

Narrative Analysis of Sexual Etiquette in Teenage Magazines

by Ana Garner, Helen M. Sterk, and Shawn Adams

Expanding on existing research on women's magazines, this essay examines the sexual etiquette developed in advice columns in magazines popular among teenage women. Over a span of 20 years, the advice has changed very little. Serving the rhetorical function of field guides and training manuals, teen magazines limit women's sociality and sexuality within narrowly defined heterosexual norms and practices. The rhetoric of sexual etiquette encourages young women to be sex objects and teachers of interpersonal communication rather than lovers, friends, and partners. Young women are being taught to subordinate self for others and to be contained.

Enormously popular and highly successful, women's magazines represent the largest segment of the U.S. consumer magazine industry. Circulations range from 500,000 to more than 1 million. Containing advice on everything from diets and exercise, to how to dress and use make-up, to how to attract men, women's magazines play a socializing function through the stories they tell in columns, features, and advertising. Readers encounter and then may imitate cultural myths of identity. Women's magazines fill in the contours and colors of what it means to be a woman and how women should relate to men. According to Kellner (1995), "media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture" (p. 5). Magazines constitute part of the media stories that shape both society's sense of culture and our sense of self in culture.

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Researchers have argued that women's magazines play a role in the acculturation of women (e.g., Durham, 1996; Ferguson, 1983; May, 1988; McCracken, 1993; McRobbie, 1991; Peirce, 1990, 1993, 1995; Steiner, 1995; Wolf, 1991). Our concern is with the acculturating rhetoric of a segment of this industry, namely, magazines aimed at teenage girls. The five most popular of these are *YM (Young and Modern)*, *Teen*, *Seventeen*, *Glamour*, and *Mademoiselle*. Each has over 1.5 million in circulation (*Standard Rate and Data*, 1995). Ironically, only a few studies have attended specifically to magazines directed at this market (Duffy & Gotcher, 1996; Duke, 1995; Evans, Rutberg, Sather, & Turner, 1991; Frazer, 1987; McCracken, 1993; McRobbie, 1991; Peirce, 1990, 1993, 1995; Pool, 1990). Not surprisingly, these studies, like those for their adult counterparts, found that teen magazines work to shape women into enthusiastic consumers who pump money into capitalistic enterprises. Taking it as a given, then, that their latent function is to acculturate readers into consumers, we found ourselves intrigued by the kind of story teen girls' magazines tell about a narrow, but extremely interesting and crucial part of life—sexuality.

Studies have shown that teens rank the media just behind peers and parents as sources of information and influence on attitudes and behaviors, including sexuality (Strasburger, 1995, p. 41). Fine's (1988) study of adolescent females' sexual education found that "public schools have rejected the task of sexual dialogue and critique, or what has been called 'sexuality education'" (p. 30). Peer influence (Fine, 1988) and the popular media (Moore & Rosenthal, 1993; Thompson, 1995) fill in gaps left by schools and parents. As Thompson (1995) noted, "teenage girls still spend several billion dollars a year and untold hours following the advice of friends and teen magazines to 'fit in but be themselves'" (p. 51). Furthermore, Finders (1997) claimed that junior high school girls appropriated the experiences reported in teen magazines as their own and the "zines [sic] served as [their] handbook" (pp. 59–60). The girls said that "the advertisements and articles were 'just like me'" (p. 61), and "talked as if each [article or ad] carried an implicit command that one must follow in order to achieve high status" (p. 62). They treated the magazine's content as a ruler for judging the behavior, values, and opinions of themselves and other girls (p. 65). DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1982) suggested that people are most dependent upon a given medium when that medium offers the most direct information and when people lack experiences and interpersonal advice required to serve their informational needs.

Clearly, sexual education for teens is not limited to one site or one source. Parents, peers, and the media all offer advice. For teenage girls, it could be argued that magazines are one of the most accessible, inexpensive, and readily available media for information about sexuality. Magazines allow for private, repeated readings. They are easily purchased in stores, are free in libraries, and are passed along from friends or relatives. Further, magazines can give more explicit kinds of information to readers. As Strasburger (1995) noted, print media are more likely than electronic media to discuss birth control and to advertise birth control products (p. 46).

In this study, we looked for the story of women's sexuality, both emerging (in magazines directed at younger teens) and maturing (in magazines directed at

older teens and women in their early 20s). We asked this question: What messages do the highly popular teen magazines carry for young women about social and cultural norms for sex and sexual relationships?

Women's Magazines as Training Grounds for Tradition

Paging through contemporary teen magazines, readers may be struck by the seeming "hipness" of the images. The pictures feature pert, smiling, predominately White, middle-class, young women dressed in the latest fashions. The teenage models look confident and in control. In short, they imply agency, the ability to do as they choose. However, this image is at odds with the messages carried in the magazines.

The slight body of research available on teenage girls' magazines suggests that they construct a traditional, advertiser-influenced style of female sexuality, which features pleasing men through enhancing beauty and sexual availability. In a study of *Jackie*, a best-selling British teen magazine, McRobbie (1991) found the magazine scripted for young women a sexually competitive world in which other girls were positioned as adversaries in the quest for connection with a man. Similar findings marked Evans, Rutberg, Sather, and Turner's (1991) study, which noted that "articles and advertisements mutually reinforced an underlying value that the road to happiness is attracting males for successful heterosexual life by way of physical beautification" (p. 110). Peirce (1990) also found that traditional socialization messages (e.g., "finding a man to take care of her") dominated more feminist messages (e.g., self-reliance), even when influences from the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s were taken into account. Duffy and Gotcher (1996) argued that *YM* provided a "rhetorical vision that permeates the magazine lead[ing] the viewer to believe that beauty, costuming, popularity, and romance are the keys to female success" (p. 44). The end result was a "distorted world view . . . where success is determined by meeting the needs and expectations of males, and a world view free of consequences for sexual activity" (p. 45).

