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5-25-2007

# Sex and Spectacle in Seventeen Magazine: A Feminist Myth Analysis

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Durham, G. (2007, May). Sex and spectacle in "Seventeen" magazine: A feminist myth analysis. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, CA .

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## **Sex and spectacle in *Seventeen* magazine:**

### **A feminist myth analysis**

It's patently clear to even the most casual observer that sex is a dominant theme in teen media. Orange and pink headlines advocating "Hot bods!" and "Sexy styles!" scream from the covers of *Seventeen* and *Teen*, and the characters on popular teen TV shows like *Laguna Beach* and *One Tree Hill* tangle with licentious "hook-ups," unplanned pregnancies and skirmishes with strippers. The research, too, indicates that the sexual content of teen-oriented media is on the rise: Huston, Wartella and Donnerstein (1998) reported that "over the past twenty years, there has been an overall increase in the number of portrayals and the amount of talk about sex in these media and an increase in the explicitness of these portrayals" (p. 1); Ward (1995) found that references to sex are common in television programs aimed at children and adolescents; Kunkel, et al. (2005) observed that one in nine TV shows for teens included a scene in which intercourse was depicted or strongly implied.

These representations of sex are problematic on multiple fronts. As Schor (2004) has observed, "Teen media depict a manipulated and gratuitous sexuality, based on unrealistic body images, constraining gender stereotypes and, all too frequently, the degradation of women" (p. 20). Kunkel, Cope and Colvin (1996) note that while the sexual content of "family hour" TV shows continues to rise, there are never any mentions of the risks or responsibilities related to sexual activity. Garner, Sterk and Adams (1998) found that in sex-related articles in teen fashion and beauty magazines, "the sexual community belongs to men, and women survive by containing themselves and adapting and subjugating themselves to male desires" (pp. 72-73).

These sexual representations, overall, skirt the complex realities of sexuality and offer a version of sex that is at best absurdly fanciful and at worst sexist and unsafe.

Sexuality is, of course, a preeminent issue among teenagers. During adolescence, interest in sex rises, and in line with these developmental trends, adolescent audiences are drawn to media with high levels of sexual content (Greenberg, et al, 1993a and 1993b; Jochen & Valkenburg, 2006; Treise & Gotthofer, 2002). Studies also indicate that teenagers tend to rely on the media for information about sex (Currie, 1999; Treise & Gotthofer, 2002).

Yet it is clear that significant gaps exist between the mainstream media's glossy and unrealistic representations of sexual experience and the kind of accurate, useful sexual information that could help teens navigate their lives. Thus, it becomes imperative to examine these gaps, to understand the motivations and dispositions of popular culture's constructions of adolescent sexuality, and to develop strategies by which to demystify and explicate them in ways that might contribute to media literacy efforts aimed at youth.

With these goals in mind, this paper addresses the overarching research question: What are the key motifs in representations of female sexuality in mainstream media aimed at adolescent audiences?

I choose to focus here on portrayals of female sexuality, in part because current trends indicate that girls are becoming more avid media consumers than boys (Nielsen Media Research, 2006), in part because girls are being aggressively targeted by media producers (Bantick, 2006; Brady, 2004; Pollett & Hurwitz, 2004), but principally because girls are more negatively impacted by cultural attitudes about sex than boys. Sexual double standards still exist by which girls face condemnation and punishment for sexual activity while boys are celebrated for the same behaviors (Jackson & Cram,

2003). Girls are overwhelmingly more likely to experience violence in sexual relationships than boys, with one in five girls nationwide reporting such abuse (Silverman, Raj, Mucci & Hathaway, 2001). Sixty percent of all rape victims are girls under 18 (National Victim Center, 1992). More female than male high school students have unprotected sex (Centers for Disease Control, 2005), and the United States has the highest rate of teen pregnancy of any industrialized nation (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 2002). Tolman (2002) reports that girls are distanced from and confused about their own sexuality such that they do not feel “entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, [to make] active sexual choices, [or to have] an identity as a sexual being” (p. 6).

Scholars believe cultural contexts strongly influence girls’ sexual attitudes and behaviors, and in general the expert consensus is that contemporary American culture does not offer a healthy or safe environment in which girls can understand sex or their bodies. Brumberg (1997) has noted, “Contemporary girls are in trouble because of a mismatch between biology and culture. At this moment in our history, girls develop physically earlier than ever before, but they do so in a society that does not protect or nurture them” (p. 197). Levy (2005) writes that girls get constant mixed messages about projecting sexuality but remaining chaste, so that “adolescent girls in particular – who are blitzed with cultural pressure to be hot, to seem sexy – have a very difficult time learning to recognize their own sexual desire” (p. 168). While these attitudes are pervasive in society and transmitted in a variety of ways, teenagers live in a media-saturated environment: popular culture and mass communication are significant sources of their sexual information and cultural codes. Mary Pipher, in her bestselling critique *Reviving Ophelia*, observes, “Because of the media ... all girls live in one big town – a sleazy, dangerous town,” adding, “With puberty, girls face enormous

pressure to split into false selves. The pressure comes from schools, magazines, music, television and the movies" (1994, pp. 27 and 38). Thus, it becomes important to examine the ways in which the media construct and inscribe ideologies of adolescent female sexuality in order to understand the impacts of such inscription and to identify strategies for resistance.

