She then applies this argument to the examples of Weight Watchers, plastic surgery, and sexual reassignment surgery to show that these processes of normalization are more so "mechanisms of docility" than "gestures toward recognition" of an inner self (Heyes, 2007).

The clearest criticism of the beauty industry comes from journalist and activist Wolf (1991), who theorizes that the "beauty ideal" was established to "distract" women when they gained power, legal recognition, and professional success—essentially rendering the "feminine mystique" obsolete in the process. This beauty ideal, or "myth" as Wolf calls it, is omnipresent; it influences the dolls people buy their children, the personalities people see on the news, and, most pertinently to this paper, the content people consume in their magazines. This beauty myth is the result of the political economy of the media, which dictates how content decisions are made; since magazines are supported by advertisements, the editors are indebted to them and must make content selections consistent with those advertising messages. "Our magazines simply reflect our own dilemma: Since much of their message is about women's advancement, much of the beauty myth must accompany it and temper its impact ... It is understood that some kinds of thinking about 'beauty' would alienate advertisers, while others promote their products" (Wolf, 1991).

Women and the media

Much time has been dedicated to researching the ways in which women are systematically disempowered by the media. Only 16 percent of film protagonists are female, female characters are as likely to be wearing revealing clothing in G-rated movies as in R-rated movies, and 79 percent of the women represented on television are in their teens, 20s, and 30s, despite only making up 39 percent of the population (Siebel-Newsom, 2011). Of the 6,111 films in the Bechdel Test's database, only 57 percent pass all three "tests," meaning 43 percent of those movies either don't have two named women in them, don't have two named women who talk to each other, and/or have a men-centric premise ("Bechdel Test Movie List," n.d.). The average number of news stories about girls and women is less than 20 percent, and the majority of broadcast news duos are comprised of a young, attractive woman and an older, not necessarily attractive man (Siebel-Newsom, 2011). Not to mention, in John Boehner's first four weeks as speaker of the house, he was on the cover of five national weekly magazines, whereas in Nancy Pelosi's four years as speaker, she was not put on a single weekly magazine cover. This "symbolic annihilation" limits women and girls' conceptions of what they can achieve; as Gloria Steinem said, "You can't be what you can't see" (Siebel-Newsom, 2011).

Moreover, adolescent media engagement in the United States is at an all-time high. American teenagers spend 31 hours per week watching television, 17 hours per week listening to music, three hours per week watching movies, four hours per week reading magazines, and 10 hours a week online. That amounts to 10 hours and 45 minutes of media consumption each day (Siebel-Newsom). When one considers how oppressive many of these media messages are to women, it is hardly surprising that 53 percent of teenage girls are unhappy with their bodies, and that number increases to 78 percent by age 17 (Siebel-Newsom). "Girls get the message from very early on that the most important thing is how they look—that their value, their worth, depends on that. And boys get the message that this is what's important about girls" (Siebel-Newsom). 65 percent of women and girls have an eating disorder, 17 percent of teenagers engage in self-injurious behavior like cutting or burning, and the number of cosmetic surgeries performed on youth under 19 years of age tripled from 1997 to 2007 (Siebel-Newsom).

Past research

Previous research on *Seventeen* magazine looked specifically at how the magazine addresses sexuality, romance, relationships, and gender roles (Carpenter, 1998; Jochen, Valkenburg, & Yoshi, 2007). Two studies analyzed how *Seventeen* socializes its readers through adolescence and how these socializations change as sociocultural shifts are made over time (Peirce, 1990; Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman, 1998). The study most resembling this paper's approach was "The Making and Unmaking of Body Problems in *Seventeen* Magazine," which addressed the contradictory messages the magazine sends to its readers regarding body image (Ballentine & Ogle, 2009). The researchers found that *Seventeen's* messages about body image were rife with ambivalence; "Much of the body-related content . . . promoted the dominant female beauty ideal of a thin and toned body. However, in some articles, authors problematized for readers mainstream ideologies about the body and provided them with strategies for resisting cultural pressures to be thin" (p. 298).