Although these studies addressed issues of sexuality, sexuality was neither their main focus nor purpose. We found no studies focusing specifically on the overt sexual advice given in regular columns. Only one brief, intriguing article, found in the popular press, spoke directly to the nature of sexual advice in teen magazines. The *Utne Reader* ran a short feature, written by *Sassy* staff member Elizabeth Larsen (1990), which allowed an inside glimpse into the dynamics of the coverage of sexuality in teen magazines. *Sassy's* initial editorial policy focused on questions teenage girls asked them, writing columns and features in response, "to let girls know that whatever choices they made about their sexuality weren't shameful as long as they were responsible about safe sex, birth control, and emotional self-care" (p. 97). Shortly after they began publication, *Sassy* was boycotted by Women Aglow, an evangelical women's group. Advertising revenue dropped precipitously, until "*Sassy* had lost nearly every ad account and we were publishing what we jokingly called *The Sassy Pamphlet*" (p. 97). After the magazine reluctantly removed "controversial content" (p. 97), *Sassy's* advertisers returned. In 1994, *Sassy* was purchased by Peterson Publishers, who also own *Teen* magazine, called "a

more traditional and middle-of-the-road publication for teen-age girls” by the *New York Times* (Carmody, 1994). Anecdotal though it may be, this glimpse inside the workings of a popular teen magazine shows that advice that treats women as relatively autonomous decision-makers is controversial. Significantly, *Women Aglow* did not boycott magazines whose columns advised women to act according to more traditional heterosexual norms.

Previous scholarship has revealed that messages about sexuality are present, but researchers have not examined the columns that advise young women about issues of sexuality with the explicit intent of understanding the sexual discourse presented in teen magazines. Our purpose is to expand both the focus and range of previous work by examining the explicit sexual advice popular teen magazines have presented to young girls over the past 20 years. We begin by developing a base founded on Bormann’s (1972, 1985a) symbolic convergence theory.

Symbolic Convergence: Merging Narrative and Culture

Mediated messages symbolically reflect and shape attitudes and values. Fisher’s (1987) paradigm suggests that narratives act symbolically to create meaning for “those who live, create, or interpret them” (p. 58). Narrative, whether persuasive or literary, packages information, inferences, attitudes, and values. Narratives invite audiences to identify with the characters; they suggest motives as reasonable and as working for these characters. They encourage imitation. Symbolic convergence theory, originally applied to small-group interaction (Bales, 1970) and later elaborated as a theory of public discourse (Bormann, 1972, 1985a, 1985b), allows discovery of both long-term social and cultural impact of mediated messages, and analysis of the narrative elements found within those messages.

Symbolic convergence theory is based upon two major assumptions. First, communication creates reality. Second, individuals’ meaning for symbols can converge to create a shared reality for participants. According to this perspective, people construct reality through inductive and intuitive forms, such as narrative. People do not deduce their reality from abstract symbols, rather they create reality based upon interpretation, intuition, and shared messages. The power of symbolic convergence theory stems from dynamic narrative, through which people understand events in terms of characters with certain personality traits and motivations, making decisions, taking actions, and causing things to happen. Narrative can shape what people see as possible, even as real, if it is attractive enough and repeated enough.

“Fantasy theme criticism” (the method of charting symbolic convergence) can be used in media analysis and evaluation. *Fantasy* refers to the creative or imaginative interpretation of events. *Fantasy theme* refers to the verbal or nonverbal means through which a particular interpretation of reality appears (i.e., a word, phrase, statement, or image). Filling a rhetorical need to explain experience, fantasy themes use words, phrases, statements, or images to interpret events in the past, envision events in the future, or depict current events that are removed in time or space from the actual activities of the group. Fantasy themes tell a story that accounts for the group’s experience and shapes group members’ understanding of what is real.

Just like drama, fantasy can be analyzed through use of elements of the scene, character, and action (Bales, 1970; Bormann, 1972, 1985b). *Setting themes* depict where the characters act out their roles or where the action takes place. The elements of the scene are closely integrated with characters and action and are given presence through them. *Character themes* describe the agents or actors in the drama, ascribe qualities to them, assign motives to them, and portray them as having certain characteristics (Bormann, 1985b). *Action themes*, or plotlines, deal with characters' actions within the drama (Bormann, 1985b). The action of the drama gives meaning to the fantasy theme. Within the drama, motives are personified within actions that converge in a unified vision.

Symbolic convergence encourages group members to be caught up in the drama. Those who share the fantasy act it out (Bales, 1970; Bormann, 1985b). The psychological process of being caught up in the narrative helps group members interpret some aspects of common experience, enabling symbolic convergence on that issue. That convergence creates a coherent rhetorical vision of some aspect of their social reality (Bormann, 1985a). The rhetorical vision is a shared image of what the world is like and how people fit into the world. People who share the vision become a rhetorical community, knit together by a common sense of purpose, agency, motivation, and action.

Method

We surveyed five magazines aimed at teenage girls for their advice on sex: *YM*, *Teen*, and *Seventeen* aimed at a younger (12–19) audience, and *Glamour* and *Mademoiselle*, whose audience, although older (18–24), includes teenage readers. According to *Standard Rate and Data* (1995), each has been published for at least 20 years and has a circulation over 1.5 million.

