

"Seventeen Magazine Covers -- Messages to Adolescent Females in the Age of Celebrity"

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Purpose

The purpose of this study was to analyze the visual and textual content presented on the covers of *Seventeen* magazines published between 1997 and 2007. *Seventeen* is the most widely read magazine among adolescent females today (SRDS, 2002); research suggests that young readers look to this publication for ideas about who to be and how to look (Duffy & Gotcher, 1996). Covers were chosen for analysis because they represent an index to the information included within the magazine and serve as an advertisement for the sale of the publication. Since young people look to *Seventeen* magazine for insight on how to look and act, it is important to be aware of what they are being told and shown.

Figure 1

Figure 2



Results

Analyses revealed three overarching rhetorical visions within the data: celebrity, heterosexual romance, importance of appearance management.

Rhetorical Vision 1: Celebrity

Celebrities appeared on 124 of the 132 (93%) *Seventeen* magazine covers examined for this study. Four themes relevant to the rhetorical vision, "celebrity," emerged from the analysis: the notion of celebrity as a "cool" or desirable figure, the notion of celebrity as "realistic" or accessible, the idea that readers should remake themselves in the image of a given celebrity (i.e., that they should look or dress like a celebrity, and the notion that the magazine could provide the reader "access" to the celebrity "real" life or identity. For example, the January 2004 issue of *Seventeen* illustrates well the construction of a celebrity as a real or accessible person (see Figure 1). This cover includes an image of Liv Tyler alongside the headline, "She's Real". Similarly, in 2004 and 2005 issues, the magazine began to feature quoted celebrity comments on its covers, as if the given celebrity were speaking directly to the reader, thereby fostering the impression of a friendly conversation or a relationship between the celebrity and the would-be reader. Finally, the April 1999 cover features Kirsten Dunst (see Figure 2) and includes a text that seemingly offers insight into her personal life. It reads "Kirsten Dunst on bowling, boys and her parents' breakup". Each of these topics is presumably something that a typical *Seventeen* reader could relate to, which, in turn, might provide a platform for identifying with (and developing an affinity for) Kirsten Dunst.

Rhetorical Vision 2: Heterosexual Romance

Seventeen magazine covers also included content addressing (heterosexual) romantic relationships, which were presented as including sex and as requiring negotiation and care-taking. This rhetorical vision was observed 150 times and included a variety of subthemes, such as "how to" attract male attention, conduct oneself on a date, and manage various phases of a romantic relationship. For instance, a young female can find advice on "How to be a great date (and get asked out again)" if she refers to the December 2003 issue of *Seventeen* magazine. Similarly, text on the October 2004 cover (see Figure 3) emphasizes the importance of romantic relationships. Here, the headline, "Make your long distance relationship last," is worded as a directive, which underscores the seriousness of preserving a relationship. Finally, the cover for the April 1999 issue promises girls instructive advice about multiple issues relevant to romantic relationships: "a guide to his head, heart and...", advice on "the secret language of guys...", and "...50 clues he's crazy about you." Implicit here is the notion that the reader should interpret actions, conversations, kisses, etc. of/with a male as cues to the status of a relationship or a potential relationship.

Rhetorical Vision 3: Appearance Management

Throughout the covers analyzed, fashion and appearance were presented as matters in need of attention and monitoring/concern. This rhetorical vision occurred 478 times throughout the 132 issues (i.e., an average of 3.62 times per issue). Implicit within content addressing appearance management was the importance of achieving or "getting" certain, prescribed looks. Headlines frequently promoted magazine features describing numerous strategies for achieving the "right" clothing, hairstyles, make-up, and/or generally "looking good." For instance, the cover of the September 2007 issue offers readers of the magazine "998 Fashion & Beauty Tricks" plus an extra 10 to try immediately. At the same time that content promoted an almost singular (or at least narrow) ideal of appearance, however, at least some headlines implored girls to "Celebrate your personal style" (see Figure 3, the October 2004 cover). Here, it is interesting to note that although readers are encouraged to express their individuality through their appearances (hair, make-up, clothes, and body) at one headline suggests that they should do so using "the right colors" for their skin tone.

Conclusions

Analyses revealed three overarching rhetorical visions within the data: female celebrities were presented as embodying realistic and normative characteristics (e.g., as representing an achievable and accessible reality); romantic relationships were presented as including sex and as requiring negotiation and care-taking; and fashion and appearance were presented as matters in need of attention and monitoring/concern. Thus, findings suggest that, for the repeat audience for *Seventeen* magazine, these rhetorical visions or themes may come to represent a social reality that is invoked to guide thoughts about the self as well as relationships with others.

Although the present research did not include an analysis of reader responses to *Seventeen* magazine cover content, this is an area ripe for future exploration. In particular, findings raise concerns about how young adolescent readers may interpret content constructing (a) celebrity as realistic and attainable, (b) sex as a normative component of adolescent romantic relationships, and (c) a narrow range of appearances as desirable or ideal. These topics could form the basis for future inquiry.

Introduction & Background

According to McCracken (1993), magazine covers are designed to sell products and advertising space to marketers. That is, the cover initiates the selling of products featured within the magazine pages through the inclusion of enticing images and text. In other words, "the visual images and headlines on a magazine cover offer a complex semiotic system communicating primary and secondary meanings through language, photographs, images, color and placement" (McCracken, 1993, p. 13). These images and messages are interpreted as specific meanings by the reader. Further, many of elements (e.g., imagery and text) of magazine covers encourage purchase and readership of magazines, which in turn, expose female readers to advertisements for products and services as well as to editorial content about ways to comply with cultural norms of femininity (McCracken, 1993, p. 14).

Contemporary beauty, fashion, and teen magazines typically feature TV celebrities because the target age groups for these publications are avid television watchers, and thus, often relate to the celebrities on the shows. Inasmuch as these celebrities serve as "silent endorsers," their inclusion on magazine covers may help to sell magazines to these consumers (McCracken, 1993, p. 18). Neil Gabler, a cultural historian, explained that featuring celebrities on magazine covers may be preferable to the inclusion of fashion models on covers: "In the eyes of the public, models are unidimensional. They are purely visual, whereas celebrities have these lives we can attach to and they seem more fully dimensional to us." (Kuczynski, 1999, para. 9).

As noted, the present work examined the covers of *Seventeen* magazine, which is the most widely read magazine among adolescent females today (SRDS, 2002); research suggests that young readers look to this publication for ideas about who to be and how to look (Duffy & Gotcher, 1996).

Theoretical Framework

In previous work, researchers have applied symbolic convergence theory to analyses of teen magazines (e.g., Duffy & Gotcher, 1996). This theory and its method of theme analysis allow researchers to consider how people and groups arrive at a shared "rhetorical visions" (Bormann, 1981), or understandings about the social world around them. Rhetorical visions include themes that are constructed to advance a given view about social reality. Implicit here is the assumption that individuals jointly "construct social reality through rhetoric" (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1985, p. 253).

Method

A qualitative theme analysis approach was used to examine 132 covers of *Seventeen*. The period of 1997 through 2007 was chosen for analysis because, during this time, the practice of featuring fashion models on magazine covers gave way to a new trend in which cover models were replaced by images of celebrities (Kuczynski, 1999, para. 20).

Data were coded and analyzed for emergent themes. Themes within the data were identified and compared against one another. Through this process, the researcher discovered similarities among concepts and grouped them together under higher order, more abstract concepts referred to as "categories." These categories were developed into a coding guide that was then applied to the data during the process of "open coding." During the final stages of analysis, the researcher explored the data for broader and more abstract thematic categories.

Figure 3



References

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