“Stuff You Really Want to Read:”
Pleasure and Negotiation in Teen Magazine Reading

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“Surely we all know women’s magazines demean women and solely benefit capitalist profits. What more is there to say?” – Janice Winship

When teenage girls have free time, for the most part they don’t read great literature. They read magazines with articles like “What to Do About Your Big Fat Crush,” in the August 2002 issue of YM. Nearly 60% of girls between 12 and 19 read YM magazine, and Seventeen boasts an even larger circulation. Teen magazines are so pervasive in adolescent girls’ culture that even girls who say they don’t read them are familiar with the contents.

The first issue of Seventeen was published in September 1944. For a variety of reasons, the cultural concept of the teenage girl was emerging at this time. First, postwar prosperity led to the increased spending power of adolescent girls, making them an attractive market for advertisers. Second, greater high school attendance than ever before in history kept girls free of work and family responsibilities longer, creating a new class of people between children and adults. Seventeen’s advice intended to make its readers better teenagers, not to help them grow into adults. Seventeen magazine played an important role in identifying and constructing teenage girls as a distinct, culturally important group. This formation of identity was based largely on strategies to attract advertisers – from the beginning, the ideal reader was white and middle class. Seventeen’s success is evidenced by the fact that eleven years later, a competitor emerged – in 1955, the first issue of YM was published.

A plethora of research has been done on the negative effects of teen magazines – they are sexist, racist, classist; they cause eating disorders and low self-esteem. 71% of teen girls say they compare their own bodies unfavorably to those of models in teen magazines. In 62% of teen magazine fiction, the heroine had to rely on someone other than herself - usually a male - to resolve her problem, and occupations were gender-stereotyped in all but two cases. But a monolithic focus on the negative aspects of teen magazines underestimates teen girls’ critical response.

Girls would not continue to read magazines if reading only made them feel bad – so where is the pleasure in teen magazines? Teen magazines construct an ideal subject, the perfect adolescent girl, to whom they direct their comments. Girls read magazines to “check in” with the ideal, to see how much they have in common with the perfect teen. Much of the pleasure in teen magazines comes from identification with the constructed ideal; one girl I talked to said, “It’s just funny to see...Sometimes you can just see and try to make stuff – like what happened to you in the past month, try to make it into what the horoscope says.” This reader tries to make
events of her own life correspond to those described in the text, specifically horoscopes, but she aptly describes the process through which girls negotiate with teen magazines. A reader negotiates with teen magazines in an attempt to identify with the constructed ideal. When she encounters messages with which she cannot identify, she may change either her self-perceptions or her interpretations of the magazine’s meanings. In negotiating with teen magazines, she rejects both aspects of the magazine and aspects of herself. She derives pleasure from the process – rejecting magazine messages can be fun and empowering. But readers prefer negotiations which end in identification with the constructed ideal. Girls complain most about teen magazines when they cannot relate to the ideal – for example, when African-American girls read makeup tips intended for white girls.

This process of checking in can cause problems when girls question the aspects of themselves which don’t match the constructed ideal. However, the critical work on teen magazines focuses too heavily on readers’ self-rejection, without much respect for adolescent girls. Several critics, including Dawn Currie and Meenakshi Gigi Durham, propose three methods of teen magazine reading: dominant, negotiated and oppositional, based on the degree to which the reader accepts the intended meaning and message. I argue that this false stratification simultaneously gives too much and too little agency to readers. All girls negotiate with the meanings provided to them by teen magazines – no one accepts magazine messages in pure form, and no one completely rejects them. Even girls closest to the constructed ideal negotiate. White, middle-class females criticize teen magazines for failing to represent them on the smallest issues; for example, one girl complains, “They very rarely have something for curly hair.” Girls naturally experience varying degrees of success in negotiation, but they almost all seem to feel that they are personally insulated from magazines’ negative messages.

The first half of my paper closely examines teen magazines, with three major thematic areas of focus. Because the constructed ideal is such a fundamental part of teen magazines’ pleasure, I look at editors’ rhetorical strategies for establishing their expectations of their audience. Teen magazines depend so heavily on advertising revenue that they must necessarily construct the ideal teen as materialistic. In my next section, I consider some effects of magazines’ focus on commodities. Finally, I look at the ways in which the special discourse of teen magazines shapes the constructed ideal and affects readers’ pleasure. I focus on the sexual discourse, especially relevant because these magazines are read at puberty. I concentrate on the
two best-selling American teen magazines, *Seventeen* and *YM*, since they presumably reach the widest audience and have the most appeal.

In the second half of my paper, I will discuss the strategies girls use to negotiate with textual meanings and messages, and the varying degrees of success they achieve. Most critics (with some exceptions, such as Dawn Currie) do not work directly with readers, but read the negative effects of the texts off the texts themselves. To help me understand how and why girls read teen magazines, I conducted focus groups with high-school aged girls in five different communities. I focused on reading practices as illustrative of their methods of negotiation with the texts, and on preferences among and within popular magazines to try to get at pleasure. I hoped that by making them articulate why they preferred certain magazines, or certain sections of magazines, to others, I could figure out why they like teen magazines in general. I also look at teenage girls’ zines as a response to magazines like *Seventeen* and *YM* in their own medium. These amateur publications, produced by girls who see themselves as outside the mainstream, reflect one creative method of negotiation with teen magazine meanings.

Teen magazines deserve most of the criticism levied at them; their negative effects have been proven. However, I intend to problematize the current critical consensus by focusing on teenage girls as active meaning makers and agents of their own pleasure.

“Mascara Road Test:” Advertising in Teen Magazines

Gloria Steinem begins her expose of magazine advertising practices, published in the first ad-free issue of *Ms*, with an anecdote about an official from post-Soviet Russia: “‘So I’ll have to ask my American friends,’ he finished pointedly, ‘how more subtly to control the press.’ In the silence that followed, I said, ‘Advertising.’”

Advertisers have tremendous power over the content of teen and women’s magazines. They demand complementary copy – if a cosmetic company purchases an ad in *Seventeen*, *Seventeen* must then extol some product produced by this particular company on another page. McCracken claims that overt advertising takes up 50-60% of women’s magazine pages, but when “covert” ads, such as complementary copy or contests and sweepstakes, are taken into account, the figure may be as high as 95%. Advertisers may also demand tie-ins, like swimwear ads placed next to an article on fitness. Every month, editors must tailor content and layout to meet the desires of advertisers.
For example, magazines use “relay texts” – teasers on the cover and in the note from the editor, and stories which are “continued on page 241” – to force the reader to flip through all those pages of advertising as many times as possible. Currie cites a study which found that the more a magazine reader engages with the articles she reads, the less she recalls the ads. This probably accounts for the fragmented, discontinuous format of teen magazines.

Finally, advertisers frequently make truly outrageous demands of the magazines in which they buy space. Steinem includes a clearly cathartic list of the stipulations she endured in her years at *Ms*. Most spectacularly, Procter & Gamble insists that “its products [are] not to be placed in *any* issue that include[s] *any* material on gun control, abortion, the occult, cults, or the disparagement of religion.”

Glossy, colorful, full-page ads make up an important part of magazines’ visual pleasure, but girls do not explicitly read teen magazines to look at the ads. Therefore, in this paper I will focus only on the editorial texts, the more obvious source of pleasure, but I want to stress that advertisers have an enormous influence on the form and content of all aspects of a teen magazine.

“Your life. Your style. You!” *Teen Magazines’ Construction of Audience*

“You must tell him that you’d like a little positive feedback.” “Soften your hair and skin with a quick spritz.” “Here’s how to create a totally different but equally adorable you.” Teen magazines address their readers as “you,” usually in imperative sentences. Mary Talbot calls this phenomenon “synthetic personalization” – giving the impression of treating each member of a mass audience as an individual. As a result of this rhetorical style, *Seventeen* or *YM* creates an ideal reader, and addresses its entire audience as if it were composed of “thousands of identical yous with attitudes, values and preoccupations ascribed to them.” Girls find synthetic personalization pleasurable; they enjoy “checking in” with the constructed ideal. Editors recognize the importance of this technique – at the beginning of 2001, *YM* changed its name from *Young and Modern* to *Your Magazine* (it was originally *Young Miss*).

This kind of personalization began in the early years of *Seventeen*’s publication, when its editors created “Teena,” the prototypical adolescent female, based on reader surveys – in an attempt to attract advertisers by telling them that teenagers bought in a group. Their slogan, “Teena means business,” captured a feminist spirit, telling the world to take teen girls seriously,
and a mercenary one simultaneously. Literally, young women meant revenue. Teen magazines have always had to support themselves through advertising, and from the inception of the cultural prominence of the teenage girl, she was designated a consumer. 

Although some critics of teen and women’s magazines hypothesize a conspiracy on the part of editors and publishers to destroy women’s self-esteem, really they are simply businesspeople – this construction of audience helps the magazines sell. Many of the editors’ choices reflect, not conscious ideology, but the need to make money. The ideal reader, the universal “you,” must be principally a consumer; therefore, teen magazines’ constructed audience is composed of white, middle class or affluent, commodity-focused teenage girls. Seventeen’s ideal reader has problems like: “I have clothes everywhere! How can I fit them into my closet?” The speaker cited here is not actually a reader, or even a real person. Under each subheading of this article on cleaning “your” room comes a first-person quote describing the nature of “THE MESS.” This not only makes the article easy on the eye – it puts the “problem” into the mouth of the reader.

This rhetorical strategy, which Talbot describes as “simulation of reciprocal discourse,” creates the illusion of community, as if the reader were having a conversation with a cool older sister. The writer asks a question of the reader, but leaves room for only one response – “yes,” she is worried. Magazine quizzes show the clearest example of this sort of pseudo-reciprocal questioning. They supposedly reveal to the reader some deeper truth about herself; however, because the “correct” answer to each question is so obvious, the girl really only learns whether she participates in behaviors which the teen magazine deems correct – and if not, how to change herself to become closer to the constructed ideal.

Teen magazine articles function to create a sense of community. Despite their apparent focus, for the most part, the articles fail to offer real, valuable advice. For example, an article on breakups opens with the author’s personal anecdote: “I once stayed in my room for three days after a particularly bad end to a six-month relationship. I finally got past it and remembered all the good things about being single.” She then reassures the reader that “feeling like someone sat on your heart is a normal reaction.” The rest of the article consists of retellings of teen girls’
breakup anecdotes (including first and last names) paired with trite advice: “Brace yourself and say yes if you’re asked out [by someone else].” “Avoid a scene.” This advice probably would not truly help anyone get over a breakup, but girls read because they enjoy identifying with the other teenagers quoted in this article.