For this study two research questions were asked based on literature review:

RQ1: In quantitative terms, what is the ratio of empowering content to disempowering content when it comes to overall messages sent by *Seventeen* magazine through its articles?

RQ2: When these articles are analyzed from a deeper, more qualitative standpoint, what empowering and disempowering messages are they really sending to readers?

III. Methods

This study used the method of critical analysis to determine the ways in which *Seventeen* magazine directly and indirectly empowered or disempowered readers through articles appearing in two issues (June/July and August 2015). These editions were the two most recently released at the time this study began.

The critical analysis in this study was two-fold. First, magazine articles were analyzed based on the messages they communicated at first glance (through headlines primarily). These articles were categorized as *empowering*, *disempowering*, both *empowering and disempowering*, or *neutral*, and these categories were analyzed quantitatively. Articles were then read through a deeper, more critical lens to see what other messages were being conveyed through the fine print. This qualitative step (a “don’t judge a book by its cover” approach, if you will) added a level of depth to the research, giving a more holistic picture of what the magazine was really communicating. For example, an article that seemed *empowering* from its headline could contain contradictory and potentially harmful language in its body.

Sample

Drawing on Carpenter’s (1998) previously mentioned study, the unit of analysis for this study was an *article*. In this study, the operational definition for the term *article* extends to cover a variety of storytelling forms: interviews, sidebars, personal essays, and, of course, traditional articles. This definition excludes tables of content, fashion and beauty editorial spreads (more image-based than text-based), fine print pages (for sweepstakes), advertisements, and images. The covers of both issues were also included in this definition. There were 76 articles in total.

Procedure: Part I

As mentioned earlier, this study involved a two-step critical analysis of *Seventeen* magazine articles. The first quantitative step labeled each article as being one of the following: *empowering*, *disempowering*, both *empowering and disempowering*, or *neutral*. For an article to be considered *empowering*, it needed to help the reader further the reader’s development in some way. For an article to be considered *disempowering*, it needed to seemingly exclude or limit the reader. Articles categorized as *empowering and disempowering* involved conflicting messages—simultaneously helping the reader while also limiting them. *Neutral* articles did not necessarily empower or disempower the reader; they simply existed and likely did not impact the reader (a page about horoscopes is neither harmful nor particularly helpful, for example).

This study drew from a 1998 study conducted by Schlenker, Caron, and Halteman in its creation of coding categories to guide the classification process. They used the categories of *appearance*, *male-female relations*, *home*, *self-development*, *career development*, and *political/world issues*. The first three categories were labeled *traditional*, and the latter three *feminist* (close equivalents to this study’s *disempowering* and *empowering*, respectively). This study expanded these six into the following coding criteria:

1. *Appearance*: reinforcements of conventional beauty standards, using clothing/beauty as a means to adhere to trends as opposed to a method of creativity/artistic expression,
2. *Male-female relations*: reliance on men, emphasis on pleasing men,
3. *Superficiality*: popularity, valuing image over authentic self,
4. *Exclusion*: lack of representation for atypical gender characteristics, body types, race, sexuality, socioeconomic status,
5. *Self-development*: health, confidence, emphasis on creativity/individuality, hard work, independence, education,
6. *Relationship development*: friendships, romance, family, community,
7. *Needs-meeting*: embarrassment management, encouragement, information provision, reader importance, and
8. *Inclusion*: concerted inclusion of atypical gender characteristics, body types, race, sexuality, socioeconomic status (SES).

Categories 1-4 correspond with *disempowerment*, because they perpetuate conventions many guiding feminist philosophers would consider limiting, and categories 5-8 correspond with *empowerment*, because they focus on growth and development based on the immediate needs of the readers. Each article’s headline and general presentation was analyzed, then labeled using the various sub-categories listed above, which were not mutually exclusive. Based on its sub-category classification, the article was then grouped under one of the larger categories—*empowering*, *disempowering*, *empowering and disempowering*, or

neutral.