Because this paper works from the premise that mainstream media depictions of female sexuality are largely unrepresentative of the real-world complexities of girls' sexual lives, it is useful to begin to consider such depictions as constructions or as dominant ideologies that have real-world impacts. Roland Barthes' conception of myth and Guy Debord's theory of spectacle thus become applicable tools for addressing and analyzing these issues.

#### Myth and spectacle in the media

In Barthes' (1972) formulation, a "myth" is not a falsehood or a fiction, but a rhetorical figure upholding a social belief that has become so firmly entrenched it is understood as real and therefore has real effects. "[T]he term refers to ways of conceptualizing a subject that are widely accepted within a specific culture and historical period, despite having little necessary connection to reality," as Macdonald (1995, p.1) explains. These beliefs are fostered and circulated when signs existing in a culture are recoded to fix particular meanings or significations. By way of example, we can recognize the belief that certain races were subhuman as a Barthesian myth: physical differences were recoded as racial differences, and, while unfounded on any kind of empirical or scientific evidence, a hierarchy of race was widely held to be true

and comprised the basic rationale behind social practices that dehumanized and thus disenfranchised, enslaved, colonized and exterminated large numbers of people.

“Myth is a system of communication ... It is a message,” explains Barthes (1972, p. 109). Barthes understands myths to be both historically and culturally bound, although they present themselves as neither, but rather as immutable truths. In Gramscian terms, these myths might be seen as the “common sense” of a culture, the dominant ideological beliefs that shore up existing power hierarchies. As a semiotician, Barthes defines myth as “speech” and parses it according to the tenets of semiotics, but his conception of speech is very broad, encompassing verbal and visual artifacts, actions, artworks, and other things. “A photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article; even objects will become speech, if they mean something,” he writes (1972, p. 111). So myths are expressed in a wide variety of ways, through these multifarious “speech” acts. A basic premise of semiotics is that social meaning is carried via all sorts of cultural artifacts and practices—thus, clothing is a semiotic system, as are technologies, architecture, laws, art, cuisines, medical practices, and so on, all of which carry meanings within cultures at specific historical moments. A central part of Barthes’ concept of myth is that any of these can be converted into mythical speech and used for strategic purposes usually connected with capital and power.

Barthes sees myths as confusing the distinction between nature and history; he writes, “Mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history; it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things” (Barthes, 1972, p. 110). Yet myths naturalize certain beliefs such that they appear to be unmotivated and ahistorical. These beliefs circulate and play out in a variety of venues within a culture, and Barthes recognizes the media as such a venue, and a particularly powerful

one. The media “are the creators of contemporary social myths,” observes Share (2003); they cause “myth to rise to the level of fact and [pass] the message off as common sense” (¶ 4). Lule (2002) traces the various ways in which news relies on and reinscribes myths as part of a storytelling tradition that works to sustain ideological imperatives. Marshall McLuhan argued early on that “we can regard all media as myths and as the prolific source of many subordinate myths” (1968, p. 295). From a cultural studies perspective, media texts function as Barthesian myths in their power to naturalize ideas, relationships and perspectives that sustain the status quo.

Thus, myth becomes a powerful tool for feminist analysis when one considers how masculinity and femininity are socially constructed in ways that tend to support and render natural the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 1994, p. 71). In particular, myths of femininity emphasize gender roles, body dimensions, behaviors and proclivities that subordinate women to a patriarchal order. Bordo (1993) notes that media representations of women’s bodies are coded in ways that homogenize ideal womanhood and normalize certain body standards (including slenderness, youthfulness and racially specific beauty) that “train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands” (p. 27). Bignell (1997) argues that “being feminine is a mythic identity constructed by the coded connotations of signs in society. Femininity is not a natural property of women, but a cultural construct” (p. 61). McCracken (1993) points out that women’s magazines, in particular, define femininity in terms of “preparing meals, beautifying the self and succeeding on the job” to “exert a cultural leadership to shape consensus in which highly pleasurable codes work to naturalize social relations of power” (pp. 2 and 3). Bignell (1997) similarly observes that “the semiotic codes of women’s magazines work to construct a mythic world of the feminine” which “naturalises an ideological view of what being a woman means, and

overlapping with this, it naturalises the consumer culture which magazines stimulate through advertising and editorial material" (p. 61). In Barthes' view, the media's role is to "infuse a conformist morality of subjection" upon women, in order "to tighten a little more securely the constitutive dogmas of society" (1979, p. 94). Thus, mainstream myths of femininity and gender generally function to circumscribe women's social roles and exert pressures on women's lives.