To establish this sense of community, the women who write for *YM* and *Seventeen* adopt a stilted adolescent style of discourse (“Laura, no offense, but you’re really kind of, um, mean”).\(^{22}\) They attempt to create a sense of friendship through self-disclosure,\(^{23}\) as in the breakup article. To appear close to the reader, the writer must establish a huge range of presuppositions and projected facts – she positions herself as the reader’s best friend, who knows what she thinks - literally.\(^{24}\) The caption to a picture of a girl lying in the grass in a skirt and bikini top reads: “What you were thinking about when it was cold and snowing outside.”\(^{25}\) In response to a question about cohabiting women’s synchronized menstrual cycles, Rebecca Onion writes, “Think about what happens when you go to camp. *Everyone* in your cabin is downing PB&J and Kool-Aid, going to sleep at 10 p.m. and waking up at 6 a.m., and taking the same supervised hike up Pine Mountain. Is it really such a surprise that you all end up depleting the camp store’s supply of Kotex in one week?”\(^{26}\) Of course Onion has no way of knowing whether this questioner has ever been to overnight camp, let alone what she eats when she’s there!

Editors make their expectations clear through an abundance of details – they know that readers’ pleasure lies in checking in with this minutiae. Magazine quizzes especially are usually jammed with pop culture references in an effort to connect with readers and to try to normalize unlikely hypothetical situations.

Critics argue that by buying a teen magazine, a girl agrees to its form of address. Ostermann and Keller-Cohen contend that magazines use construction of audience as a “more insidious” way of imposing ideology, because “the classification of processes, person, and actions are not always presented directly in an argumentative way... Rather,... they are simply labeled in one way or another as if that were the only way to refer to them.”\(^{27}\) In other words, teen magazines leave no room for disagreement. If certain assumptions do not fit the reader’s experience, Currie suggests that teenage girls question themselves instead of the texts, probably because they are insecure about their own identities (as she puts it, adolescent girls’ “lived experience does not invite critical decoding”).\(^{28}\) Duffy and Gotcher claim that “the attempt to create an intimate rhetorical community among *YM*’s teen readers disguises the economic motive
behind the relationship. The editors cynically exploit young women’s intense desire for belonging, connection, and answers to puzzling life questions with a caricature of friendship.”

I do not fundamentally disagree with any of this. Teen magazines do “create an intimate rhetorical community;” their motive is economic, and they do fill their readers’ needs as evidenced by sales. I object, though, to the critics’ underestimation of teenage girls – they do not respect the readers as agents, but construct them as passive sponges. Except for Currie, they read the effects off the texts; their methodological perspective views magazines as acting on girls, rather than the other way around. Also, this anger at teen magazines seems to serve no purpose. Regardless of the editors’ supposed malevolent intent, girls clearly take pleasure in the illusion of community, because they keep buying teen magazines.

My research with readers suggests that teen magazines’ construction of audience and simulation of friendship play a key role in their pleasure. The Prep School girls were the only ones who recognized (in the context of the focus group) magazine audience as a construction. They argued bitterly over what age group teen magazines aim for. One 12-year-old ventured: “So this is geared towards us but it’s called Seventeen.” Another explained: “No but they want to make it seem cool.” While this realization shows a certain level of sophistication, each age group, the 12 and 16-year-olds, believed that the magazine was created for them. So each girl takes the “you” form of address personally. Each believes that she is the intended reader in order to gain maximum pleasure from the magazine.

“What’s Your Perfume Personality?” Teen Magazines’ Focus on Commodity Consumption

Teen magazines exist to sell products. Magazines pretend an emphasis on “girl power,” but that power can only be achieved through physical beauty, and beauty can only be achieved through the purchase of the appropriate products - Mazzarella calls this “commodity feminism.” Susan Douglas, in her article “Narcissism as Liberation,” dubs the advertising industry’s appropriation of feminist rhetoric the “You’re worth it!” movement, after L’Oreal’s catchphrase. “You’re worth it,” of course, actually means “you’re not worth it, but if you buy this product, you might possibly become worth it, if only briefly.” Teen magazines invite girls to feel inadequate, and present products as the solution.

McCracken describes “advice” as an ideological code word. Editors rely on the friendly relationship they’ve established to make themselves look impartial – they pretend to
recommend products because they truly care about their readers, and want them to buy the best. In response to a reader’s question about facial hair, “beauty expert Leslie” advises: “Sprouting hair in new places is just part of growing up (darn hormones!). But you don’t have to live with peach fuzz forever. For dark hair, try bleaching with Jolen Creme Bleach ($4.59).” Leslie reassures the reader that facial hair is normal, but so is the desire to get rid of it. Magazines never question the society which requires females to be hairless or suggest that teenage girls should have anything more important to worry about. They accept the perpetual, relentless pursuit of physical perfection as natural, but not because they want to destroy women’s self-esteem. Teen magazines tend to reinforce dominant, patriarchal values because advice is really advertising in disguise.

Magazines are forced to devote a lot of space to beauty simply to have room for all the products they must endorse, and they must necessarily promote commodities as the solutions to all kinds of problems. McCracken claims that the commodity base for pleasure offered by teen and women’s magazines must be so pervasive that it appears an essential part of womanhood. Editorial features in teen magazines take on and naturalize the language of advertising - in what other medium would we accept phrases like: “According to every makeup artist we’ve ever met, it’s the Holy Grail of eyelash curlers?” This comes as a response to a purported reader’s question about fear of eyelash curlers. The editor gives her tips on how to get over her fear, rather than suggesting that fear of eyelash curlers may not be an incapacitating phobia or that the reader may, in fact, be able to live without them.

Although the magazines’ focus on commodities springs from economic necessity, advertising is so pervasive that it becomes the ideology of teen magazines. For example, columns such as “Say Anything” (which publishes readers’ stories of their most embarrassing moments) serve an ideological function: reading about their peers’ embarrassment, teen girls learn what not to do. One girl writes about the humiliation she suffered when she farted in front of her boyfriend. In large pink print above this story, YM writes, “May we suggest Beano?” This joke reinforces the message that girls should use products to cover up evidence of their bodily functions.

Advertising plays on insecurity; thus, teen magazines take advantage of the “imaginary audience” phenomenon – teen girls’ belief that they are always being watched. In an example of complementary copy, the March 2003 issue of Seventeen proclaims, “When snapping pre-prom
pics, your friends should look at the camera and say ‘Cheese!’ – not at your hands and yell ‘Yikes!’ So if you have dry, hangnailled paws with chipped polish, here are the quickest and cheapest ways to make your hands prom-pretty.”39 Seventeen implies that fingernails could actually cause social ostracism in order to plug products.

Magazines also reinforce adolescents’ poorly developed sense of self in order to be able to tell them what they need. Teenage girls desperately seek identity and conformity at the same time – they want to look “the same but different” as their peers.40 In teen magazines, “individuality is reduced to wearing a dress that no one else at the prom will be wearing;”41 this requires an excruciating attention to the details of appearance. Teen magazines play into this desire through articles such as Seventeen’s prom special, which advises: “How to make a prom dress personal? Add your own touches – whether it’s sneakers, ‘heirloom’ jewelry or the jean jacket you wear with everything.”42 YM’s monthly feature “the details” reduces human personality to catch phrases, and informs the reader that she may express her personality through her clothing. The August 2002 column, which focuses on “your denim identity,”43 proudly proclaims: “Sometimes it’s so easy to tell who you are by what you wear.” All the reader needs to do is choose her personality type – “Laid-Back,” “Rocker,” “Sporty,” “Princess” or “Preppy” – and YM will tell her what sort of jeans, skirt, jacket, belt and underwear she should choose.

In addition to playing on insecurity, though, editors must make consumption pleasurable in order to get girls to read. Advertising begins with the creation of a need - beauty writers often must exercise real creativity with products such as eyebrow and eyelash conditioners: “You’ve probably never thought about conditioning anything other than the hair on your head,” writes Beth Shapouri. “But after seeing what these softening and strengthening products do for my eyebrows, nails, and eyelashes, I’m beginning to wonder how I ever got along without them.”44 But consumption then becomes pleasure - teen magazines depict hanging out at the mall after school every day as a reasonable form of entertainment.45 Girls must enjoy this focus on commodity consumption or the magazines wouldn’t sell. The reader experiences one important level of pleasure in the fictional resolution of her created problem through commodity consumption. But in order to attain full pleasure, she must reenact the behavior of her constructed self and actually buy something.46

Teen magazines are forced financially to play on adolescent insecurity in order to sell products, attract advertisers and remain economically viable. They define identity by which
products a reader chooses to purchase, as in “What’s Your Perfume Personality?” They encourage girls to pay excessive attention to physical appearance. This undoubtedly has negative effects on teenage girls, but editors’ motivations are economic, not ideological.

“He expects sex.” “If only I were in love.” Sexual Discourse in Teen Magazines

Sex – in general, and in teen magazines – incites controversy, among both experts and teenage girls. In my focus groups, Hannah (12, Caucasian, PS) suggests that teen magazines’ goal is to make “like our generation like more sexual when they’re younger.” Kim (15 ½, Caucasian, PS) acknowledges that “a lot of the quizzes are like, are you a bad girl, have you had sex or whatever...” She unequivocally equates sexual activity with being a “bad girl.”

The MHS girls disagree with the assessment of sex as automatically bad. Looking at an article on birth control pills in Seventeen, Imani (16, Black) says, “Like, see something like this, I would read, because it relates to everybody.” When I asked why, the girls spoke over each other in their hurry to elaborate. Imani: “I mean, cause it’s realistic, it’s happening around us.” Tammie (16, black and puerto rican): “Sex happens, so does pregnancy, so birth control needs to happen...But if it was like, Oh my gosh, I have to cure my acne, get on the pill, I wouldn’t read it.” This difference of opinion proves that all readers are not the same, which critics who read off the text necessarily assume.

Critics also disagree on the effect of teen magazines’ sexual discourse: Amy Bowles-Reyer claims that it is liberating for girls to read about their own sexuality, because the language magazines use “offers an important vehicle for the articulation of female adolescent sexuality: sexual slang.” She maintains that providing girls with a terminology to describe their sexual feelings allows them to discuss among themselves an issue which was formerly taboo. Angela McRobbie argues that as creators of a sexual discourse, magazines carry a tremendous power - in providing the vocabulary, they decide what is normal and abnormal, acceptable and unacceptable. The discourse constructs and polices adolescent female sexuality by identifying which things may be talked about. For example, teen magazines use euphemisms such as “down there” or “you-know-where” for the vagina, implying that girls should be afraid or embarrassed to name their own genitals. The discourse is also exclusively heterosexual; teen magazines profess acceptance of gay teens, as in YM’s article on Harvey Milk High School, “A
School of Their Own." But gays and lesbians are “they;” the reader is always assumed to be straight.