An article about avoiding bad breath to become a better kisser, for example, would be labeled as *embarrassment management* (it can be embarrassing to have bad breath) and *male-female relations* (the emphasis is on another person—likely a man). The article would not be labeled as *romance*, because it is not encouraging the reader to be in a romantic relationship for its benefits; it is simply helping those who already are. Because *embarrassment management* is an *empowering* sub-category and *male-female relations* is a *disempowering* one, the overall article would be grouped under the *empowering and disempowering* classification.

There are two points worth noting in regard to this portion of methodology. First, this study did not code for gender in the *exclusion* or *inclusion* sub-categories. *Seventeen* is a young women's magazine, so it is expected that young men will be excluded from much of the content. That is not to say this study advocates this exclusion of male readers, but that seemed like a topic for another study entirely. Instead, this paper was more focused on how *Seventeen* marketed content to its female readers—did it take into account female readers who strayed from traditional norms of femininity, for example?

Procedure: Part II

The second step in the critical analysis involved taking a deeper, more qualitative look at the articles. While headlines and general article presentation may convey one subject, a thorough read through a piece can reveal other messages. These can be as nuanced as a brief sentence perpetuating heteronormativity, to a paragraph overtly disempowering women who are not thin.

In order to gain an understanding of these messages in a way that was comprehensible and organized, many of the coding criteria from the quantitative step of the methodology were employed. Many sentences, descriptions, or paragraphs within the bodies of the articles could still be categorized under these criteria; this qualitative analysis simply allowed for a more detailed read of the articles by acknowledging the reality of the gray area journalistic storytelling—a single article can often carry conflicting messages. Articles were read neutrally until an example of *empowerment*, *disempowerment*, or simultaneous *empowerment and disempowerment* arose. The specific sentence or paragraph in question was then logged as an example to be examined further in the Discussion portion of this paper. Some articles contained several sentences and/or paragraphs that became pertinent to this part of the analysis, while others contained none. This step therefore helped illustrate the complexity and variety of messages *Seventeen* readers must navigate as they determine how to engage with the information in front of them, creating a more authentic representation of the magazine's content—one that would not be available from a first look at the impressions articles make.

IV. Findings

Part I: Quantitative

A total of 76 articles were analyzed from the two issues. Among them, 39 (51%) were classified as neutral, 24 as empowering, 9 as both empowering/disempowering, and 4 as disempowering, as shown in Table I. Those classified as empowering most often fell under the categories of *needs-meeting* and *self-development*, respectively. Those classified as disempowering most often fell under the category of *exclusion*, specifically in regard to sexuality. Those classified as *empowering and disempowering* varied immensely.

Table 1: Overall messages conveyed through articles.

Classification	# Articles
Empowering	24
Disempowering	4
Empowering and disempowering	9
Neutral	39
Total	76

Classified as empowering were 33 articles, either classified as empowering—24--or empowering and disempowering--9. Because articles are comprised of many parts, which contain different messages, some articles were described using more than one subcategory. Thus, 13 articles were labeled as needs meeting, 13 as self-development, 11 as inclusion, and 6 as relationship development. (Refer to Table 2 for more details.)

Within the needs meeting subcategory, information provision was the most common (appearing 6 times). These elements typically offered information about fitness (“Gym 101”) or health and beauty (“Skin solutions”). Embarrassment management followed by appearing 4 times, and reader importance appearing 3 times. Within self-development, health appeared 5 times, hard work 4 times, confidence and education 2 times each. Inclusion was skewed heavily to the socioeconomic status subcategory, with 7 relevant mentions (of 11 total). Finally, within relationship development, romance and family each appeared twice, and friendships and community each appeared once.