As these theorists have noted, the mass media are carriers of myths; given that myths are ideologically motivated, the cultural studies view of the media as an ideological apparatus is corroborated by this perspective. Of particular relevance in considerations of gender and sexuality are mediated images – the visual tropes by which myths of the body are transmitted and promulgated. The impact of an image is often more potent than that of a verbal text, although in conjunction with words, meanings are constructed and anchored in ways that serve to fix and naturalize the messages being sent. Barthes (1977) noted that a photograph presents itself as "a message without a code," (p. 17) or a true representation of reality – but, he adds, the perceived objectivity of a photograph "has every chance of being mythical" (p. 19). As McCracken (1993) observes, "A photograph thus appears to represent reality objectively, yet at the same time it necessarily interprets it" (p. 24). In her analysis of women's magazine covers, she deconstructs the codes by which stylized, unrealistic and highly manipulated images of women are presented as real and natural, in ways that fix specific ideological messages about ideal femininity. The representation of the female body, then, is a culturally motivated text offering an interconnected set of meanings that in combination constitute a myth of womanhood. While it is inevitable that such representations have the potential to be interpreted in various ways by viewers, a characteristic of signs known as polysemy, McCracken (1993) notes that "the



originators of mass cultural messages often add a linguistic message to encourage viewers to select the desired meanings" (p. 27), thus limiting the number of possible interpretations of the signs, and fixing the myth. Even Stuart Hall, the theorist who first posited variations in sign interpretations by media audiences, acknowledges, "Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world" (1980, p. 134). He is clear that the techniques of semiotic encoding define the parameters within which decodings must operate. Thus, the dominant ideologies of a culture are inscribed via a myth-making process onto images of female bodies in media texts.

These interconnections – of signs, myths, and audience response – constitute a media "spectacle." Debord (1977, 1988) conceived of a spectacle as "not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (1977, thesis 4). It is important to recognize the idealized figure of the female body in the media as such a spectacle, for not only does it have visual potency, but it is an alienating force, in the Marxist sense. It is the product of a capital-driven industry that conjures it in order to compel certain types of social relations among its viewers: not only are they interpellated by the image and thus positioned as subjects, but the idealization impacts a variety of social interrelationships as a result of the consumerism they impel as well as the social privileges accorded to those who most nearly correspond to these mediated ideals. In Debord's conceptualization, the spectacle is an organizing system: the ideas about class, race, consumerism and so on that are conveyed by the spectacle prescribe the norms for society. In this sense, the spectacle is a form of Barthesian myth – a social belief system that influences real social relations.

"The spectacle," writes Debord (1977, thesis 12), "presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible." McCracken (1993) describes the

presentation of the feminine ideal in women's magazines as "an arena of temporary vicarious pleasure" (p. 13). Such magazines conjoin the everyday and the extraordinary so as to inveigle the reader into performing "a kind of pleasurable work by combining fantasy with elements of her everyday life" (p. 13). And in large part, the fantasy upon which the spectacle of the ideal or "spectacular" female is predicated rests on the criteria for heterosexual desirability, because femininity and sexuality are inextricably linked by the mediated spectacle of the adolescent female body.

### Sexy girls in the media

A substantial body of literature tracks this linking of femininity and sexuality in mainstream media, particularly with regard to young girls. Duffy and Gotcher (1995) found teen magazines to be "a place where sexuality is both a means and an objective, where the pursuit of males is almost the sole focus of life. In fact, the objective of attracting males is the only objective presented – it is an unquestionable 'good'" (p. 43). Gibbons (2003) points out, "Teen magazines are loaded with ads and editorial – and the two are difficult to distinguish – urging girls to acquire the latest 'hot haircut' (*Seventeen*) and 'hot' looks (*Elle Girl*), reinforced by commands to 'flirt your way to a date' (*Teen*)" (¶4). Kitch (2001), in her analysis of women's magazine covers, identifies sex as a major theme, albeit one that manifests itself differently in different historical moments. Importantly, she conceptualizes the mediated representation of female sexuality as "a cultural cipher for political turmoil" (p. 185). While a majority of analyses have singled out teen fashion and beauty magazines for scrutiny, examinations of other media reflect a similar fusion of sex and femininity. Casells and Jenkins (2000) have found that in video games marketed to teens and children, portrayals of women are regularly sexualized and misogynistic. Merskin (2004)

observes that advertisements containing images of young girls closely mirror the visual codes of pornography. Horgen (2005) finds images of girls on television to be hypersexual. Thus, girls are almost by definition sexual in mediated portrayals.