Magazines purposely send mixed messages about sexuality so girls can choose how to read them. They leave room for girls with very different sexual behavior to identify with the constructed ideal; if they came down too strongly on either side of the argument, they would alienate some potential buyers. For example, the cover blurb for the article on birth control that Imani and Tammie mentioned reads: “THE PILL 101: Strong medicine for acne, cramps, cancer and you know what else.” Apparently, Seventeen’s editors consider it taboo to mention sex in conjunction with birth control, although the same cover includes the phrase “sexy bands.” Teen magazines encourage girls to wait to have sex, but the word “sexy” constitutes the highest possible praise.

The Pill article seems to frown on sex by extolling uses other than pregnancy prevention: “Lots of girls take birth control pills to solve major menstrual problems – from superheavy flow to almost none at all, or extreme pain, or even abnormal hair growth.” Its first paragraph – in big print on a page with nothing else but the article’s title and a larger-than-life picture of a dialpack – explicitly seeks to convey that the authors do not believe all Seventeen readers are sexually active. Tammie’s comment that she would not want to read an article on curing acne calls this strategy into question, especially because the rest of the article addresses girls as if they are having sex: “One precaution: Any drug or illness that causes vomiting or diarrhea can make birth control pills less effective. It makes sense that if the Pill leaves your system before the hormones are absorbed, it can’t do its job. And adding a backup condom is a must, to protect against STIs as well as pregnancy.” But readers who take the Pill for acne don’t need a “backup condom!”

Another example occurs in the brief Q & A section at the end of the article. The first question reads:

I started taking birth control pills about a year ago. At first I remembered to take them every day, but now I forget all the time. There’s blood on my underwear even when it’s not the week of my period. Could misusing the Pill mess up my chances of having children when I’m older?

Although this reader mentions nothing about her reasons for taking the Pill, after briefly reassuring her actual fear, the authors reprimand her: “The real trouble with your forgetfulness is
how much it increases your risk of getting pregnant,” and go on to advise her on alternate forms
of birth control.

*Seventeen* presents statistics such as “34 percent of ninth graders have had sex; 60 percent
of twelfth graders have,” in big blue print across the bottom of the third page, or “If you’re like
more than a million other teen girls, you may already be on the Pill,” (the first sentence of the
article), which clearly promote an “everybody’s doing it” attitude. Simultaneously, across the
bottom of the second page stretch the words, “More than 5 in 10 boys – and 7 in 10 girls – who
have had intercourse wish they had waited longer.” The formality of the word “intercourse” in
this sentence may alienate readers used to being addressed with neologisms like “superheavy.”
By removing this statistic from teen magazine discourse, the authors distance themselves from it.

The degree of intimacy in the discourse indicates how acceptable *Seventeen* considers a
particular action. The sidebar about the “morning after pill” is not addressed in the second
person. Instead of “If you’re like more than a million other teenage girls...,” the authors say “if
taken within 72 hours of unprotected intercourse...” and “about half of Preven users...”
Emergency contraception users are not assumed to be part of the *Seventeen* audience.

The dichotomy set up by December’s quiz, “Are You a Good Girl or a Bad Girl?,” might
help to clarify some of the conflict apparent in the Pill article. After taking the quiz, the reader
adds up her score to find out whether she is “The Nun” (too many good girl answers), “The
Good Citizen,” or “The Convict” (too many bad girl answers). For each question, it’s easy to
figure out, even without looking at the scoring box, which is the “correct” answer, the moderate
one, in between the two extremes of “good” and “bad.” For example, one scenario is: “On
Friday night a new friend takes you to a party where kids are making out in every corner.” The
correct thing to do is “talk to a couple of cute guys but keep your lips to yourself.” Only a bad
girl would engage in a “smoochfest.” “The Nun” would “head home since you don’t feel
comfortable there, and avoid your pal in school the next day.” The reader should not
compromise popularity by leaving a situation in which she feels uncomfortable; she should seize
the opportunity to “talk to a couple of cute guys.” Also, the quiz seems to have forgotten
between the question and option “c” that this hypothetical party is on a Friday, when there is no
school the next day.

At the end of the quiz, the girl reads the advice intended for “The Nun,” “The Good
Citizen” or “The Convict.” “The Nun’s” column encourages: “Nobody wants to be labeled a
Goody Two-shoes – we know that’s not the real you!” The author, Lauren Weedon, advises “that if you break curfew once, it’s not the end of the world,” and quotes an expert in support.\textsuperscript{58} She threatens “The Convict:” “Eventually you’ll get burned. Trust us.” However, the next sentence offers a much less vague consequence of “bad” behavior: “Other kids might get caught up in your carefree attitude, but they might not trust you when they need a serious friend.” In other words, the social consequences of being a “bad girl” are more dire – or at least more immediate – than any possible problems that go unmentioned, such as teen pregnancy, substance abuse, or dropping out of high school. Perhaps this is because most of the “bad girl” answers in the quiz involve such behaviors as wearing a skirt and then returning it to the store, pretending you didn’t get a voice mail message asking you to baby-sit, or going on a date just to get a free meal.

The quiz form limits readers because it pretends to allow agency – they can choose any of three answers – but really the right choice is very clear. Also, the correct answers themselves constitute assumptions about girls’ priorities, for example, popularity at all costs. Interestingly, Kim’s assessment of what would be on a good girl-bad girl quiz, “have you had sex?,” was absent – instead, bad girls “grab the nearest guy and start [a] smoochfest.” A quiz author must choose three typical, appropriate behaviors (admittedly, two which are “wrong”) for its ideal constructed reader – sex doesn’t fit into this schema.

Another quiz topic which the Prep School girls brought up is found in the August 2002 issue of \textit{Seventeen} – “Are You Ready for Sex?”\textsuperscript{59} This quiz includes such questions as: “After researching your state’s laws about getting birth control with or without parental consent, you saw your gynecologist. Now you’re all stocked up on condoms and the Pill.” “You know exactly what you’d do if you got pregnant; when you told your boyfriend what your decision would be, he was cool with it, too.” The reader has to check off 15 out of 17 statements in order to be deemed ready for sex! This quiz definitely sends the message that “you” are \textit{not} ready to have sex, complicating Alexandra’s (12, Caucasian, PS) opinion that “quizzes...like ‘have you had sex before and are you ready?’ or something like that [are] a bad example to us, because you know we shouldn’t even be doing that kind of stuff.” This quiz seems to be intended for a different audience from the Pill article. Because every girl can identify her sexual behavior with that of the constructed ideal, all girls read and criticize teen magazines, whether for being too
sexual or too prudish. Thus magazines are successful, because they sell, but readers maintain their agency through active criticism.

Linda Christian-Smith asserts that teen literature renders female sexuality acceptable by linking it exclusively to romance. A girl’s sexual feelings are "awakened by her boyfriend." Therefore from the very first moment, males define and control female sexuality. In January 2003, YM publishes an article called "The Cryptic Workings of the Boy Brain." The first subheading reads: "Your Nightmare: Him Confiding in Another Girl. His Nightmare: You Kissing Someone Else." The column cites "evolutionary psychologists" to assure girls that this difference is biological, and then gives the reader advice on how to control her emotions when her boyfriend spends time with female friends. This section of the article concludes: "Keeping your boyfriend calm is simpler: Don’t kiss someone who’s not him.” This plays to the assumption that men want sex while women, at least "good girls,” want emotional companionship. It also tells the teenage girl that she bears all the responsibility for adapting to her boyfriend’s needs and maintaining the relationship.

The July 2002 issue of YM advertises on its cover the “Ultimate Love Guide,” which includes “Big Poll: Inside the Boy Brain,” and “Quiz: Are You Boy Obsessed?” Despite the magazines’ relentless emphasis on boys, girls can be too boy crazy – this quiz features questions like: “How many times a day do you find yourself squealing over a picture of some guy in a magazine?” The correct answer: “Maybe one or two, but only if the picture is of Orlando Bloom.” At the top of the page are the words “At least start this before flipping to ‘Aww Yeah!’ [celebrity pinups] on page 77.” In other words, YM’s constructed ideal reader is boy-crazy. Although this quiz ostensibly focuses on the girl who is boy obsessed, a real reader would more likely err in the opposite direction. The quiz orders the girl who demonstrates insufficient interest in boys: “Check Your Pulse!...You like to insist that you don’t care about guys. That makes us a bit suspicious.” This may be the reader who really needs correction according to YM – how can they sell magazines to girls who “don’t care about guys?”

Teen magazines include plenty of pinups of male celebrities for girls to "squeal over." Angela McRobbie points to magazines as one of the few cultural spaces in which girls can stare unembarrassed at boys. This stands the usual convention of voyeurism, verbal male subject and mute female object, on its head. However, this bizarre form of female agency is limited in many ways – first, because it is based on and derived from a fairly offensive and chauvinistic
practice. Second, it is undermined by all the rest of the pages of the magazine, which present women’s bodies to be ogled. Finally, this form of magazine-sanctioned voyeurism comes with tightly bound conventions.

*Seventeen*’s monthly feature, “Would You Date This Guy?” prints a full-page picture of a “real” guy, with a sidebar containing the kind of information usually published about *Playboy* Playmates – his astrological sign, what kind of underwear he prefers, what he likes in a woman and “his perfect date.” On the next page, “The Judges” (the *Seventeen* interns) “rate” the guy, and finally tell whether or not they would date him. They don’t seem expected to critique him as a sex object. Their responses are constrained within very strict limitations: they respond to categories such as “First Look, Style Factor, Vibe.” These categories may be intended to teach teen girls how to evaluate possible dates - the very existence of “The Judges” is evidence that *Seventeen* thinks its readers need help deciding whether a guy is worth dating. Finally, an important part of “Would You Date This Guy?” is what he likes in a woman. Thus, apparently, if readers decide they would date this guy, they should model themselves after his preferences.

The reason for including features about sex in teen magazines is obvious: sex sells. McCracken points out that *Seventeen*, *YM*, and the others like them need to present a “wholesome” image in order to sell, because they have to appeal to parents too. Their postulate that teen girls are not emotionally ready to have sex reflects a predominantly accepted cultural value. However, they do emphasize “sexiness,” mostly in order to sell the products that a young girl uses to make herself sexually attractive.