Table 2. Empowering Content

Category	Subcategory	Further subcategory	Parts
Empowering (33 articles, 43 appearances)	needs meeting (13)	Information provision	6
		Embarrassment management	4
		Reader importance	3
		Encouragement	0
	Self development (13)	Health	5
		Hard work	4
		Confidence	2
		Education	2
		Individuality	0
		Independence	0
	Inclusion (11)	Socioeconomic status	7
		Sexuality	2
		Atypical gender characteristics	1
		Body types	1
		Race	0
	relationship development (6)	Romance	2
		Family	2
		Friendships	1
		Community	1

Of the articles categorized as *disempowering*--either wholly *disempowering* (4 times) or *empowering and disempowering* (9 times), *appearance* was the most frequently occurring (8 times). (Refer to Table 3 for more details.) Within *appearance*, reinforcements of *conventional beauty standards* appeared 5 times, while using fashion and beauty as a means to adhere to *trends* appeared thrice. *Exclusion* appeared thrice: 2 times for being exclusive in regard to *sexuality* and 1 time for being exclusive in regard to *socioeconomic status*. Finally, *male-female relations* had appeared once, in an article focusing on *pleasing men*.

Table 3. Disempowering Parts

Category	Subcategory	Further subcategory	Parts
Disempowering (13 articles)	Appearance (8)	Conventional beauty standards	5
		Trends/fitting in	3
	Exclusion (3)	Sexuality	2
		Socioeconomic status	1
		Atypical gender characteristics	0
		Body types	0
		Race	0
	Male-female relations (1)	Emphasis on pleasing men	1
		Reliance on men	0
	Superficiality (0)	Popularity	0

Nine articles were classified as being simultaneously *empowering and disempowering*—a nuanced category that deserves additional attention. Articles falling under this category featured combinations of the following subcategories: *inclusion/SES* with *appearance/trends* (“Trends under \$50”), *self-development/health* with *appearance/conventional beauty standards* (“Look tan tonight!”), *needs-meeting/information provision* with *appearance* (“Your summer skin issues”), *self-development/education* with *exclusion/SES* (“The perfect college visit”), *needs-meeting/embarrassment management* with *male-female relations/emphasis on pleasing men* (“Prep for your perfect makeout”), *self-development/health* with *appearance/conventional beauty standards* (“5 ways to look tanner”), *needs-meeting/embarrassment management* with *appearance/conventional beauty standards* (“How to survive ... a hairy situation”), *relationship development/romance* with *exclusion/sexuality* (“What he’s thinking”), and *needs-meeting/information provision* with *appearance/trends* (“Campus chic”).

Part II: Qualitative

Messages contained within the fine print of articles added another level of nuance and complexity to the analysis. Many articles classified as *neutral* remained *neutral* in what they were communicating (especially those that were image-heavy, as images were excluded from this study), but several were rife with messages that subtly *empowered* and *disempowered* readers. The horoscopes pages of both issues, for example, seemed generally harmless, but they contained numerous contradictions; many horoscopes referenced crushes using masculine language and friendships using feminine language, perpetuating the heteronormative expectation that *Seventeen’s* readers—who are mainly female—can only have male love interests and female social ones. That said, the horoscopes also suggested that readers combat conventional dating expectations by “making the first move” as opposed to remaining passive and letting their male love interest come to them.

For the most part, articles that seemed overwhelming *empowering* or *disempowering* at first glance contained consistent messages within; features on entrepreneurial women remained *empowering* and inspiring throughout, while pages dedicated to expensive trendy products remained superficial and *Socioeconomic-exclusive*. There were, however, some exceptions. The only article in either issue dedicated to addressing curvy bodies—a seemingly *empowering* piece—was full of suggestions for looking thinner, clearly perpetuating *conventional beauty standards* in a *disempowering* way. The “Traumarama” sections also proved to be more complicated than they appeared. These pages are dedicated to comforting readers by featuring embarrassing stories shared by fellow adolescent girls (*needs-meeting/embarrassment management*)—a noble pursuit. That said, by classifying some of the stories as embarrassing (one about having an allergic reaction and one about appearing to have unshaved armpits), the magazine reinforced ideas about natural processes being unfeminine, unattractive, and embarrassing—thus disempowering readers who have allergies or have chosen not to shave their armpits, for example.