Even though the demographics of *Glamour* and *Mademoiselle* suggest an older audience, we included them for three reasons. First, their messages of sexuality continue themes sounded in magazines for younger women. Given that “by the time they are 20 years old, 70% of girls and 80% of boys have engaged in sexual intercourse” (Greenberg, Brown, & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1997, p. 1), these magazines may be sought for information and guidance. Second, according to Teenage Research Unlimited (1991), *Mademoiselle* and *Glamour* captured 14.4% and 18.3%, respectively, of the 12- to 19-year-old market. *Mademoiselle* reported that 20% of its readers are between 12 and 19 years of age and *Glamour* reported that 14.5% of its readers fall within this age group (S. Martin, personal communication, March 2, 1993). Third, although their targeted audience may be older, younger and mid-range teens find easy access to them in older sisters' rooms, libraries, and store shelves.

Focusing on the editorial part of the magazines that gave direct sexual or relationship advice to young women, we analyzed health, sex, and relationship columns, as well as any directly related feature articles or stories in the April and October issues from 1974, 1984, and 1994. We selected these years because we wanted to see if the advice changed over time, and reflected the impact of AIDS.

We chose advice columns and features because they provide readers the clearest possible picture of what sex and sexual relationships should be like; this is information supported by the prescriptive advice of the “experts” who author the articles. The 30 issues provided us with 175 articles for analysis. April and October issues were used because we wanted months that would not be influenced by holidays (e.g., Christmas) or special events (e.g., proms and summer vacations).

Relying on categories of analysis drawn from Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory, we mapped the narrative of appropriate sexual conduct and expression created by the material as a whole. Within this interpretive frame, we looked specifically for sexual metaphors, phrases, and sentences as they relate to setting, character, and action. Following the guidelines of Silverman (1993), the three primary authors and two other researchers read all the advice columns and stories in all the magazines and interpreted the material. Each independently made his or her own lists of sexual metaphors, key words, phrases, and sentences. Each recorded interpretations and whether he or she thought items related to setting, character, or action. The descriptive lists were collated. As a group, we discussed the emerging themes and patterns (major, minor, and conflicting ones) and came to agreement on the content and its implications. Differences were resolved by reexamining and discussing the text in question.

The Story of Sex

In 1974, only *Teen*, *Glamour*, and *Mademoiselle* directly and openly addressed the issue of sexual activity and sexuality through such topics as sex and the single scene, infidelity, pregnancy and abortion, venereal disease, “his body,” and bust exercises. Coverage in *YM* and *Seventeen* was more implicit, focusing on the dating game, dating etiquette, abusive boyfriends, kissing, love letters, going steady, surviving a breakup, and being a loser on the dating scene. By 1984, all more openly addressed male-female sexuality and sexual relations. Coverage in *YM* and *Seventeen* was not as extensive, but it was as definitive. *Seventeen*, for example, carried articles on teen pregnancy and masturbation, abortion, and sexual double standards. *Mademoiselle* and *Glamour* continued their unabashed approach to sexuality by talking about subjects such as ejaculations, male attitudes toward their penis, and talking too much while lovemaking. By 1994, the differences in treatment of sexuality among magazines were slim. Whereas *Glamour* and *Mademoiselle* talked about erotic dreams with lesbians, satisfying sex with an older man, penis enlargements, last minute flings, and so forth, *YM*, *Seventeen*, and *Teen* discussed wanting babies, boyfriends wanting virgins (and she’s not), sex with cousins, sexual abuse, sex between juveniles and adults, chastity belts, whether a guy can tell if you’re a virgin, and being addicted to love. In sum, over time we saw a shift in the range and explicitness of topics relating to sexuality. This finding is consistent with Strasburger’s (1995) observation that contemporary magazines, like television, reflect a trend away from “naive or innocent romantic love” to “increasingly clinical concerns about sexual functioning” (p. 46). We did not see, however, any significant change over time or magazine in how women’s sexuality

was framed. We decided, therefore, to treat the material primarily in a paradigmatic (stressing content-based categories) rather than syntagmatic (stressing change over time) way. We will, however, discuss changes over time that we did observe.

Setting Themes

The setting for the sexual relationship dance between male and female teenagers was rarely named or described in teen magazines. Sex appeared to occur whenever and wherever possible. Teenage sexual activities and relationships took place wherever teens could find a private space at home, parties, or even school. The magazines, however, did not show sexual activity taking place on vacation, at home, or within bedrooms, sites where adults typically engage in sexual activity. This lack of focus on the physical setting was in marked contrast with adult magazines. A cursory review of more adult-directed women's magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, and *Harper's Bazaar*, revealed the importance of place for adults by providing articles that focused on subjects like decorating the bedroom or bathroom to make it more romantic or suitable for lovemaking, creating the most romantic picnics for two, and discovering the most romantic vacation hideaways. The question, then, is why was there no clear physical setting for the sexual drama?

The most obvious answer is that parents control the "normal" sex setting. Rules forbidding members of the opposite sex in a daughter's or son's bedroom are not uncommon. This makes sexual activity difficult within the home, especially the bedroom. A less obvious answer is that to focus directly on setting assumes an established knowledge level most, or many, teens do not have. Young teens do not ask sophisticated questions, such as where can I have sex, or what is the most romantic hideaway for sex. Rather, they ask such questions as should I have sex, and if I do, "how do I kiss," "give oral sex," or must I have "anal sex if I don't want to?" (Lever & Schwartz, 1994b, p. 69). The scene of the story, then, is not of primary importance. Reducing adolescent uncertainty about the basic nature of sex is.

Character Themes

Finders (1997) found that teen magazines help young women identify the nature of their new adult community, as well as the other actors. In the magazines we surveyed, there were two actors in this sexual drama: the "guy," or boyfriend, and the "girl." The most prevalent questions were these: What are guys like? What do guys want from girls? How should I behave around guys? Overall, men or "guys" were characterized as users and controllers within the community, whereas women or "girls" were characterized as negotiators of their own use.