While this is not a problematic finding *per se* – given that all human beings are by definition sexual beings, as well as having other characteristics – it is clear that sexuality is an emphasized trope in the portrayal of girls in mainstream media, with other aspects of their lives taking a secondary role. And given the documented gaps between the representations of girls' sexuality and the real-world vicissitudes of adolescent sexuality, a scholarly assessment of such representations becomes imperative.

In the context of these understandings, this paper interrogates the semiotic processes by which specific codes operate to construct female sexuality in media targeted to adolescents. The analysis engages feminist methodological approaches in combination with the semiological strategies of myth analysis to examine these issues.

### Method

To examine the mythic dimensions of sexual content in teen media, this study used techniques of myth analysis, a subset of semiology based on Barthes' work. Semiotics, or semiology<sup>1</sup>, is an approach to the analysis of culture that is singularly suited to feminist critique because of its inherent questioning of the "taken for granted" dimensions of social life. Defined by one of its pioneers, Charles Saussure, as "the study of the life of signs within society," (1974, p. 16), semiology, like feminism, interrogates the construction of social meanings in their historical, political and cultural contexts, with a view to recognizing and actively critiquing their philosophical underpinnings and material implications.

Semiology challenges the worldviews transmitted almost imperceptibly through everyday sign systems. Through its attention to the ideological themes and myths inscribed by means of various symbolic forms—including language, images, music, fashions, and other cultural products—it offers us a way to understand the role of communication and culture in the shaping of the social environment and the location of people within it. Hierarchies of power based on such signifiers as race, gender, class, or physical ability can most effectively be understood and then deciphered as semiological effects. This is a perspective that is closely aligned with the feminist conception of gender as a social construct rather than a biologically determined essentialism (see, for example, Bem, 1993; Brownmiller, 1984; Butler, 1999; de Beauvoir, 1952; Devor, 1989; Fausto-Sterling, 1985; Millett, 1969; Money, 1995; Ortner, 1996). A great deal of feminist scholarship is concerned with the ways in which discourses of gender are generated by and function within a patriarchal system in order to sustain inequities that subjugate women. Because the focus of semiology is the creation, circulation and interpretation of such discourses in the form of social “signs,” it provides a useful tool for feminist media scholarship.

The semiological subdiscipline of myth analysis is focused specifically on the ways in which communication functions to create and sustain social beliefs. Barthes (1972) defines myth as both a “second order semiological system” (p. 114) and a “metalanguage” (p. 115). Both of these terms refer to the process by which myth functions, which is one of appropriating existing cultural signs and recoding them to fix them with certain ideological meanings. To understand this process in the context of this analysis, the existing sign would be the adolescent female body, which is already imbued with certain connotations in culture: Driscoll (2002) points out that girls’ bodies and subjectivities are culturally understood to be unformed, in process, and in

“a sexualized mode of development” (p. 139). Yet the representation of the adolescent female body in the media render it part of a complex system “communicating primary and secondary meanings through language, photographs, images, color and placement” (McCracken, 1993, p. 13). Thus, while the adolescent female body itself can be read in a variety of ways in a particular culture and historical moment, the *representation* of it in a mediated form comprises an act of myth-making in that it re-signifies the body by means of a selective process that imbues it with clearly delineated meanings. As Barthes writes, “[M]yth in fact has a double function: it points out and it notifies, *it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us*” (1972, p. 117, emphasis added).

For Barthes, a myth comprises a “form” (the sign) and a “concept” (the meaning attached to it). The concept is invoked by means of various strategies, including the invocation of archetypal figures (Lule, 2002), the “anchorage” of meaning by the juxtaposition of verbal cues with the form (McCracken, 1993), the tactical use of color to create visual connections among elements (McCracken, 1993), and the conjuring of an imaginary community that includes the audience member (Bignell, 1997). Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Bignell (1997) suggests that media images represent imaginary ideals that simultaneously create desire and an awareness of inferiority in the viewer. Via these images, viewers’ pleasure and longing interact to drive consumerism. These ideals are clearly delineated in terms of their distinction from other, undesirable forms – a strategy based on the marking of difference. Barthes, too, recognizes this as a mythic tactic, which he refers to as “identification” (1972, p. 152). He runs through a number of other rhetorical strategies that contribute to the constitution of myths, but adds “there may well be others: some can become worn out, others can come into being” (p. 155).

Given the array of strategies by which myths are constituted, my method of analysis here will incorporate the approaches suggested above while taking into account Frye's (1990) conceptualization of feminist epistemology:

Our process has been one of discovering, recognizing, and creating patterns ... Pattern recognition/construction opens fields of meanings and generates new interpretive possibilities ... Instead of drawing conclusions from observations, it generates observations ... What we do is sketch a schema within which certain meanings are sustained. (p. 179).