Finally, all articles initially classified as *empowering and disempowering* unsurprisingly contained similarly dissonant messages within. Some examples include: “I get more compliments about my curly hair than anything else—it’s my signature” (celebrating the *individual* while *superficial* external praise) and “#sororitylifegoals” (*encouraging community development* while *excluding* those who choose to opt out of this classically feminine Greek Life path).

V. Discussion

The quantitative results of this study suggest that *Seventeen’s* content is more empowering than disempowering. Much of this can be attributed to the fact that *information provision* belongs to the *needs meeting* subcategory, which fell under the classification of empowering content. If any media outlet is doing its job properly, it should be *meeting the needs* of its readers by *providing information* specifically tailored to them. Still, the magazine scored high in other further subcategory, such as *embarrassment management*. These further subcategories are specific to *Seventeen* magazine and its presumably fragile and insecure adolescent reader base. By scoring high in these areas, the magazine’s editors show that the brand is committed to supporting its readers through the ups and downs of adolescence.

The magazine also scored high in the *self-development* area, showing that *Seventeen* places an emphasis on helping its readers grow creatively, healthily, intellectually, and professionally. Examples of this encouragement of growth included book recommendations, stories of girls who have pursued their passions and attained success, advice from celebrities telling readers to embrace their uniqueness, and fashion stories emphasizing creativity and individuality as opposed to trendiness or assimilation. The magazine placed an emphasis on *relationship development* as well as making some efforts to appeal to a variety of readers (inclusion).

Even though the magazine was found to be more empowering than disempowering, the results suggested significant areas for improvement—especially when articles were analyzed from a deeper, qualitative standpoint. As mentioned earlier, articles classified as *disempowering* most often fell under the category of *appearance*—primarily due to *Seventeen’s* perpetuation of *conventional beauty standards*. Several articles encouraged girls to “look tanner,” and one focused entirely on getting rid of body hair. Not to mention, one seemingly *empowering* article recommended girls to use certain foundations to “perfect their complexion IRL and on Insta.” Bartky and Heyes would regard these methods of appearance management as forms of self-discipline, imposed on girls (and thus, on *Seventeen* readers) by patriarchal society. The process of getting tan requires subjecting the skin to potential cancers if done the “natural way.” If one opts for healthier options like self-tanners (which *Seventeen* recommends), one must still dedicate immense amounts of time, effort, and money to get the even, natural-looking bronze glow the magazine suggests; Bartky speaks specifically about the process of removing body hair in her essay, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” explaining that it is both painful and time-consuming; and both Bartky and Wolf explain that the typical process of putting on makeup has more to do with painting a face of conventional beauty than it does expressing some core sense of self (Heyes would take issue with anyway, as she considers the self and the body inseparable).

Another major area for improvement—which became more apparent in the qualitative portion of the analysis—was the magazine’s tendency to *exclude* readers who do not fit into neat, conventional boxes when it comes to *gender* and *sexuality*. Though it is probably safe for *Seventeen* to assume its reader base is primarily female (that is their target audience, after all), the magazine risks alienating readers who are not heterosexual or who do not adhere to traditional gender norms in its regular use of heteronormative language. The magazine used the term “girl crush” several times in both issues—especially the August “Crush” issue—to describe women platonically admiring other women. This term trivializes women who genuinely are romantically and sexually interested in other women. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the horoscope sections of both issues used feminine pronouns in reference to readers’ friends and masculine pronouns in reference to readers’ romantic or sexual interests; this is clearly heteronormative and excludes those who have friends who are men, or romantic or sexual interests who are women. This would be an easily avoidable issue if the magazine were to adopt gender-neutral language in cases such as these, which it managed to do several times in both issues by using the terms “a certain someone” or “crush” instead of generalizing with the pronoun “him.”