A recent advertising campaign for abstinence, funded by the Candie’s Foundation, sums up the contradiction in its slogan: “Be Sexy. It doesn’t mean you have to have sex.” The conflict between sexiness and sex results from the opposing pressures of society and advertisers – but it does not account for all the waffling even in a single article, such as “The Pill 101.” Teen magazines are inconsistent in an effort to appeal to the widest possible range of readers, but girls also find this inconsistency pleasurable. Society as a whole is ambivalent about female sexuality; *Seventeen* and *YM* play directly on the cultural contradiction, and teenage readers find this extremely appealing. In a culture with no acceptable female role, teen magazines create an impossible ideal girl who shuttles constantly back and forth between virgin and whore.
“It’s like knowing your whole life that you’ll be rich one day:” Why Girls Read Teen Magazines

With my focus groups, I explored a variety of interrelated reasons why adolescent girls read teen magazines, and I also examined various negotiation strategies. (See Appendix A for more information.) Every girl negotiates with teen magazines’ meanings and messages: no one completely accepts them and no one absolutely rejects them. The girls in my focus groups gave a range of reasons for reading magazines – such as insecurity, functional purposes like relaxation, and pleasure – which cannot really be separated. Girls derive pleasure from relieving insecurity through information from teen magazines, and of course they choose teen magazines to relax with because they find them most pleasurable.

In addition, girls seem to realize (as I do!) that some of the pleasure of teen magazines is indefinable. They hold some kind of inexplicable draw, even for someone who has read mountains of research on their negative effects. Near the end of our discussion of the ways in which magazines tell the reader how to think and act, Noette (16, white) from Northeastern High School said: “Now that I think about it, that is bizarre...But sometimes when I come across a good quiz I can’t help it!” Kayla (18, white, Caucasian, NHS) mocks her excessive love of magazine quizzes, saying: “Even if it’s like ‘are you a Sprite lover?’ I’m like ‘oh my God I have to find out. Do I like Sprite? I don’t know...’”

Adrienne (15, white), from Catholic Girls’ Academy, struggles to articulate why she finds teen magazines pleasurable: “It’s sort of like fun to read because...it’s like knowing your whole life that you’ll be rich one day and like trying to reach that goal or like, I don’t know, but happy?” Adrienne nailed it - the new editor-in-chief of Seventeen, Sabrina Weill, described the magazine as “aspirational.”

Girls also mentioned reading for functional purposes - the CGA girls agree that they read magazines because they are “relaxing,” or they read them when they’re “stalling on my homework” (Adrienne, 15, white, CGA). Kim (Caucasian), a Prep School student who described her age as 15 ½, complains: “All I do is schoolwork, like, and I have no time to do anything else, and like reading those magazines, like – they’re like all girly, and like reading about hair and makeup, I feel like such a girl, it’s like nice.” Kim’s comment indicates the connection between function and pleasure. She responds to teen magazines’ construction of audience. The model reader is interested in hair and makeup, and Kim enjoys feeling like the ideal adolescent girl while she reads about these topics. Also, teenage girls are bored! “It’s something to do,”
says Jasmine (15, white, CGA). “Like, I read them if I’m bored and I like have nothing to do.” Radway suggests that women read romance novels for escape, and teen girls seem to do the same with magazines. Jasmine says she reads magazines “if I’m just stressed out and I’m like, oh I need to not think about anything.” Becky (12, Caucasian, PS) adds: “I don’t like the news ’cause I think it’s depressing and I don’t really agree with Bush so I don’t really like to read what he’s doing.” Jessica (17, white) of Northeastern High School sums it up best when she says: “Sometimes I just want to read like crap. It’s like funnier. Like it’s more entertaining.”

The younger Prep School girls – the 12 and 13-year-olds - were the only ones in my study who spoke about insecurity as a reason for reading teen magazines. Becky describes the peer pressure to read teen magazines: “In the middle school, there’s lots of people who like who talk about the magazines...There’s pictures from magazines posted up, and then people like bring in magazines to read at break and stuff. So it seems like, in my opinion, like middle school is really like - has sort of a focus on teen magazines.” These girls read magazines for information. “Girls are mean to each other and they think you’re uncool if you don’t know about these things,” says 12-year-old Alexandra (Caucasian, PS).

Many of the girls I talked to were getting too old to read Seventeen and YM. Most of the older girls described Cosmopolitan as their favorite magazine; it is “less bubblegummy” than Seventeen and YM. The girls considered Cosmopolitan, probably because of its unwavering emphasis on sex, to be more educational than teen magazines. Andi (14, Jamaican/Black, GH) comments: “I know Cosmopolitan and all, I was like ten reading those and learnin’ a lot of stuff.” Imani (16, Black), from Midwestern High School, explains: “They be breaking it down in Cosmo. They be getting nitty-gritty like.” The information magazines provide serves to alleviate insecurity – teen magazines offer explicit instructions on how to become the perfect adolescent girl.

But this information is tied up inextricably with pleasure. Most girls don’t emphasize the informational function of Cosmopolitan, but insist that it is more interesting and entertaining than teen magazines. Teen girls see themselves doing something slightly rebellious, and therefore cool, by reading a magazine intended for adult women. One NHS girl says, “It’s funny to read the like 1-800-GET-HOT-SEX [ads] in Cosmos. It’s just so funny.” The other girls break into laughter. They find this otherwise uninteresting ad funny because they enjoy the transgressive idea of a woman paying money for sex. Noette (16, white, NHS) says of
Cosmopolitan: “It’s more like adult...and you’re at this age where you’re like stuck between the little stuff you still want to read and the big stuff you want to read.” 12 and 13-year-olds see Seventeen in the same way as older girls view Cosmo — “aspirational,” and providing instruction or education for the future. This explains younger girls’ greater investment in teen magazines — as Andi says, “When I was like 12,...I used to buy ’em like 24-7.”

Girls who use teen magazines primarily for their informational function take them quite literally. Currie claims that teenagers invest their magazines with “truth status,” and that the most common grounds for rejecting a particular aspect of a magazine is implausibility. The second part of her observation appears true — Krystal (15, black, MHS) doesn’t like teen magazines because, she says scornfully, “This stuff ain’t real.” When asked how teen magazines could improve, Tammie (16, black and puerto rican, MHS) suggests: “Just put some more real stuff, real stuff that happens. I mean I know that like when people be writin’ in here, it’s real, but it’s just not real like.” Tammie attempts to articulate a distinction between what the magazines present as true by putting it into readers’ words, and what she finds believable based on her own experience.

Girls negotiate with teen magazine messages mostly through comparison with lived experience, and therefore the girls who most closely resemble the constructed ideal assign the most truth status to magazines. The CGA girls like the most “real” aspects best: Jasmine (15, white, CGA) says her favorite part is “the real-life stories ‘cause it’s about people who like aren’t famous....Like sometimes they’ll have a story about like a 19-year-old girl raising like a whole family.” Adrienne agrees: “It kinda shows you what the world’s like, like what people are dealing with other than yourself.” Winship calls these “triumph over tragedy” stories, and points out that they are voyeuristic (“Thank God it’s not me”), and that the protagonists are usually working-class, while the presumed readers are middle and upper-class. In addition, the triumphs are emotional, not material, so the class issue can be safely ignored. The Catholic school girls’ relatively insulated and privileged environment probably predisposes them to be interested in stories about “what the world’s like.” The MHS girls may recognize a 19-year-old raising a family as reality, but not necessarily entertainment.

In addition, when I asked my focus groups if they ever used hair and beauty tips from magazines, most replied that they sometimes tried them out, or had done so in the past (most commonly, older sisters tried on younger sisters). But Jasmine replied: “Actually I like...rip out
magazines that I just keep behind like my makeup, so I’m like oh I want to try this today or whatever.” The fact that Jasmine regularly puts the magazines’ advice into practice indicates that she finds the informational function of teen magazines very important – she also gets more pleasure out of teen magazines than most of the other girls in my study. The NHS girls frequently used such phrases as “You’re going to see me come in tomorrow...,” “Now you’re gonna go home and do that,” “Tomorrow my hair will be like...” in reference to pictures in magazines. This type of physical modeling reveals that these girls identify with the constructed ideal in a way that is impossible for African-American girls.

Thus African-American and white girls need to use very different strategies of negotiation. For instance, there seemed to be a correlation between how girls felt about horoscopes – to which almost no one would assign truth status - and how seriously they took the magazines. The CGA girls did not like horoscopes: Adrienne complains, “They’re so fake, when you read it, nothing came true. It’s just a waste of space...I don’t even read it.” Her highest criticism, “I don’t even read it,” indicates her investment in teen magazines – Jasmine says she reads them “from the cover to the end.” Adrienne contrasts the horoscope section with the rest of the magazine, which she does accept as truth.

The MHS girls, on the other hand, name horoscopes as one of their favorite sections. Tammie (16, black and puerto rican, MHS) says she likes to read her horoscope “even though I know it’s not true,” because “it’s just funny to see...Sometimes you can just see and try to make stuff - like what happened to you in the past month, try to make it into what the horoscope says.” More serious readers, like the CGA and NHS girls, do this with every page of a teen magazine – analyze themselves against the contents and vice versa, and try to make it fit. The MHS girls do not read magazines this way at least partly because they are African-American, and do not see themselves and their culture reflected in the pages of YM or Seventeen. Thus they must negotiate much more to make the constructed ideal “fit” their own lives and vice versa. So they take teen magazines less seriously than some of the white girls, and negotiate with the messages more as fiction than as factual information.

On the other hand, the MHS girls’ reaction to a letter in a Sex Q & A column indicates that they take at least some parts of the magazines seriously. A girl says that she has had sex with a boy four times, and he still hasn’t asked her to be his girlfriend. Tammie calls this girl a slut, and Imani (16, Black, MHS) declares: “That’s your business. Don’t put that up there in a
magazine like that. I mean, and they even have your name, they’re like Christy from California. Okay Christy, thanks for telling us that.” Clearly, the girls object to something which they consider private being brought into the public sphere of a teen magazine, and they believe “Christy” is a real person. These girls are offended to see this problem, to which they assign truth status, brought into a medium which they consider fiction – just as the CGA girls are annoyed at having horoscopes, which they recognize as fiction, included in teen magazines, which they read as fact.

All girls negotiate with the constructed ideal presented by teen magazines; the more girls like the magazines, the more specific their criticism. The core of teen magazines’ appeal is their individualized voice – so the girls who most resemble the ideal subject feel most disappointed when the magazines don’t speak to them personally. Jasmine complains, “They do a lot of um...makeup and stuff that’s a lot for like darker people, like tan people, and I’m really pale so that doesn’t always work.” Adrienne adds, “They never did anything for like people that have curly hair, [and if they do], it’s wicked curly; it’s like Afro curly.” And it’s not only hair and skin type – Adrienne continues, “Yeah, I don’t like when they talk about – in some articles, like considering that we go to an all-girls school and I bet a bunch of other people do too, they have like articles about like how to like get your crush like at school, and it’s like, well, we don’t have crushes at school.” She laughs at the impossibility of having crushes at an all-female school. Their comments illustrate their fairly insulated and homogenous world, but they also reveal how closely these girls read their magazines, and how much they expect of them. A reader can never be close enough to the constructed ideal – even white, middle-class girls find room for negotiation.