Girls. In teen magazines, girls were assumed to be, quite simply, in the process of "becoming." Girls were never right just as they were. This vision takes on added importance in light of the Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer (1987) finding that adolescent girls see themselves as becoming someone in relation to other important persons in their lives (e.g., their mothers or teachers). Gilligan et al. (1987) argued that many girls submerge their individuality and sense of identity in favor of becoming what someone else wants them to be. They found that it was the rare

girl who maintained her sense of self if it conflicted with what she perceived to be the sense of self promoted by important others. Our analysis revealed that teen magazines encouraged girls to become what significant others, in particular, guys, wanted them to be.

Health and relationship advice columns, supplemented and complemented by fictional stories and features on sexual issues, encouraged young women to become sexual objects whose lives were not complete unless sexually connected with a man. Girls could earn a man, first, by recognizing traditional interests (“affection” and “company”) and training of women (to be “ladylike,” “neat,” and “polite”; Rubis, 1984), and, second, through the changing of self as they negotiated their way through sexual encounters and relationships. Young women achieved the latter by being better informed than guys about male and female physiology and psychology; by attracting guys through good-looking hair, beautiful clothes, and thin bodies; and by developing sex and relationship skills. According to *Seventeen*, “If you see someone you like or who seems interested in you, let yourself glow. Take a chance. Bring yourself to flirt. Play a little. That’s what flirting really is: part of a game between men and women” (Wood, 1974, p. 58). According to *YM*, it also helps if they possess the quality of innocence.

Do you know the one quality boys can’t resist? It’s innocence. They refer to it by many terms (“cute,” “sweet,” “adorable,” “charming,” etc.), but what really attracts boys is innocence. That’s why an actress like Brooke Shields is so alluring; she projects childlike, wide-eyed naiveté into her roles. (Rubis, 1984, p. 47)

This innocence was especially evident in the 1974 issues of *YM* and *Seventeen*, where the girls were, implicitly, virgins looking for tips on being a good kisser and proper dating etiquette. “My question is short and sweet: Is it or is it not considered proper to call a boy these days?” (Borchart, 1974, p. 38). Not all the younger teens were virgins, however, as evidenced by articles in *Teen* on venereal disease (“The Truth Behind VD,” 1974) and “his body” (“You, Your Parents,” 1974), and in *Mademoiselle* about “getting laid,” infidelity, and abortion (Baudry & Weiner, 1974; Durbin, 1974a, 1974b). By 1984, girls were told, both subtly and directly, that they should focus primarily on understanding the “guy,” and meeting or dealing with his constant sexual desire and readiness. Even in articles focusing on a young woman’s emerging sexuality, such as in the April 1984 issue of *Teen*, “Sexual Involvement: The Experts Answer Your Questions,” young women were warned that they could expect to be pressured into sex and experience painful emotional and sexual scars from male-female relationships (Soria, 1984a). *Teen*’s October 1994 issue stated:

That’s not to say that guys don’t value girls as people, but chances are they may have some sexual agenda as well. Girls often get physically involved with a guy to feel close emotionally. Guys are more apt to separate the emotional from the physical. Girls, therefore, can be more vulnerable to getting hurt after getting physical. (“Why Guys Do What They Do,” 1994, p. 34)

To survive the presumably inherently animalistic traits of men, the October 1974 issue of *Seventeen* advised girls to be patient, as, “like most boys, your friend simply doesn’t want to make a big display of his emotions, especially in school” (Borchart, 1974, p. 36). In 1984, it advised that, when guys “make these lame noncommittal offers, we’re also trying to gauge your reaction. If you respond with a friendly smile and a sincere ‘that would be great,’ we just might come through for once and say exactly what we mean when we make that promised call” (Schwartz, 1984a, p. 104). In 1984 *Glamour* cautioned girls to avoid the tendency to be “pushy,” “bossy,” or to act like “mom” (Naifeh & Smith, 1984). “The other mistake women make is to show their ‘independence’ by being demanding” (Naifeh & Smith, 1984, p. 291). In *Seventeen* and *YM*, girls were told to fight the “desperate” urge to get pregnant (Duncan, 1994; Fuller, 1994). In *Teen* they were told to fight the urge to “pin guys down” or to push for “commitments” before guys are ready (“Why Guys Do What They Do,” 1994).

Guys. In teen magazines, guys simply “are.” Guys need to know only themselves and, because they “are,” they need not worry about “becoming” men or achieving power or status; they already have it. According to *Teen*, because they possess these qualities, guys are “allowed to be wild,” have “fewer restrictions,” and focus more on “impressing buddies” and “group bonding” than on relationship and communication skills (“Why Guys Do What They Do,” 1994, pp. 32–34).

Whether looking at teen magazines from 1974, 1984, or 1994, we found that guys lacked relationship skills and proved unable to express themselves verbally or emotionally. Any presentation of women’s sexuality also involved a treatment of men’s sexuality. Over the 20 years, men’s sexuality was narrowly portrayed as animalistic and self-centered, and the sexual advice became more explicit and graphic. In 1974, guys were difficult to talk to, used girls, made them feel like losers, and cheated on them sexually (only in *Mademoiselle* was this explicitly stated, see Durbin, 1974a). By 1984, guys did all these things, *and* they were primarily motivated by sex and self-interest. Guys “don’t learn [about sex] from talking with the guys. [They] learn from hands-on training with girls.” Their training, however, was inherently unsuccessful, because they only knew the basic mechanics of sex (Nelson, 1984, p. 157). Nonetheless, according to *Teen*, guys pushed girls beyond their level of sexual readiness (e.g., beyond kissing) or used excuses to pressure girls into sexual intercourse.