Acknowledging, too, Raymond Williams' belief that "it is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any useful cultural analysis begins" (1961, p. 47), these principles form the framework of my analytical system.

This paper is part of a larger work in which the most popular teen media in a variety of genres (television, video games, music videos, web sites and magazines) will be analyzed for their representations of female sexuality. However, the scope of this paper will center on print media, particularly teen fashion and beauty magazines. According to a recent survey, eight out of ten teenagers read magazines, and magazines are on teens' top 10 list of purchases (Magazine Publishers of America, 2004). In Spring 2006, the top-ranked magazine among teenage readers was *Seventeen* (Klinefelter, 2006). With a current monthly circulation of more than 2 million, this magazine, founded in 1944, has been a perennial favorite among teenage girls. In 2005, the magazine teamed up with MTV to launch a reality show which boosted its ad revenues and readership (Brady, 2005). In a waning print media market, the magazine is thriving. Because of its enduring popularity and influence among teen audiences, it serves as an appropriate focal point for this analysis.

For this paper, all of the issues of *Seventeen* in print in 2006 (January through November – that is Volume 65, issues 1 through 11) were analyzed. Following the method outlined above, references to sexuality were interpreted following the protocols of myth analysis to identify and locate thematic patterns in the representations.

#### Four myths of sex

The analysis revealed recurring patterns of representation that drew on specific signs, codes and conventions. From these thematic patterns, four distinct myths of adolescent female sexuality emerged.

##### *Myth No. 1: Sexuality as a function of body hierarchies*

Barthes (1977) describes a range of “connotation procedures” (p. 20) that are used to convey messages via photographs in the mass media – these procedures include trick effects, the posing of the photographic subject, the inclusion of specific objects, and the syntax or composition of the photograph. But the first connotational procedure, one that is overlooked by Barthes, is selection. By selecting certain photographic subjects according to specified criteria, connotational effects are created.

In the 11 issues of *Seventeen* analyzed, sexuality was visually yoked to particular body dimensions: that of the slender, long-legged, full-breasted girl. While occasional fashion features offered advice on finding clothes to flatter various body types, the linguistic anchors of “sexy” or “hot” were never connected with those possibilities. Instead, “sexiness” was the province of the conventionally slim yet voluptuous. The overwhelming majority of photographs featured girls with virtually identical body proportions. In the January 2006 issue, for example, a six-page fashion photo spread titled “The New Sexy” featured only slim, long-haired, leggy models, all of whom were heavily made up; the verbal texts on every page emphasized slenderness

as a criterion for sexuality: “super-slim jeans,” a “tiny tank,” and a “short skirt shows a lot of leg” were linguistic cues that served, in Barthes’ terms, to “quicken” the interpretation of the image and fix or “anchor” the intended connotation. The linguistic signifiers used – slim, tiny, short, etc. – served to emphasize the desirability of the dimensions of the models, and all of these terms were subsumed under the linguistic rubric “The New Sexy.” Thus, in this photo feature, sexuality is linked with a specific body type.

This trope is repeated throughout the year in the magazine. In September 2006, a six-page feature on the singer Christina Aguilera again highlighted this slender, voluptuous young woman dressed in couture black, wearing very high heels and heavy make-up. The pulled quote accompanying these images was, “I think it’s important as a female to feel empowered in your sexuality” – again, linguistically anchoring sexuality to this body type. Similarly, the August 2006 issue included a short feature titled, “Look hot for back to school” – this photo essay focused on a workout routine, again featuring a slender, long-limbed and curvaceous model whose exercise regimen was geared to “looking hot,” according to the verbal message. Exemplars of this nature pervaded the magazine. Thus, the visual texts worked systematically to conjoin sexuality with slenderness.

The covers reflected the same message: every cover but one featured the same body type (the only exception was the November 2006 issue, which had a young man on the cover). In addition, 10 of the 11 covers (90 percent) had a Caucasian cover model; nine of these were blondes; and seven of the nine had blue eyes. That these physical traits were accorded privileged status by the publications was also evident from the textual “anchors” accompanying them. Cover lines like “885 ways to look hot” (September 2006), “875 ways to look beautiful” (March 2006) and “The best ways



to get gorgeous" (October 2006) cued readers to interpret these characteristics as highly desirable and inherently linked with beauty.

Because the cover is the key identity marker of the magazine (McCracken, 1993), the racialized selection of cover models is a key indicator of the dominant ideology carried by the magazine. As Davis (1997) has pointed out

there is a racial hierarchy among women in terms of appearance. Women with white skin, blonde and straight hair, blue eyes and small noses are at the top, and women with dark skin, black and curly hair, and big noses are at the bottom .... Women who conform to the ideal, or come close to conforming, can feel superior to other women simply because of their racial characteristics. (p. 92)

*Seventeen* magazine's cover models reflected this racial hierarchy.