Sarah (17, white, GH), the one girl who claimed that she doesn’t read teen magazines at all, had trouble coming up with a response when I asked her why not. “Because I don’t read stuff like this,” she says. “I don’t know; I just never have...It’s just not me. I don’t read this, stuff.” Her use of the phrase “It’s just not me” is revealing – she can’t give any specific reasons why she dislikes the magazines, which the other girls, who do read, give in abundance. She simply responds to the constructed ideal, the person who the reader agrees temporarily to be, and says “It’s not me.” Finders tells a story about a girl who said teen magazines are “not for her” because of her socioeconomic status. The girls in the Group Home have no disposable income, only the money the state gives them for necessities, and I wonder if this has to do with Sarah’s
rejection of teen magazines. Sarah is the only white girl living in the Group Home. The other girls in the home, since they are people of color, reject many of the magazines’ messages as “not them” immediately, and so may overlook the fact that the magazines are not geared to someone of their socioeconomic status.

The other Group Home girls are intensely aware of teen magazines’ focus on commodity consumption, and they seem to embrace it. Because of their socioeconomic status, these girls obsess over designer brands, and list names of popular designers, presumably to prove that they know them. Andi (14, Jamaican/Black) explains: “I know that like if I had money? I don’t want to be lookin’ like, you know what I’m sayin’, I don’t know what’s going on, so you know I would go get some [brands].” Rameeka (17, African-American, GH) explains why fashion pages in magazines are important: “Certain designers you really don’t care about ‘cause they really don’t put their stuff in [magazines] so if somebody wears it you be like, oh what’s that, and they tell you and you be like, oh I never heard of that...Like a lot of people think that people who wear designer clothes are designer people.” Andi translates, “Or designer clothes, they’re rich.”

During my focus group, Rameeka chose to look at a bridal magazine which was in her backpack rather than any of the magazines I brought with me. She looked only at the ads, and every few pages she would ask the table in general: “How much do you think that costs?” These girls rarely have the pleasure of actual consumption, and rely exclusively on vicarious consumption through the pages of magazines (as well as other media, I’m sure). They take pleasure in fantasizing about the impossible, but Rameeka’s comment about “designer people” also reveals the pressure these girls feel to hide the fact that they don’t have money for designer clothes.

The other girls find vicarious consumption through magazine reading pleasurable as well. The NHS girls approve of the focus on makeup. One commented wistfully, “I wish I had a styling artist like at my house every morning.” The MHS, CGA and Prep School girls all complained that the products pictured in magazines are too expensive – although girls at CGA and Prep School mentioned buying things they had seen advertised. The Prep School girls exhibit a little more skepticism. Hannah (12, Caucasian) admits: “I always have to like wash my face and then I always have to put like moisturizer on it and stuff. My mom’s like, ‘I didn’t like start doing that till I was 40, why are you starting doing this now?’” The Prep School girls –
showing their affluence—tend to focus more on “health” than beauty. In response to an ad for a cream to reduce undereye circles, Alexandra (12, Caucasian, PS) says: “My dermatologist told me, actually my allergist told me...that um most girls that have circles under their eyes buy these products and they don’t work...and then when they go to the allergist...they figure out that they’re actually allergic to grass pollen and that that’s what’s making their dark circles, so just a medication can help it if you’re allergic.” Hannah says, “I can’t eat ice cream every day...cause that would be very unhealthy.” And looking at instructions for yoga exercises in a magazine, Kim comments, “If I had time like I might do this cause it might give me more energy or something.”

The Prep School girls, particularly the younger ones, criticize the sexual focus of teen magazines, claiming that it is “inappropriate” for people their age. I found it very strange that these girls actually believe their own reading material should be censored! But Alexandra is adamant on the subject: “In Seventeen, the quizzes are like, have you had sex before and are you ready or something like that...[and] well, everyone says that Seventeen is geared towards 13-year-olds to make it seem cool, but when the quizzes are more mature than the 12-year-olds, I think it gives a bad example to us because you know we shouldn’t even be doing that kind of stuff.” Alexandra also complains about “really, really slutty” ads, and Becky (12, Caucasian, PS) objects to the words “hell” and “ass” in the magazines. The older girls argue: Sharon (16, Caucasian, PS), speaking in the third person, says, “It’s good for girls 16 and up to know, to be educated because if they’re gonna do it anyway, they should at least like be educated.” Although she believes in sex ed, and she is old enough for it in her own estimation, the people who have sex are not herself, or even the ubiquitous “you,” but “they.”

These girls reported a higher level of parental control of their magazine reading than any other group. (They also mentioned not being allowed to wear certain clothes, makeup, or to highlight their hair when they were “younger.”) Kim says: “I know when I was younger, when I was in like eighth grade, I wasn’t allowed to read that magazine. My mom was like, no you can’t read this, this is Seventeen, you’re like not 17, you’re 13, you can’t read this magazine. And I was like that’s not fair...[but] now I get like why she wouldn’t let me read it.”

These girls, the wealthiest and best-educated, judge teen magazines inappropriate for themselves. I discuss the articles the girls specifically objected to in my section on sexual discourse; they do not overtly encourage teen girls to have sex, nor feature scantily clad women.
or racy fiction. The girls seem afraid of the sexual discourse. The Prep School girls, unlike most of their peers, are encouraged to read teen magazines critically. Emily (16, Chinese/American, PS) explains: “We’re all like you know girl power and stuff, and it’s been like drilled into us like not to listen to the ads.” Alexandra comments: “At [school] they told us, that um, after 10 minutes of reading a magazine, girls or women feel bad about like, yeah statistically, girls or women feel worse about themselves than when they didn’t – than if they didn’t, but I don’t really believe that.” This sort of indoctrination may be what makes them so fearful of the sexual discourse. The negative effects of teen magazines have been “drilled into them” so much that although they still find pleasure in reading, they fear while doing so that magazines are “a bad influence.”

Although the Prep School girls’ background allows them to negotiate with teen magazines in what many would consider the most successful way, their indoctrination fails in its own terms. Currie claims that in negotiated reading, although girls criticize the magazines, they do not reject the cultural mandates that come with them – for example, the belief that women should be beautiful and sexual. Despite the Prep School girls’ objection to sexual content, they seem to have internalized and normalized the “male gaze” prevalent in teen and women’s magazines. They complain about the pictures of women in skimpy outfits, and Becky suggests that editors include them to “try to get the boys to buy [teen magazines] so they can stare at the pictures.” Another girl adds: “Like they target the articles to girls but then the pictures to boys.” They all accept that it is normal and inevitable for teenage boys to “stare” at teenage girls, and for girls to allow themselves to be objectified. Men, on the other hand, are not meant to be objects of visual consumption – Sharon (16, Caucasian, PS) comments, “I don’t think they airbrush guys.” Like the CGA girls, the Prep School girls told me that there’s no point in wearing makeup to school because it’s all female. Hannah (12, Caucasian, PS) adds: “If our school was coed, I probably would.”

However, Prep School’s strategy is at least somewhat successful, because the girls in my other focus groups accept teen magazines’ sexual discourse with much less negotiation. For example, the issue of YM which I used with the groups has a story about a 19-year-old girl becoming a nun with the cover line “I’ll Never Kiss a Boy Again” – the article implies that this woman chose celibacy because she had a bad first kiss. The NHS girls accepted the focus of this story (sex, not religion), commenting: “I think her parents told her that like boys are the devil.”
The CGA girls also consider the overwhelming focus on heterosexual romance natural. Jasmine says, giggling, “I also like the pictures of like the guys of course!”

The critical work on teen magazines focuses overwhelmingly on their negative influence on girls’ self-esteem, particularly body image. All the girls I talked to recognized these negative effects as part of the negotiation process, and in every focus group we discussed the question of whether magazines “make people feel bad.” Interestingly, the NHS and CGA girls seemed to focus more on popularity than body image. Kayla (18, white, Caucasian, NHS) says: “I read this thing that was like, how to like be popular and get the boy of your dreams, and I was like, I’m sorry if you are reading this, like you’re just not going to be popular ‘cause like there’s no like guide that you read and you’re just like ooooh I’ll come to school tomorrow and be like this....cause I was reading it and it was like, you can get him, all you have to do is be confident...strut your stuff and lick your lips.” Veronica (17, Caucasian, NHS) breaks in: “That’s really sad...They should encourage things to like be okay with who you are instead of trying really hard to be cool.”

The girls have hit on several basic truths about teen magazines in their comments. First, they are right to be sad – the constant emphasis on popularity and particularly heterosexual romance does make girls feel inadequate. Second, the tips probably wouldn’t work if applied in real life. Girls read these articles more for reassurance that other teenagers experience the same problems than to get advice on how to solve them. Third, magazines urge girls to “be confident” while undermining their confidence through constant harping on what is wrong with them. And the way to be confident is to “strut your stuff and lick your lips.” The way to feel good about yourself is to be popular, and the way to be popular is to make yourself into a sex object.

Most of the girls acknowledged that looking at pictures of thin and beautiful models might make people feel bad, but the African-American girls were particularly adamant about it. “When you see people in magazines like this, it sometimes makes it seem like everybody in the world gotta be this size,” complains Krystal (15, black, MHS). “I mean you could have skinny models and then bigger models; you don’t just gotta have skinny on every page.” Rameeka (17, African-American, GH) seems to feel that teen magazines have a responsibility to show heavier models: “Some of ‘em like show like a lot of like skinny people? Which is really not good cause if you have, I mean like girls who like 10, 11, 9, all of that, they gonna expect oh when I grow up, I gotta be this size. I think that the magazines, the teen magazines should...you know what
I’m saying, show people who are not just all skinny, you know...Not everybody’s skinny in the world, I mean everybody knows that - what if you live in a small town, and everybody you’re near is, you know what I’m sayin’, doesn’t wear no size bigger than a 10?”