Are guys really in pain if they are sexually aroused, then don’t have sexual intercourse? . . . It’s important to be aware that this “pain” is sometimes used as a tactic to pressure a girl into more sexual activity than she’s ready for. For example, if a guy says, “If you loved me, you wouldn’t want to see me in pain.” This line should be a warning to you that this person puts his own physical satisfaction above your emotional welfare. (Soria, 1984a, pp. 9–10)

Younger teens were told by *Seventeen* that guys kiss you and then call you “stupid” (Schwartz, 1984b, p. 68). They were told by *Teen* that guys start going “out a lot” and “stop coming around” when you get pregnant (Soria, 1984b, p. 91). They were told by *YM* that guys marry only virgins (Clifford, 1994, p. 37), and by

Teen, again, that guys toy with your emotions or “act mean,” because they “want to be cool in front of friends” (Nguyen, 1994, p. 30). Older teens were warned by *Mademoiselle* that guys deceive you sexually and emotionally (Durbin, 1974a). They were told by *Glamour* that guys demand that you “make [yourself] irresistible to other men” as a means of measuring your worth and his own (Barbasch, 1984, p. 325). They were warned by *Mademoiselle* that guys ask you to do things like join in a threesome with your best friend (Vernon, 1994, p. 74).

Ironically, these male ways of being, although depicted as regrettable, were not shown as lacking worth. Although the advice columns overtly guided young women to accept men as they were, further guidance came from other parts of the magazine, in particular, the celebrity biography and photo spread. In teen magazines guys were set up as ideals or poster boys meant to be treated by young women as icons—someone to placate, adore, and manipulate. This ideal, two-dimensional male was presented as the type of “guy” who could fulfill the “girl’s” dream, standing in for all men for young women trying to understand and know men’s wishes, needs, and behaviors.

Warning: “TV Turn-ons,” our tear-out-and-tape-it-to-your-wall story, may be damaging to your social life. Once you get a look at our favorite guys from the new fall shows, you’ll be tempted to stay home every night and glue yourself to the couch in front of the tube. (“TV Turn-Ons,” 1994, p. 10)

Young women, encouraged to “study” these icons as if they were the enemy, read about “guy” qualities and characteristics to survive within the community.

Action Themes

The narrative clarified the elements of sexual advice and told the reader which elements were the most important. It stressed the kind of character, and person, the young woman should strive to be within the community. Three central action themes emerged from our analysis. All presumed sexual activity on the part of young women, suggesting how they should adapt themselves to sex, as young men want it. We should be clear, these magazines encouraged women to be self-reliant and to defend themselves and their desires for better treatment within a relationship. The women were not told to be patsies or to let men walk all over them. Independence and emotional strength were touted in all the magazines. These messages, however, were usually not tied to the woman’s own sexuality. Instead, the predominant themes included presenting oneself as sexually desirable (not desiring), developing the skills of sexual therapy (designed to enhance men’s sexual pleasure and performance), and becoming a communication teacher (to help guys become better relational partners).

Woman as sex object. As members of the adolescent, sexually active community, young women were told to be sexually desirable and ready for sexual activity. This is not to say the advice columns, like those in *Seventeen* and *YM*, did not tell young women to “wait” until they are emotionally (Kent, 1994) or legally “ready” (Clifford, 1994; Lee, 1994). They repeatedly cautioned young women about engaging in sex before they were ready. However, woven into these cautions was

the underlying assumption that readers are, or soon will be, engaging in sexual activity. The presumption was that sexual intercourse would happen before marriage. The only questions were where, when, and with whom.

Magazines told young women to be ready and willing through standard articles and advertisements on “sexy outfits,” “sexy hair he’ll love,” and “passionate fingernails.” They encouraged girls to “shape-up” for that “sexy swimsuit he’ll love,” and to eat right for that “healthy” and “sexy” glow. Through advice columns, like those in *Mademoiselle*, older teens read questions from other teens about whether it was safe to have sex if your boyfriend had cold sores (“he says not to worry”; Rosenbaum, 1984, p. 50), whether sex was better when your bladder was full (Vernon, 1994, p. 78), or whether getting pregnant to “tie a man down” was ever successful (Baudry & Wiener, 1974, p. 34). Older teens could also read in *Glamour* about how to deal with the sexual activities men desire of women. “I’ve been seeing a guy for a couple of months. Our sex life is great, but lately he’s been asking me to perform oral sex on him. I’d love to—but I don’t even know how to begin. Please tell me” (Lever & Schwartz, 1994a, p. 76). Through discourse such as this, younger women were told that others within their community were actively engaging in sex, and that others achieved success and status within their community through sexual intimacy.

This sense of a sexually active community was especially evident in the 1994 magazines geared toward the younger teens. Here, young girls wrote to *YM* about having sex with their 18-year-old boyfriends when they were 14 years old (Lee, 1994), or to *Teen* about sex when they were 13 years old (“Ask Juli,” 1994b), or to *Seventeen* about their desire to have a baby (Duncan, 1994). In *YM* one girl wrote: “I’m a 15-year-old girl and I want a baby—in fact, I’ve always wanted a baby. I’ve been going out with the guy for about seven months. . . . I’ve agreed to wait, but it hurts really badly—I want a child so much” (Fuller, 1994, p. 28).