Thus, sexiness was directly correlated with the privileged body: a slender, voluptuous, youthful and Caucasian female figure, one that flaunted the advantages of whiteness. This hierarchy of sexuality/body can be understood as a myth, in part because it has no basis in reality – scientific and medical evidence indicate that sexual desire and desirability are complex phenomena predicated on a number of factors (see Geary, Vigil & Byrd-Craven, 2004) – and in part because it is clear that the idealization of desirable bodies is a historical effect: the fleshy bodies of women in Rubens' 16<sup>th</sup> century paintings would be considered unattractive today; the "plus-size" dimensions of Marilyn Monroe's size 16 body or the extreme thinness of Twiggy's frame underscore the point that the criteria for physical desirability are culturally and historically determined. But the portrayals in *Seventeen* naturalize a historical (and capital-driven) construct. In addition, the body hierarchy promoted in the magazine is a rhetorical

device with real social effects, in that in contemporary Western cultures, slender yet curvaceous bodies tend to be idealized by girls and perceived as more sexual and more desirable than others (Dohnt & Tiggeann, 2006; Regan & Joshi, 2003).

*Myth No. 2: Sexuality as spectacle*

Sexuality was coded primarily as a spectacle: both in terms of an exhibitionist premise and in terms of a capital commodity, per Debord's conception. Sexual desirability was visually and verbally constructed as an effect of body display. In the November 2006 issue, a photo fashion spread titled "Sexy and seventeen" featured a series of slender Caucasian models in clothes that revealed their underwear—sweaters unbuttoned to expose brassieres, models wearing only a top and panties or a camisole with tap pants (pp. 95-99). The "sexy" headline again linked the body displays with the connotation of desirability. Similarly, in "The New Sexy" (January 2006), the subhead read, "Get ready to show off just a little bit," and the succeeding captions noted, "Tiny tank: A cute sleeveless top paired with a thick, cozy scarf shows off just the right amount of skin" (p. 96) and "A short skirt shows a lot of leg" (p. 98). The visual text that emphasized the baring of skin was supported by visuals of models in skimpy clothing.

In the August 2006 issue, in a feature story titled, "What makes a girl stand out?," quotes from a variety of young men described the ideal girl in terms of sexuality, many of which focused on body display. "Showing just a little skin—like wearing a strapless top with jeans—is sexy without giving the wrong impression," opined Tom, 21, of Jessup, MD (p. 74). In similar story from the November 2006 issue, titled "Sexiest style awards—what guys love," Jack, 20, noted, "I, like every guy, am a sucker for anything short" (p. 44) as he commented on a mini-dress. Brian, 21, admired yet another outfit for its skimpiness: "This shows off her curves in a sassy-

cute kind of way" (p. 44). In another November story titled "Ten cute international guys reveal what they find irresistible," one young man notes, "A girl who isn't afraid to get up and belly dance in front of me or do a sexy cha-cha-cha dance when we go out—she's absolutely the hottest!" (p. 146). Throughout the magazines, advertisements for clothing lines like Bongo, YMI Jeanswear, Hot Kiss and similar brands featured body-baring clothes on slender, usually blonde models, thus further reinforcing both the body hierarchies and the exhibitionist aesthetic of sexuality.

Because the display of the female body is so conjoined with sexuality in the magazine, a more complex understanding of sexuality as a multidimensional human relationship is elided, if not erased. That attraction and desirability might be predicated on factors *other* than exhibition of an "ideal" body is unimaginable in this context. Thus, sexuality reverts to objectification; it is defined almost solely in terms of exposing a girl's idealized body to an approving male gaze.

In addition, the underlying directive is that sexuality of this type can be attained via consumerism. In a March 2006 fashion feature, readers are advised to "Give a flowing top a sexier shape with a wider belt" (p. 46) and to "Put a polo shirt under a sexy V-neck to look more preppy" (p. 48). Again, the attainment of "sexy" status is a function of purchasing the belt or the V-neck. In "The New Sexy" (January 2006), sexuality is projected via the clothing: "Check out winter's flirtiest must-haves!" (p. 5). In the September 2006 feature, "Look hot in minutes!" sexiness is attained by following hair, makeup and clothes tips that identify products for purchase. In another story titled "Lust List" the magazine offered a literal shopping list of products that "guys think are totally irresistible" (pp. 118-119). The list included "sexy heels, neutral nails, a flirty bra, pretty skirt, dangly earrings, floral perfume, natural makeup, fruity shampoo, lacy cami." Brand names, prices, and retail outlets were helpfully provided

for each commodity on this “lust list.” Similarly, on the covers, the cover lines trumpeting “875 ways to look beautiful” (March 2006) and “Styles guys love the most” (February 2006) were supported by detailed information about the make-up, hair, and clothing products worn by the cover models. The overarching message of these montages, in which product information was bracketed with the verbal promise of “sexy” consequences, was that sexuality was a consumer commodity.