Examples of dissonant, or simultaneously empowering and disempowering, content varied immensely. One example was an article titled “Prep for your perfect makeout;” while the article scored positively in the *needs-meeting/embarrassment management* category—providing ways for readers to feel most confident in potentially vulnerable situations—it scored negatively in *male-female relations*, because it suggested that girls who do not partake in this pre-makeout regimen would not please their partner and should thus be insecure. Other examples included the multiple stories run on self-tanning; these articles reinforced the *conventional beauty standard* of needing to be tan to look good, but they also scored high in *self-development/health* for encouraging girls to take healthier steps to achieve this standard of beauty. *Seventeen* could have easily incorporated language that normalizes the decision to be tan (in a healthy way) as well as the decision not to be—therefore empowering readers to make choices about their appearances instead of forcing one standard of beauty upon them. A final example of dissonant messages is an article titled “The perfect college visit.” While this piece scored positively in the *self-development/education* category, it scored negatively in the *exclusion/socioeconomic status* category, because it provided no alternatives for readers who could not afford to go on college visits or those who could not afford to go to college at all. This was particularly disappointing because the magazine tended to be inclusive of various socioeconomic statuses throughout; several articles featured products within a certain price range to appeal to readers who could not afford to spend much on fashion and beauty products, and both issues offered sweepstakes providing free gifts to lucky readers.

Also of note is the fact that the magazine did not score high in either the *inclusion* or *exclusion* categories in regard to further subcategories of *race* or *body type*. The magazine did run one story entirely focused on *body type inclusion* (“Curvy Confidence”), though, as mentioned earlier, the story’s copy read, “A drawstring anorak instantly makes your middle look smaller.” This reinforced the idea that one must look “small” to be attractive—a contradiction that effectively negated the positive message the story seemed to be sending. Aside from that, no strong messages were sent regarding race or body type. This was likely due to the fact that this study focused solely on communications through written content; if another critical investigation were to be conducted analyzing the images in *Seventeen*, findings would likely be dramatically different in the *body type* and *race*, further subcategories under *inclusion* and *exclusion*. (An argument could also be made for the classification of the tanning stories being exclusive to race, but this would likely be more apparent in image content than written content.)

VI. Conclusion

This study sought to achieve two objectives: critically analyze the messages *Seventeen* magazine sends to its readers by determining the ratio of *disempowering* content to *empowering* content in two recent issues, and to analyze the more complex give-and-take exchange of ideas within articles that reveal more complex and conflicting messages. Prior studies have found that *Seventeen* sends contradictory messages to its readers—a result that the quantitative side of this paper does not support since this study found that content was overwhelming classified as *empowering*, and one the qualitative side would confirm since even seemingly *neutral* articles, like “horoscopes,” were interpreted otherwise when they were thoroughly analyzed.

Much of *Seventeen*’s content is geared toward meeting readers’ needs through *information provision* and toward helping readers *develop* their *professional*, *intellectual*, and *social* capacities. It is in these ways that *Seventeen* is providing its readers with *empowering* messages. While content was quantitatively overwhelmingly positive, a qualitative analysis revealed that the magazine still sent many *disempowering* and dissonant messages. Areas for improvement include using more *inclusive* language—especially when it comes to *gender norms* and *sexuality*—and minimizing allusions to *conventional beauty*. The magazine could instead use gender-neutral language and focus on fashion as an outlet for creativity and individuality (both of which it did in a few articles).

This analysis was limited in terms of both time and resources. Only two of the several hundred issues of *Seventeen* magazine that have been published since 1944 were analyzed for this study, and both came from the same year. There is room for further exploration of how content has shifted from decade to decade, from editor-in-chief to editor-in-chief, and even from month to month within the same year. This study could also be expanded to include image analysis in addition to the written content analysis; though certainly

more nuanced, visual messages are often as significant to magazine communication as clearly expressed written messages are, and this dimension could enhance the conversation surrounding empowering and disempowering messages in magazines. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, one person conducted all the quantitative coding for this study. While the coding criteria were made as specific as possible to ensure objectivity, there was still room for human biases. Future studies could include multiple coders to ensure greater objectivity.

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