In 1984, the sexual activity of the younger women was addressed more implicitly in these same magazines through articles on sexual involvement (Soria, 1984a), pregnancy (Graeber, 1984; Kellogg, 1984), and premature parenthood (Soria, 1984b). In 1974, only *Teen* magazine acknowledged sexual activity beyond kissing, through its discussion of venereal disease (“The Truth Behind VD”). This shift, over time, in content acknowledging sexual activity seemingly corresponded with increased teen sexual activity noted by Greenberg et al. (1997) and the editorial trend cited by Strasburger (1995). Regardless, these articles and columns for younger and older teens rarely addressed the teen’s own sexual needs and concerns. The one exception was the “Sex and Your Body” column in *Seventeen* (McCoy, 1984) entitled “Masturbation: Normal or Not.” Even more importantly in the age of AIDS, young girls were rarely told how to protect themselves.

Over time, in the advice columns to younger teens, young women who were not ready for sex or were having problems getting dates were encouraged to employ self-analysis for possible emotional or behavioral problems—for example, is she “not getting enough love from [her] own parents” (Fuller, 1994, p. 28), or is she “too dependent on him?” (“Whoa!,” 1994, p. 46). Young women were advised to let their “shyness” work for them, and stop being “flirts [and] social butterflies” because “boys like to feel special. They love it when you shower them with

[selective] attention" (Rubis, 1984, p. 47). According to *Seventeen*, if you are a "loser" because you "can't bring [yourself] to flirt the way some girls do because it seems so fake," you should examine your own anger and hidden feelings and reconsider "the other old saw: A boy runs after a girl until she catches him!" (Wood, 1974, p. 58).

Self-analysis is also a way young women can determine what may be going "wrong" in a relationship. The "Dear Jill" column in *Teen* (October 1984) suggested:

Next, it may help to examine how you're acting around guys, to make sure you're not sending out the wrong signals. For example, do you act naturally around guys? Some girls get caught up in acting according to how they think a "popular" girl would act, rather than how they feel most comfortable. This often appears phony. Are you too complimentary? Sincere compliments seem insincere when they're dished out excessively. Do you tend to talk too much around guys? (p. 24)

Is the girl "ask[ing] him questions about himself," just filling "the dead space with tales about [her]self," or "cornering him into a commitment" ("Dating Dilemmas," 1994, p. 18)? Questions such as these encourage several assumptions on the part of young women: (a) Relationship problems are the fault and responsibility of women, (b) women must subjugate self for the sake of the relationship, and (c) women who do not make men the center of the relationship will not succeed as members of the community. This self-analysis, and the self-help culture that promotes the continued social and emotional subordination of women, have been well studied (e.g., May, 1988; Simonds, 1992; Tavis, 1992), but the sites of study have been adult women's magazines and self-help books. These cultural messages begin much earlier.

Because guys are "inconsiderate," "manipulative," and "possessive," girls can expect to be treated like "dirt." Teen magazines provided explanations and potential solutions or warnings for this "guy" behavior. According to *Teen*, for example, "guys" act "kind of mean because they want to act cool in front of their friends." The solution is to "be nice to him—suggest swapping phone numbers" (Nguyen, 1994, p. 30). *YM* told young women that

if its hearts and flowers you're looking for, try to initiate some romance yourself If your boyfriend is like most guys, he should take the hint and start doing nice things for you. But don't expect him to change overnight; some guys can be really thickheaded about picking up clues. (Blanchard, 1994, p. 37)

The implication was that their behavior can be changed eventually. Other solutions, offered by *Seventeen*, included reassuring guys of their worth and changing guy behavior (e.g., dating other girls) through the sharing of feelings (Borchart, 1974; Schwartz, 1984b). Conversely, *YM* warned girls that guys who didn't want a "used tire" (i.e., a nonvirgin) should be dumped (Blanchard, 1994, p. 37). It should also be noted that the advice given by *YM* in this latter situation included one of the few references we found about AIDS: "He, as your new partner, has the right

to know your sexual history—what with AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases” (Blanchard, 1994, p. 37). Significantly, the woman was not encouraged to press him for information about his sexual history. In fact, and in contrast to Strasburger’s (1995) claim that print media are more informative about birth control, we found only eight overt mentions of birth control and nine references to sexually transmitted diseases or AIDS; all but two appeared in the 1994 issues of *YM*, *Seventeen*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Glamour*.

Women as sex therapists. Not only must young women adapt themselves to male-defined sexual expression, they must also teach men their own needs and how to satisfy them. Although this theme did not appear overtly in the 1974 sample, it was foreshadowed in its grooming of young women to communicate well with men, on their terms. By 1984, however, whether the magazines targeted younger or older teens, the sex therapist character theme was clear—it is the job of women to teach men how to be good lovers and to adapt themselves to male desires and needs. The explicitness of the messages, especially those from 1994, reflected more graphic sexual content rather than sexual agency on the part of women. Overall, male pleasure oriented and drove the advice.

On one level, teen magazines encouraged young women to think of themselves and their needs (e.g., to be independent, assertive, self-assured, and confident of their body image). Young women were told to move at their own pace and respect themselves by standing up to guys and avoiding male pressure to engage in activities that made them feel uncomfortable. *Seventeen* advised: “In terms of sexual activity, it’s always possible to slow down, and anyone can choose to go from intercourse to kissing or anywhere in between. What you do—and don’t do—is entirely up to you” (Kent, 1994, p. 114). Magazines aimed at younger teens encouraged them to refuse unwanted sexual moves, even if they had been active in the past: “Though you may have been sexually involved in the past, this doesn’t mean that you are obligated to continue to be sexually active Let him know that it’s not acceptable for him to pressure you. You said no, and you mean it” (“Ask Juli,” 1994a, p. 6). Girls were also urged to “reconsider staying in a relationship” that’s making them “unhappy” or where guys engage in unkind “macho” behavior (Schwartz, 1984b, p. 69).