In this way, sexuality was formulated as a spectacle in the Debordian sense: as “a tendency to make one see the world” (Debord, 1977, thesis 18) as well as “capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image” (thesis 34). The insistent visual trope of the slender, voluptuous, youthful Caucasian female body on display and the reifying definition of sexuality through consumerism link traditional gender stereotypes with capitalism so as to sustain both.

*Myth No. 3: Sexuality as defined by the hetero male gaze*

Throughout the magazine, sexuality was conceptualized in terms of attracting male attention. From the March 2006 cover line divulging the “Flirting moves guys find irresistible” to the numerous feature stories relying on boys’ opinions of girls’ desirability, sexuality was unquestionably defined from a male viewpoint. The November 2006 issue contained a story titled “How to make a fling last” and offered advice from boys who exhorted girls to “support him” “plan fun stuff” and “rub on his sunscreen.” All these prescriptions centered on ways in which girls could please boys, rather than the reverse. The October 2006 issue offered a column called “My secret weapon” in which girls confided how they had held boys’ interest by “cooking him a meal” “writing love notes and poems to him” “making a mix CD of his favorite songs” “wearing a perfume he likes.”

The February 2006 issue coached girls on “Flirty ponytails, sexy volume, pretty waves!” urging readers to “Try out these girl-tested, *guy-approved* looks” (p. 51, emphasis added). In November 2006, a feature titled “I love girls who ...” highlighted “ten cute international guys’ ” thoughts on what they found sexy in girls. In July 2006, the feature “What makes a girl stand out?” told readers “Cute guys reveal what would make them pick you out of a crowd” (p. 74). Quotes from boys included, “If I walk past a girl and I can just smell a tiny hint of the perfume she’s wearing – that’s sexy” (A.J, 19, of Tempe, AZ; p. 75).

Again, the verbal texts emphasized the importance and authority of boys’ definitions and judgments of female sexuality. Corollary articles by girls were completely absent from the magazine.

*Myth No. 4: Girls as sexual victims*

A final dominant myth of the magazine was what Tolman (2003) called a “dilemma of desire” – the idea that girls have no sexual agency; that sexuality, for girls, is principally a matter of resisting boys’ advances rather than feeling or expressing their own desires. In August 2006, for example, the story “Are you ready for sex?” focused on girls’ sexual experience in uniformly negative terms: “81% of girls have been kissed but almost 1 in 5 regrets her first time; 35% of girls have had oral sex but almost 1 in 3 regrets her first time; 29% of girls have had vaginal sex but almost 1 in 3 regrets her first time” (p. 137). The article goes on to say, “42% of girls have had guys pressure them for sex and 51% have given in to the pressure even though they *didn’t* want to” (p. 137, emphasis in original). In one sense, the article recognizes girls’ lack of control in sexual relationships in the real world, but in another, it denies that girls may have initiated and even enjoyed their first sexual experiences. The November 2006 issues contained a story called, “I had sex too soon” that quoted girls who lamented that their

sexual encounters with boys had “changed our relationship” so that it ended; “hurt my friendship” because the girl developed a reputation as a slut; and “destroyed my self-esteem” (p. 68). Again, no positive counter-story balanced these negative accounts of girls’ sex lives.

Throughout the year, a regular department called “Real Life” offered first-person (usually ghostwritten) accounts of girls’ experiences, most of which were sexual horror stories. One such episode, “My boyfriend was a sex offender,” repeated the motif of girls’ lack of desire or control: in this story, the protagonist was “strung along” by a criminal boyfriend; the pulled quote declared, “I had made a huge mistake by sleeping with him” (August 2006, p. 167).

Sex was framed as heterosexual, with little room for alternative sexualities as viable possibilities. One “Real Life” story, “My nanny molested me” (February 2006, pp. 58-59) was a cautionary tale that demonized lesbianism. Only one story, “In love with a girl” (July 2006, pp. 110-111) valorized a lesbian relationship. However, it was immediately followed by a two-page layout featuring a semi-clad heterosexual couple in soft focus, embracing and kissing on a beach, accompanied by the text, “Summer perfection: Endless sunny days at the beach, hanging out with your guy, wearing your favorite bikini and the cutest cover-up ...” (p. 113). Thus, the moment of resistance offered by the article on lesbian love was instantly countered by the insistently heterosexual follow-up, which was much more powerful in terms of the size of the photograph, the brilliant colors used, and the large type conveying the message of dominant heterosexuality.