When I asked Rameeka if she thinks magazines make people feel bad, she replied: “Yeah...It makes the younger people be like, oh I need to be skinny...I mean, I went through it myself when I was like 11, 12, 13, I was anorexic...I thought being small was the thing. There was times where I didn’t eat for like six months at a time. I was sick though, but I thought I was being cute and cool ‘cause all my friends were skinny. I thought if wore a size 5 or 6, they’d, you know what I’m sayin’, I’m skinny. People would like me more if I’m smaller. That’s what I did. Course I ended up bein’ in the hospital for three weeks.” Rameeka partially blames teen magazines for her own eating disorder. Her experience illustrates that critics are right – teen magazines do have negative effects on teenage girls. It also reveals that although she is African-American, Rameeka invests teen magazines with truth status, and believes that her body should conform to that of the constructed ideal, complicating my own argument.

Krystal’s comment, too, seems to indicate her concern about the negative effects of teen magazines. But when I asked her how magazines affect her own body image, she and Tammie proclaimed in stereo: “Don’t make me feel bad!” Most girls described some strategy of negotiation which they feel grants them immunity from the negative messages of teen magazines. For example, Madison (13, Caucasian) from Prep School points to “the environment that we’re in,” one which attempts to teach girls not to accept the dictates of dominant consumer culture represented in teen magazines. The CGA girls, who ascribe the most truth value to teen magazines, think they are protected because of their ability to recognize the illusory aspects of models’ appearance. “Sometimes I like, like, get mad cause it’s like aw like there’s people that look perfect,” says Adrienne, “and um you just look at them and you kinda know that they’re like airbrushed so you’re like, oh they have like an unfair advantage anyways. Like they could like airbrush like off fat and like acne.”

Several girls claim that they aren’t affected by the pictures of skinny models because they have no reason to feel bad about their own bodies. Jasmine says: “I mean, me and Adrienne aren’t like obese or anything,” and giggles. Andi’s assessment of this issue is most poignant. She claims that magazines don’t make her feel bad “because, you know what I’m sayin’, I’m not conceited but I - I know I’m – I’m skinny. And I’m always talking about oh I want to lose some
more weight and everybody looks at me like what weight do you have to lose? Because I wear a size 2. I wish I was lower than that but...” Andi clearly has a problem with body image. It would be ridiculously reductive to claim that this is purely caused by teen magazines – as Tammie says, “That’s just society altogether.” Rameeka cites peer influence (“all my friends were skinny”) as part of the reason for her eating disorder – but magazines do contribute.

Lisa Duke claims that African-American girls are less negatively affected by looking at pictures of thin models than are white girls. While white girls may ignore or reject the fashion and beauty found in the text, they find it harder to escape body shape, “which in a sense represents a physiological reality rather than a trend.” African-American girls, however, regard the pictures as irrelevant. My study appears to prove Duke’s theory false; at least in this small sample, the body image of the African-American girls (especially Rameeka) seemed more affected than that of white girls.

I looked at girls’ reading practices as methods of negotiation with the constructed ideal. For example, many critics (such as Currie and McRobbie) argue that teen magazines, particularly advice columns, have an isolating effect - the girl with facial hair must learn to hide her problem, not question a society that insists women be hairless. Currie argues, however, that teenage girls often read magazines together in groups, and that this sharing mitigates the isolation. I asked the girls in my focus groups whether they read alone or together. “Depends who’s sittin’ by me,” replies Krystal. Later though, the girls admit that they prefer sharing, and Tammie laughs, “If it’s just me alone, I just be talkin’ to myself.” In other words, part of the pleasure in reading magazines lies in commenting on them. This is somewhat empowering – these girls act on their magazines rather than allowing the magazines to act on them. But the CGA girls read alone: “If you read ‘em with friends, you’d have to read aloud,” they say, giggling – reading aloud is clearly horrifying. Perhaps they, then, allow their magazines to act on them. These two groups of girls also characterize their reading habits differently. “You don’t really read, you just more like flip the pages,” says Krystal. But Jasmine says, “I read magazines from the cover to the end.”

The CGA girls act on their magazines in a different way; they, as well as the NHS girls, mentioned making collages out of old magazines. The NHS girls make birthday cards, or fill pages of journals, and say “That’s the best part.” Jasmine says, “All around the door [of my bedroom], that whole wall is covered in like cutouts from magazines and um like I don’t know,
just words and pictures and everything.” The MHS girls also say they tear out pictures of celebrities from magazines (usually hip-hop magazines, not teen magazines, according to Krystal). Tammie says, “My whole locker is filled with pictures from magazines” – but I think that celebrity pinups are very different from cutting out “words and pictures.” Jasmine explains, “Here I’d cut out like, [the words] fashion, guys um...sometimes I do look for magazines with a lot of ads just so it has a lot of different like bright colors.” She feels that this protects her from some of the negative messages, “especially since I like take them and collage my room, I look at, when I’m reading them I look more like artistically for things.”

Girls who make collages from teen magazines are, by Levi-Strauss’ definition, bricoleurs – they “assemble disparate objects to produce a tool which serves a particular purpose.” Jasmine realizes that her collages are a tool in her negotiation of meanings – she appropriates particular words and phrases to create her own form of expression. In accepting the sign systems of teen magazines to construct their own individual statements, Jasmine and the others embrace the magazines’ dominant meanings.

The girls I talked to are aware that teen magazines use a special system of signs – the discourse can be grounds for criticism when it differs too much from daily speech patterns. “Some of the words they say - like, instead of hair, they’ll say, how to like spice up your treads or something. Like, love your locks,” says Jessica (17, white, NHS). At one point the NHS girls began mimicking teen magazine discourse and giggling. Their ability to parrot these forms of discourse reflects their extensive familiarity with the texts. Actually critiquing the magazines’ language is a more sophisticated form of negotiation than simple comparison with life experiences, but this is as far as these girls take their criticism. They still fail to question the dominant meanings teen magazines embrace.

In many cases, teen magazines’ pleasure and their negative effects are inseparable. As Kayla says, “I’m pretty sure that if they based every magazine about like being okay with yourself and like it’s the beauty that’s within, everyone would be like this is such like bull...Nobody would get the magazine anymore.” Jasmine articulates the same principle with a different reason. If magazines stopped picturing beautiful models, people would stop buying because “no one wants to look at ugly people.” Steiner promotes the unconventional theory that that part of the pleasure of reading women’s magazines is sexual – that the close-up, airbrushed, erotically posed fragments of women’s bodies which populate these magazines provide even
heterosexual women with sexual pleasure. The pleasure may be more “aspirational,” what McCracken calls the “idealized mirror image” – she points out that models are usually pictured at eye level with the viewer, looking directly at her as if she were a reflection. Regardless, pictures of beautiful models contribute to teen magazines’ pleasure: Adrienne admits, giggling: “I like to look at people [models] and see what it’s like to be like gorgeous.”

Girls who read teen magazines primarily for their informational function read mostly for reasons of insecurity, and they ascribe the greatest truth status to the texts. It might seem that these girls would negotiate less successfully with magazines’ negative messages than girls who read magazines as fiction. However, more extensive negotiation does not always mean that the reader comes closer to rejecting the magazines’ meanings. For instance, African-American girls must engage in more extensive negotiation with the constructed ideal, and therefore tend to treat teen magazines less seriously. Imani complains, “If you’re just flipping through the magazine and you see no one like you then you’re thinking like well okay this magazine isn’t necessarily geared to me.” Tammie adds: “This is a different kind of girl; it’s not the kind of girl I think I am.”

Although the MHS girls reject the construction of audience which mainstream teen magazines set up, they do not reject the adolescent girls’ culture which includes magazine reading. Instead, they call for a magazine which relates to them. Imani insists that she doesn’t necessarily want a magazine for African-American teen girls, but to “mix different cultures together. Then I think they would be more interesting, because then you can like dip and dab into other people’s cultures like, oh what would it be like if a Black girl did this, like oh I want to know, or oh what if a – a Asian girl had to go through this, what would it be like, you know something like that’s not necessarily just geared to one set of people, you know.” Like the Prep School girls, the MHS girls do not reject the mandates handed down by teen magazines; instead, they sorely feel the lack of a magazine which speaks to them. They recognize teen magazines as an important source of peer interaction and the governance of peer norms, and feel excluded from the discourse of mainstream American teenagers. They regret the pleasure they miss through their inability to respond to teen magazines’ construction of audience. Imani says sadly: “Us as girls, we don’t have like a teen culturally mixed magazine, not a magazine that everybody can go pick up and like we all relate to this magazine...Not just one magazine that you can go anywhere and say, oh have you read this magazine?”
Zines

“remind me again why i started writing a zine? oh yes... so i had an outlet for all these things that i found i had to say. but no one wanted to listen to me.” – Meaghan, Zelda in MidKiss

“There will be photocopying. There will be cutting. There will be pasting. It will be fun.” – Esther, The Singing Rooster With Lots of Fresh Toppings

Around the 1930’s, science fiction magazines “realized they could get a few pages of free material by publishing letters from readers.” They included the writers’ addresses, and very quickly, science fiction fans began bypassing commercially produced magazines in order to write directly to one another. Small-circulation pamphlets known as fanzines were born. In the 1970’s, punk rock culture embraced the fanzine, and the number of publications proliferated. Today, the word “fan” has generally been dropped, but the authors of many of the zines I looked at still write about punk rock music, revealing that zine culture retains close ties with this movement.

At first glance, zines don’t seem to have much in common with glossy teen magazines. Usually the size of an ordinary 8½ by 11 inch sheet of paper folded in half, zines generally utilize no higher form of technology than a black and white photocopier. But magazines like YM and Seventeen are so pervasive in adolescent girls’ culture that their influence finds its way into zines. A small group of girls appropriate the language and structure of teen magazines in an attempt to negotiate with their messages. One of the original riot grrl zines, now famous within the movement, Bikini Kill, described its mission as “taking over the means of production to create our own meanings.”

I examine adolescent girls’ zines as a response to teen magazines in their own medium. For example, zines appropriate the visual images of teen magazines, and scramble, fragment and reassemble them to subvert their messages. In Zelda in MidKiss, Meaghan pastes a poem over a page of models’ faces. She cuts up the faces and glues them back together with the eyes, lips and other features not quite lined up, reflecting the fragmentation of women’s bodies in popular magazines. Many of the zines I looked at do this – paste their original work over magazine pictures, effectively using them as a backdrop. This leads to a brilliant metaphor: these girls struggle to create their own meanings within the framework of their culture, including teen magazines.

Zine producers call themselves “zinesters” or sometimes “zinestresses.” They do not necessarily consider themselves authors or writers – these words are already too culturally
loaded. They may believe they are more than just writers, since they actually do everything involved with producing a publication themselves. Zinesters tend to see themselves as creators of a new and unique phenomenon - so they coin a term to describe it, and themselves.