However, once they have crossed the threshold of intercourse, the magazines sought to persuade girls to act as sex therapists in the male-female relationship. This was especially true in the 1984 and 1994 magazines directed toward older teens, who were told sexual issues were their responsibility through articles and advice on how to deal with male sexual desires such as the desire for a ménage à trois (Vernon, 1994) or anal sex (Lever & Schwartz, 1994b). The magazines also provided a guide for dealing with sexual problems such as waning sexual desire (Markowitz, 1994), and premature ejaculation or male impotency (Nelson, 1984). Young women were encouraged to help their “guys” through these problems by directly addressing the problem (Rosenbaum, 1984) or looking for “love boosts” to get them out of a dull routine (Volchok, 1984). The predominate focus, however, was not on the young woman’s own sexual needs, or even how to train a man to please her or to enjoy sex more.

Women as communication teachers. Across the spectrum, from younger to

older markets, teen magazines encouraged young women to teach men emotional intimacy by acting as communication teachers and therapists. The best example was an article in the April 1984 issue of *Glamour*. Entitled “Men and Intimacy: How to Get Your Man to Open Up,” the article noted that a man can’t help himself because “He’s paralyzed by his fears—of rejection, of dependence, and that he’s not the man he ought to be. He needs a woman’s help” (Naifeh & Smith, p. 290). The article then provided “five ways to help him open up” and “ten ways to get him talking.” Younger teens were counseled by *YM* to:

Remember that boys are human, too. They’re sensitive (some experts say more so than girls), they need comforting, and they have feelings, thoughts, worries, dreams, just as you do. Work hard to see this side of boys, and respond to it. (Rubis, 1984, p. 48)

Rarely, however, were young women encouraged to discuss issues of pregnancy, birth control, or AIDS with the guys; the one exception was found in *YM* (Blanchard, 1994).

In teen magazines a young woman’s primary schema, goal, or responsibility was presented as developing a working heterosexual relationship. *Teen* advised that, “If you want to understand a guy, it’s important to look at his actions. That way you’ll be better able to understand the language he’s been taught—the language of action. (“Why Guys Do What They Do,” 1994, p. 34). According to *Glamour*, she must:

Teach a man—by example and encouragement; learn to listen more closely to the sometimes muted and indirect ways he may express his feelings; and try to understand the value of nonverbal forms of communication. “There is a male and female code of expression,” says one psychiatrist, “and you have to know how to translate feelings and ideas into each other’s language. Since it’s not very likely that a man will try to learn the female code of expression on his own, a woman’s going to have to make the effort to teach him her language.” (Naifeh & Smith, 1984, p. 355)

In other words, she must, “in a sense, tutor the guy” by example (“Why Guys Do What They Do,” 1994, p. 34). She can do this by “being open herself,” “accepting his foibles,” “not forcing the issue,” and “seeing the problem from his side” (Naifeh & Smith, 1984, pp. 354–355). Young women were advised to put the guy and his problems first. This was illustrated in advice that if she must complain, a “girl” should first “validate” her boyfriend’s feelings. In the time-honored tradition of wife meeting weary warrior husband, she must put her boyfriend’s needs first and foremost.

A Rhetorical Vision of Containment

Teen magazines’ columns, stories, and features on sex and heterosexual relationships present a simple, clear rhetorical vision: The sexual community belongs to

men, and women survive by containing themselves and by adapting and subjugating themselves to male desires. This drama or fantasy is comprised of three types: setting, character, and action. The setting for the sexual drama is everywhere and nowhere. The characters are heterosexual men and women, each with their own characteristics. In teen magazines, man is depicted as animal (not self-conscious), and woman is depicted as animal trainer. That is demeaning to men, given their role in the creation of ethical, moral, philosophical, and religious systems, and to women, who are given only private and no public power. This persona is not very different from the one projected in advertising and other media. Strasburger (1995) and Greenberg et al. (1997) found that, although sexual content in television and music videos has increased in quantity and explicitness, traditional depictions of men as sexually powerful and aggressive and women as sexually weak and submissive are pervasive. Cross-culturally, van Zoonen (1994) found that, despite their extensive spiritual and intellectual training, geishas are perceived by Western males, especially, as objects and providers of male sexual desires (p. 80). Similar negation of intellectual worth and promotion of erotic fantasies have been held about African women (p. 82). In teen magazines, the fantasy action for young White women perpetuates the Victorian idea of woman as the keeper of the flame of male-defined culture. She becomes the keeper by developing a self-denying, male-affirming persona that is shaped, influenced, and determined by the hegemonic sexuality of the drama.

The rhetorical community developed through the working out of this vision is impoverished, as well. By implication, the community of people bound together by this common vision is made up of young, White, heterosexually active men and women who have no fear of, or concerns about, AIDS, other sexually transmitted diseases, or pregnancy. Over time and magazine, the characters within the community have not changed. The fantasy actions, however, have changed somewhat. Younger girls are assumed to be more openly and explicitly engaging in sexual relations with men; older teens are doing the same (plus also serving as sexual therapists). *Mademoiselle* and *Glamour* were most explicit, but the other magazines were not far behind. There were few virgins, no gay men or lesbian women, no men interested in learning how to love women, no women who thought as highly of themselves as they did of men. There were just sexually experienced guys and girls. Whether young girls' real-world experiences enable them to critique these actions adequately, along with the overwhelming sense that everyone else is "doing it," remains to be explored.