The magazine also conscientiously included a Health column in every issue, many of which were subtitled “Sex Ed.” Here, medically accurate and straightforward information about sexuality was provided, in the one progressive element in the

magazine's construction of sexuality. Articles about birth control options, sexually transmitted diseases, and adolescent development dealt with these issues in clear and direct terms. The information provided was apparently vetted by experts in the field, including professors of obstetrics and gynecology from Columbia University, Texas A&M, and other research institutions. Interestingly, each of these columns was accompanied by a banner across the page that read, "The only 100% way not to get pregnant is not to have sex!" in an apparent endorsement of the Bush Administration's "abstinence only" regimen.

### Conclusions

The prevailing myths of girls' sexuality in *Seventeen* magazine reflect both Barthes' and Debord's theorizations. By means of visual and verbal codes that support certain gendered ideologies, girls' sexuality was defined first in terms of racist and size-based body hierarchies. This myth effectively denies the possibility of sexuality in girls with larger bodies, girls of color, girls with disabilities, or girls who otherwise fail to meet the body criteria set by the magazine. Sexuality was also represented as an enactment achieved through body display. However, only the "ideal" bodies could be displayed in these ways. This myth of sexuality as exhibitionism enforces a social relationship in which girls' bodies are objects of the male gaze. This is not to say that bodies are shameful or taboo, or that girls' bodies should be kept under wraps according to Victorian modes of propriety. On the contrary, bodies are legitimate entities whose disposition is part of everyday social life. And, in fact, relations of gazing can and should be multiple: it is as possible for girls to gaze with desire as boys as vice versa. Yet these ideas are not included in the myth of body display in *Seventeen*, where girls are never positioned as gazers, and only those bodies that match the ideal are permitted to be exhibited as visual signifiers of "sexiness."

In fact, girls are incapable of sexual desire, according to the myths of the magazine. The myths position girls as perennial sexual victims, regretting their sexual actions, fending off boys' advances, and under constant peril of attack by molesters. Girls' sexual agency is unrealized in the pages of *Seventeen*. Males are the ultimate initiators and arbiters of sexuality. Their authority in the realm of sexuality is paramount.

Finally, the magazine offers the myth of sex as a consumer item. Through the purchase of make-up, clothing, hair care products and other items, girls can achieve "sexiness" as defined by the aforementioned myths. For Debord (1977, 1988) this consumerist imperative is the key explanation behind the ideological/mythical constructions in the media and in culture at large. Recognizing that in the fashion and beauty magazine industry, profits are generated almost solely by advertising revenues, there is a pressing capital imperative to sustain these myths. Only if readers subscribe to the myths will they be motivated to purchase the products advertised in the magazines' pages as well as to purchase the magazine itself. Girls who recognize that sexuality is not tied to slenderness or racial dominance, that it is not necessary to conforming to male expectations (as constructed by the magazine), and who feel secure about making good decisions about their sex lives, are less likely to accept the consumer imperative underlying the myths.

Taken together, it is apparent that the myths of sexuality in *Seventeen* are reductionist and support power hierarchies in which girls' sexuality is not recognized to be complex, mutable or authoritative. They sustain a number of traditional gender norms, and as a result they form a social belief system with real-world impacts. These representations are unlikely to change, because of the commercial and patriarchal



imperative to maintain these myths, but offering girls clear strategies for recognizing, understanding and rejecting these myths could offer an effective mode of resistance.

Thus, media literacy in the form of myth analysis can constitute a form of feminist activism. From the perspective of feminist ethics, the myths serve to reinforce and recirculate highly patriarchal views of sexuality that interfere with girls' ability to control their own sexuality. In addition, they serve as an impediment to equitable, honest and diverse sexual relationships. By understanding both the motivations and mechanisms of myths of sexuality in the media, girls would have the means to negotiate and think through these damaging social beliefs in progressive and self-preserving ways. As Barthes recognized, myth analysis is "a political act" (p. 156): its activation exposes and disrupts systems of power and, in so doing, offers emancipatory alternatives.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>There is some debate about the terms “semiotics” versus “semiology” in the literature. Saussure originally used the term “semiology,” and as Roland Barthes points out in his foreword to *The Fashion System* (1983), the term at its inception was not specifically linked with linguistics, as it later came to be; Barthes sees semiology as a broader and more encompassing term that takes “the form of a discovery, or more precisely of an exploration” (1983, p. ix). But in *Media Semiotics: An Introduction*, Jonathan Bignell (1997) uses the terms interchangeably, and in fact prefers “semiotics” in reference to media analysis. In accordance with Barthes’ looser and more flexible understanding of the term “semiology,” I have opted to use this term.

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