The most important break from the commercial publishing industry lies in the fact that zines are not for profit – some have a cover price of 50 cents or $1, but in general, the zinester barely expects to break even after mailing and photocopying costs. All zinesters accept trades – they will exchange a zine for another zine, a tape or CD, stamps, candy, or probably anything that a creative anti-entrepreneur could offer. Issue #8 of *Yesturday’s Mistake* prints on its cover, “Cost varies – money ain’t a thing.”

Zines are low-tech, usually cut and pasted physically, largely hand-drawn and handwritten, and often sloppy. Computers are so readily available today that a relatively slick-looking zine could be produced for the same cost – so this hand-made look is obviously a stylistic choice. The zinester often takes pride in how much work she has put into her zine, and wants her audience to know about it. Esther, author of *The Singing Rooster With Lots of Fresh Toppings*, notes on her inside front cover the time at which she began assembling her zine, and on the inside back cover, the time at which she finished. In *Zelda in MidKiss*, Meaghan brags: “I went through an entire gluestick and part of a new one.”

Zinesters attempt to close the gap between producer and consumer by rendering obvious the means of production – and they employ a means of production to which virtually everybody has access. Zinesters emphasize the idea of “DIY,” or do-it-yourself; they hope to inspire readers to create their own zines. Material in zines is rarely copyrighted, and “borrowing” is expected. In *Yesturday’s Mistake*, Ginger Vytis quotes a long passage from Richard Hell’s *My Burroughs*, after which she writes: “No, I didn’t get permission from Mr. Hell to print this. However, I’m sure he would not mind, since we are spiritually in love and connected, secretly of course, and I admire him...I’m positive that he would be honored to be featured in such a classic volume of literature.”

Zinesters often shun printing conventions such as page numbers and tables of contents, making their zines almost unreadable. On the inside front cover of *Wasted Style*, the creator writes a personal note to the original recipient: “Please follow the page #’s. Bad copy, sorry. XO Jamillah.” The pages of this zine are numbered randomly – the first is page 27, the second is page 3 and so on. Duncombe suggests that zinesters see sloppiness as authenticity, as “anti-
style...the opposite of a professionally designed, well-planned, easy-to-read page.” Zinesters seek to alienate their audience by making publishing conventions readily apparent – consumer culture sucks the consumer in, while zine culture pushes the reader away. Because pleasure is the be-all and end-all of consumer culture, zinesters hold easy pleasure under suspicion as evidence that one has given in or sold out. Whether zinesters are ever aware of such theoretical implications of their sloppiness is open to debate, but teenage girls certainly are not. The zine underground is an alternative culture, with an alternative set of rules, which adolescent zinesters seek to decipher and follow, often as vigorously as more mainstream teens embrace the codes and requirements of teen magazines.

Zinesters take pleasure in belonging to the underground, alternative zine community, just as teen magazine readers derive pleasure from the fictional community the magazine discourse creates. However, zinesters’ dialogue is real – almost all of the girls who sent me zines included notes asking for feedback, or even just correspondence. Of course, this tight community also prevents zinesters’ radical politics from infiltrating the world beyond like-minded zine producers.

Zines are almost always explicitly political, and expressly liberal – they are vocally antiracist, antiseXist and usually a slew of others. Their politics conform to the DIY ethic: Yesturday’s Mistake includes a page of five addresses to which to write for information on activism; Trials of a Thinking Being includes two pages of products to boycott because they test on animals, as well as one page of companies who use sweatshop labor.

Zines also tend to focus on subjects which are taboo in mainstream magazines. Cory, author of Few Are Born Beautiful, writes a poem celebrating menstrual blood which concludes with the image of “hundreds and hundreds of menstruating women” smearing their blood on the walls of the White House. She describes menstrual blood as usable (as well as conscious); her blood is “fixating on feeding a baby.” She believes that her blood could nourish other things besides a fetus: “i’ve always thought we should collect our menstrual blood in jars, feed it to trees and vegetable gardens.” More often than not, the “Say Anything” section of teen magazines includes at least one story whose punchline is something like, “To my horror, I had started my period and everyone knew about it before I did!” (YM gives this one four stars – the highest ranking). In this culture, Cory’s poem is as great a departure from the norm as it is far-fetched.
Many zinesters use parody as a tool to negotiate with teen magazine meanings. By appropriating teen magazines’ discourse and structure, zinesters provide themselves and their readers with the distance and the ammunition necessary to read critically.⁹⁴ Parody, according to Duncombe, demands the active engagement of the audience. When the reader must decipher the message, she cannot help but be aware of her role in creating it.⁹⁵ Parody also reinforces the tight boundaries of the community by requiring a shared system of signs — in the case of zines, pop culture.

*C.H.O.P.* devotes its first two pages to “MAIL BAG,” and prints one four-page letter written on an airplane barf bag.⁹⁶ The writer, Diana, mocks herself: “This is exactly the type of product that would sell well at Urban Outfitters for the ‘Generation Y’ crowd. That is...if anyone was bold enough to market barf bag stationary as a product.” Diana and the publishers of *C.H.O.P.* (Amy Cheung, Shirley Kwok and Chrissy Kurpeski) playfully subvert the convention of “letters to the editor,” and mock a society in which everything is a commodity.

In the previous issue of *C.H.O.P.*, the girls print a mock problem page: “Stylin!! The CHOP column where you ask Dr. Beau T. Mark about all your serious beauty and lifestyle dilemmas.”⁹⁷ Kearney writes that parodic problem pages “debunk the ideology of female imperfection and ridicule the patronizing morality” of teen magazines.⁹⁸ The girls include eight mock problems that *Seventeen* or *YM* would treat as “serious” — for example, “DEAR DR. BEAU, I AM SIX AND I DO NOT HAVE A BOYFRIEND YET. WHATEVER SHALL I DO? BRITNEY S., 6, NY.” This obviously pokes fun at teen magazines’ emphasis on heterosexual dating at an ever-decreasing age. However, all Dr. Beau’s responses are overtly and offensively sexual — in this case, “Hey baby (literally)... Let me teach you some addition: You + me = one...” The editors include a disclaimer on the facing page: “We would like to emphasize that this is all pure satire. CHOP does not condone pedophilia in any form. In fact we think its [sic] gross...So, don’t get offended, bitch!”⁹⁹ The *C.H.O.P.* girls clearly take pleasure in mouthing off at their audience — unlike teen magazines, zines don’t have to pander to the desires of advertisers and a mass audience. Most of *C.H.O.P.*’s audience probably knows Cheung, Kwok and Kurpeski, and recognizes their irony. But as Duncombe points out, this style of humor would not be acceptable outside a very tight audience.¹⁰⁰

Magazine quizzes are another common target for parody. *C.H.O.P.* prints: “Test Your Nick-osity! (or ‘How much do you have in common with the Antichrist?’),” in which the reader
may find out how much she has in common with egotistical Nick. Colette Ryder-Hall of *Looks Yellow, Tastes Red* includes a typical teen magazine feature, “ARE YOU READY FOR ROMANCE? take this quiz!,” with questions like:

Lucky Charms are two for three dollars at Star Market, this weekend only. You cruise in on Saturday afternoon, only to find exactly one box left. You bump into someone else as you lunge for it! It’s the girl (or guy) of your dreams! And they’re reaching for the very same box. You:

a. offer to split the box and offer to facilitate this by moving in with them.

b. tell them “Bug off, bitch-ass. This cereal is mine.”

c. knaw a button off their oxford shirt.

Just like a teen magazine writer, Ryder-Hall crams in as many pop culture references as she can - however, her reference points clearly diverge from those of *Seventeen* and *YM*. For one thing, she is a college first-year and must buy her own cereal; for another, she identifies as a lesbian in the pages of her zine, and so rejects teen magazines’ exclusively heterosexual focus. Finally, all of her choices (particularly the last one) are purposely outlandish, and therefore mock teen magazines’ conception that they can boil down all possible actions and decision-making processes of adolescent girls into three simple options. Perhaps most interesting, all the personality analyses at the end of the quiz are negative – there is no right answer. Thus Ryder-Hall flouts the implication inherent in magazine quizzes that if the reader did not get the “right” score, she should examine the magazine in order to learn how to change herself for the better.

Ryder-Hall also parodies the “Say Anything” section of teen magazines. On a page titled, “teen trauma TALES OF SOCIAL SUICIDE,” she cuts and pastes these stories into nonsensical poems, and glues in the illustrations that usually accompany them (See Appendix B). *C.H.O.P.* includes a slightly less sophisticated parody; they simply glue in one embarrassing moment verbatim, and handwrite next to it: “AW CRAP – I HATE IT WHEN THAT HAPPENS!,” ironically minimizing the severity of the problem which *Seventeen* takes seriously.

According to my focus groups, problem pages, quizzes and embarrassing moments are the most popular sections in teen magazines. Therefore they are the easiest to parody – their signs are the most easily recognizable. Although parody is one of the most successful methods of negotiating with teen magazines, it can also be limiting. Zinesters depend on pop culture, and may define themselves negatively in opposition to teen magazines. Large portions of zines
reproduce teen magazine norms without parodying them, reflecting the complex negotiation process zinesters engage in with mainstream texts.

For example, zinesters reject teen magazines’ synthetic personalization, and play with their own construction of audience. Ginger Vyts writes: “This poem is dedicated to YOU (& lots of other people too 😇).” Jenn LaTouche publishes a zine called *Imaginary Audience*. On the inside front cover of her first issue, she explains her title: “IMAGINARY AUDIENCE ‘Psychological term for adolescents’ delusion that they are constantly being observed by others.” She playfully questions the notion of audience, saying: “Imagine me on a bright-lit stage....You sit in the audience of spectators....I only imagine you care enough to listen.” Clearly, she expects her “audience” to read her zine, since they have already begun; she is not imagining this, so she mocks psychology as well. Whitney the Great opens her zine, *Trials of a Thinking Being*, by making explicit the construction of audience: “Reader...this means you. Being a ‘reader’ i’m [sic] going to haphazardly gander that you can read this. How truly splendiriferous [sic].” She also tries to stay as far as possible from the typical teen magazine voice, by using silly unusual words.

Zinesters sometimes distance themselves from teen magazine discourse by addressing their audience with hostility. Whitney writes on the cover of her zine: “Your mission is simple: Read this, fat ass.” On the back cover of Jamillah James’ *Wasted Style*, she has pasted a picture (which looks like it was cut from a teen magazine) of a young white woman in a prom dress, leaning on a tree with a hand on her hip. Her chin is tilted up so she looks down at the viewer, and pasted to left of her head are the words: “WHAT ARE YOU LOOKIN’ AT, UGLY?” Like the girls of *C.H.O.P.*, Whitney and James enjoy this oppositional tone, but the epithets with which the girls choose to confront their audience reflect teen magazine principles. They may be mocking teen magazines - perhaps Whitney points to the fact that teen magazine audiences are generally construed as needing to lose weight. Maybe James refers to the fact that models are impossibly beautiful and readers are always ugly in comparison. Or maybe both of these young women have accepted a culture in which the worst possible insult is to call someone fat and ugly.