Other than brief mentions of masturbation in *Seventeen* (McCoy, 1984), lesbian dreams in *Mademoiselle* (Vernon, 1994), bisexual men who put their female partners at risk in *Glamour* (Lever & Schwartz, 1994a), and one story in *Mademoiselle* about a woman trying to save a gay man from being gay (Scott, 1984), we found no representations that homosexuality or masturbation can be appropriate expressions of sexuality. Although there was nothing that condemned these sexual expressions, their absence can be seen as very limiting or isolating to young women with these interests. The question, then becomes: Although the male-centered, heterosexual focus of the magazines may be regrettable, is it not also an accurate depiction of our culture? Are these magazines not realistic in their fantasy

themes and the community that is developed? The answer is, predominately, “yes,” but that does not make the presentation any less problematic. Certainly, the goal, as presented in these magazines, of pleasing one’s sexual partner is desirable, but at what expense? Although young girls in teen magazines are given agency to say no, that agency is overwhelmed by the message that their prime goal should be to please men and not give offense.

Within this vision, young women are told that they must lose weight, learn about sophisticated sexual techniques, apply makeup well, dress in a sexy manner, and engage in self-analysis when (not if) their real world does not fit with the world depicted. This serves the magazines’ purpose of selling advertising. Female deficiency is needed to maintain advertising sufficiency. Editorial content that promotes knowledge about issues such as AIDS, abortion, and pregnancy do not fit advertisers’ profiles of deficient women (Steinem, 1990). As *Sassy* and *Ms.* found out, magazines that put women first do not prosper with advertisers. They do not fit the vision or the community.

Far from presenting a modern and up-to-date image of women, one that might enhance young women’s sense of their own sexual worth, contemporary teenage girls’ magazines sound the same themes sounded for years in women’s magazines and home economics textbooks—how to meet successfully the needs and desires of men. Josephine Morris (1913), for example, noted for young women attending the Kirksville, Missouri, Normal Practice School the following: “But the mother or home maker is expected to be unfailingly pleasant, cheerful, and patient, and to smooth out all difficulties, no matter how worn or tired she may be” (pp. 221–222). Similarly, the 1960s Amy Vanderbilt Success Program for Women provided advice that began: “A man arrives at his own door with the day’s atmosphere—good or bad—still clinging to him. A sensitive wife greets him warmly and waits to take her cue from him” (Fischer, 1964, p. 43).

In essence, the rhetorical vision presented in teen magazines, and these earlier quotes for successful female life, is one of containment, in which women fit themselves into a subordinate, male-defined sexual role. May (1988), noted that containment was the “overarching principle” that guided post-World War II Americans in their personal and political lives. May added that “much of [society’s] anxiety focused on women, whose economic and sexual behavior seemed to have changed dramatically” (p. 93). Working women, and women who expressed their own sexuality outside of the home, were seen as socially deviant and dangerous to home and country (pp. 94–100). Popular culture and social and psychological “experts” joined the bandwagon and encouraged women to stay at home and adhere to family values. If women were unhappy with this arrangement, they were encouraged to look to themselves for the source of their displeasure and to consult the many self-help books and magazines available to reduce their discomfort (May, 1988; Simonds, 1992; Tavis, 1992; Wolf, 1991). As Simone de Beauvoir observed, “Once again women are being defined in terms of ‘the other,’ once again they are being made into the ‘second sex’” (quoted in Schwartz, 1984, p. 103). That view, as well as that of May, appears to still be true—at least in teen magazines. The story they tell of female sexuality leaves little room for oppositional readings and little space for young women who might want to find out how

to please themselves or teach men how to please them, or who might desire discussion of sexually transmitted diseases, of sexual abstinence, of masturbation, or of same-sex relationships.

Ehrenreich and English (1978) noted that 19th-century feminists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Olive Schreiner realized, “the problem in the middle to upper classes was that marriage had become a ‘sexuo-economic relation’ in which women performed sexual reproductive duties for financial support” (p. 95). The training manuals or primers noted above guided young women to accept a reduced situation in the early and mid-20th century. We argue a similar, but not identical, guiding function is fulfilled by the containment rhetoric of teenage girls’ magazines. Brumberg (1997) pointed out that, at least in the past, women could count on men taking care of them. “Although girls now mature sexually earlier than ever before, contemporary American society provides fewer social protections for them, a situation that leaves them unsupported in their development and extremely vulnerable to the excesses of popular culture and to pressure from peer groups” (p. xvii). Although earlier cultural training manuals promised economic stability, if not advancement, to women who fulfilled their character roles, modern teen magazines offer little to women in return for their sexual and relational involvement with men. Indeed, these magazines tell young women not to nag, not to push for commitment, but to simply wait for whatever men wish to give them.

Magazines marketed to young men, such as *GQ* and *Esquire*, offer a message that complements those given to young women. As Ehrenreich (1996) observed, “The masculine ideal of popular culture has long since ceased to be the man in the grey flannel suit, trudging dutifully between office and home. It has become the millionaire hoop star with a stable of interchangeable gal pals.” (p. 36). When stories of heterosexual relations are told in men’s magazines, they are stories of sexual conquest or of surviving demanding women (*Esquire*, June 1995).

The combination of stories may well be a potent one, reinforcing the cultural assumption that young teen males are fine just as they are, and that the world is both oriented to and dominated by men. If young people take these messages to heart, they will continue to enact a vision in which men are the citizens of the world and women are citizens of the world of men. Ultimately showing little change in story dynamic from the primers of yesterday, little influence from the feminist movement or 20 years of political conservatism, and virtually no influence from the presence of AIDS in American society, teen magazines present young women with a limited rhetorical vision of the world. This vision of women as sex objects, sex therapists, and interpersonal communication teachers rather than friends, partners, lovers, and mothers, promotes the subordination of self for others and encourages young women to become contained.

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