In *Imaginary Audience*, Jenn LaTouche embraces heterosexual, commodity-based romance with her “Top 10 Gifts to Give a Girlfriend (let’s face it girls – guys could use some help!)” She has a problem with ambiguity of audience. Is the list really supposed to provide a service to “guys?” LaTouche publishes a zine of pro-woman poetry – how many guys does she
expect to read it? Instead, as in teen magazines, her readers take pleasure in checking in with the constructed audience, deciding whether or not they would like to receive these gifts. Although this list is commodity-driven, it includes such unpurchasables as “8. Candlelight dinner, 9. Your body.” Candlelight dinners are desirable because cooking is typically a feminine chore, and “your body” is also a reversal – typically women “give” men their bodies instead of the other way around. However, number one is “A ring (do I really have to explain this one?)” - although she does not, in fact, “explain” any of the items on her list.

In *Zelda in MidKiss*, Meaghan publishes a letter from Jill Thantic, who is “deathly afraid of kissing.” This is a typical teen magazine problem, phrased in characteristic language: “I’m always so paranoid about whether the other person thinks I’m a bad kisser, or whether my breath is bad...ick.” Jill explicitly seeks identification with her audience: “Does anyone else have this fear?” In a departure from teen magazines, she seeks advice from Meaghan’s readers, rather than the omnipotent editor. Also, teen magazines usually treat kissing problems as a question of inexperience. Jill not only assures us that she has kissed (males) in the past, she states “I like everything else, why not kissing?!” This implies that she has done other sexual things, and enjoyed them – teen magazines frequently treat kissing as the zenith of sexual expression. Jill refers to her problem (with a degree of hysteria that suggests irony) as a “horrible phobia that seems to be diminishing my love life.”

Jill’s letter shows the complexity of adolescent girls’ negotiations with teen magazines – like most zinesters, Jill and Meaghan clearly want to embrace parts of the teen magazine culture, such as heterosexual romance, while rejecting others, such as the editors’ role as omniscient and ideologically neutral advice-givers. Jill plays with teen magazine discourse, and mocks the gravity with which they treat kissing – but Meaghan seems to take Jill’s problem seriously. On another page, Meaghan writes, “(you know i was being facetious, right?)” when she fears that her irony was too subtle, so I assume that if Jill’s letter were a joke, Meaghan would make that clear. Zines are intended for a select audience, usually one who knows the zinester – and I am not that audience. Therefore, I can’t always have confidence in my interpretations.

Jamillah James’ *Wasted Style* and Alisa Richter’s *Xenogenesis* both publish features based on teen magazines, which reveal different levels of negotiation with heterosexual voyeurism. *Wasted Style* publishes an “Ode to it boy,” modeled on *Seventeen*, which also has a monthly “it boy.”108 James describes it boy as “my dear geek stud buddy,” and writes an acrostic
poem of his name listing his good features. She pastes this over a picture (which I think is cut from a magazine) of an attractive male posing seductively. One of it boy’s positive qualities in the poem is “Adores his girlfriend Jen” – so he is ostensibly not to be viewed as a sex object. “Ode to it boy” walks the line between a tribute to a good friend (“dear buddy”), and a celebration of Seventeen-style boy-craziness (“stud”).

Richter’s “Who’s That Boy?” is almost identical to YM’s February 2003 feature, “This Is Your Perfect Guy,” except that YM’s guy is based on a survey of 18,000 readers, and Richter’s simply on her personal opinions. YM is therefore more directive – telling readers that its boy is “your” perfect guy – and lists nine physical characteristics and three personality traits, as opposed to Richter’s six and nine, respectively. Otherwise, the two are strikingly similar: both have drawings of the boy with words and phrases written around him describing certain desirable features. The two boys even seem to have a lot in common – for example, both are “outgoing,” smart, funny and have black hair with sideburns.

The perfect example of the way in which zines rebel within constraints laid down by teen magazines occurs in the pages of Wasted Style, when Jamillah James solicits: “This is a serious issue. My friend Tommy needs a boyfriend, pronto. He is on the edge of peril! So somebody please help. He’s really cute!” This is subversive because it concerns a homosexual relationship, which are almost entirely ignored by YM and Seventeen. Yet, although their plea is somewhat tongue in cheek, James and her friend accept the “need” for romance, that the lack thereof is “perilous,” and that relationships are based on physical attractiveness. They even adopt the language of teen magazines to do so.

At the end of Trials of a Thinking Being, Whitney the Great writes: “gimme some more! Suddenly, your life is no longer complete...you need trials of a thinking being. it happens, a lot.” Whitney parodies advertising’s creation of false needs in order to sell products – but she follows this up with information about how to subscribe. Whatever her feelings about advertising, she wants to sell more zines.

In the previous section of this paper, I describe girls who make collages with words and pictures from teen magazines as bricoleurs. Levi-Strauss claims that bricolage is a tool of primitive people, who are unable to separate sign systems from concrete realities. Zinesters may escape this definition; rather than pasting bits of teen magazines into a scrapbook or onto a bedroom wall, they author their own creative works. The opposition between primitive bricolage

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and the advanced sign systems of modern people can be deconstructed though, because of course if by bricolage one means borrowing concepts from existing works, then everything is bricolage. Zinesters appropriate the form and conventions of teen magazines – the most clever parody I found, Ryder-Hall’s “teen trauma,” is based on collage. Therefore, girls like Jasmine, who love teen magazines, are not so different from zinesters who parody them. Both groups of girls draw heavily on teen magazines to create their own forms of expression.

Zinesters do exercise more agency than girls who collage, since zines provide explicit and implicit commentary on teen magazines through appropriation of their various parts. Although this method of negotiation is effective, only a tiny number of girls - mostly wealthy, white and educated - make zines. Even within the community of zinesters, girls experience varying degrees of success in negotiation, and no one rejects teen magazine culture completely.

Conclusion

Teen magazines do allow criticism from readers, but within set boundaries. In December 2002, according to the pie graph on YM's letters page, twenty-five percent of readers wrote: “Avril makes me want to totally vomit.” YM translates its readers’ words into this trendy catchphrase. YM acknowledges only criticism within its own discourse, preventing any questioning of the magazine’s fundamental meanings and messages.

Magazines struggle to establish their preferred, dominant interpretation of the text as the only possible meaning. McCracken enumerates some of the “semiotic strategies with which women’s magazines attempt to secure discursive closure over signification,” for example, the construction of audience, which presupposes agreement. Another method is simple repetition, the same messages over and over, accompanied by an abundance of signs, through words and images, of ideal femininity.

Teenage girls in particular do not have the means to contest these powerful rhetorical tools. Reading teen magazines subversively, taking them apart and examining the assumptions and implications, requires a coherent and well-developed sense of self, which most adolescents do not have. The ability to interpret a text outside its dominant and preferred meaning system relies on access to oppositional codes and experience with deconstructing texts. Girls use peer group norms and comparison with lived experience to negotiate with textual meaning, and they do reject pieces of the texts on this basis. But teen magazines reflect adolescent girls’ lived
experience to an extraordinary degree. High school culture places an emphasis on female beauty, popularity and sexual desirability.

Even girls who don’t read teen magazines tend to define themselves in opposition to them – as Sarah says, “It’s just not me.” These magazines are so pervasive in our culture that they organize our ways of thinking about femininity and acting as women, especially because girls read them at a period in their lives when they are forming their adult identities. Critics tend to focus on the negative effects of teen magazines on adolescent girls, which are certainly very important. But girls keep on reading teen magazines – and they don’t read the journal articles calculating how frequently magazine stories depict female agency.

As long as they remain popular and profitable, teen magazines are not going to go away. I assume that critics research the negative effects of teen magazines because they want to help adolescent girls. But they refuse to acknowledge the pleasure girls take in teen magazines as valid, and therefore fail to respect teen girls as active meaning makers and agents of their own enjoyment. Magazines like Seventeen and YM provide girls with something they value; they give their readers genuine pleasure. In order to be relevant to adolescent girls, any study of teen magazines needs to begin with this assumption. Therefore, in a reversal of the usual critical focus, I concentrate on magazine reading as an active process, centered on teenage girls’ pleasure and agency.

7 Beth Shapouri, YM, October 2002, 62.
11 Steinam 26
12 This is written on a YM subscription card.
Schrum 141-2, 134, 157, 146
Talbot 578.
Stephanie Trong, “News Flash! Geek Guys are Hot,” YM, August 2002, 91.
“Letters,” YM, March 2003, 36
Duffy and Gotcher 42
Talbot 577
“Warm Thoughts,” YM, July 2002, 104
Currie 245
Duffy and Gotcher 43
See Appendix A for more information on focus groups.
Seventeen, December 2002, 56
McCracken 57
McCracken 52
Cindy Fedida, YM, July 2002, 50
Currie 216
Mazzarella 106
“Prom Your Way,” Seventeen, March 2003, 166.
Nicole Fasolino, “The Details,” YM, August 2002, 158.
Nicole Fasolino, “The Details,” YM, September 2002, 216
McCracken 300
Jana Siegal Banin, “Love Q&A,” YM, May 2003, 84
Lynn Harris, “Busting Through the Holiday Blues,” Seventeen, December 2002, 149.
Betty Friedan had the same complaint in the 1960’s, pg 162
Amy Bowles-Reyer, “Becoming a Woman in the 1970’s: Female Adolescent Sexual Identity and Popular Literature,” in Mazzarella and Pecora, 35. She writes about 1970’s teen romance novels, but I think her theories apply to teen magazines also.
Melissa Daly, “Don’t Sweat It,” Seventeen, February 2003, 68.
YM, January 2003, 5.
Linda Barth, YM, February 2003, 111.
Currie found the same thing in her research, pg 207.
I wondered if girls actually read the personality assessments at the end of magazine quizzes - Tammie says that she does, but demonstrates an ability to accept or reject the separate parts: “Yeah like sometimes they have good questions, but the answer you’re like no, and sometimes they don’t have good questions, but the answer you’re like oh okay.”
“Harriet S. Mosatche, Ph.D., director of program development for the Girl Scouts of the USA, and author of Girls, What’s So Bad About Being Good?”


Two months later, YM publishes a letter from a reader who recognizes the contradiction. She shows her agency through criticism!


Angela McRobbie, Feminism and Youth Culture: From ‘Jackie’ to ‘Just Seventeen,’ (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1991), 171.


McCracken 141, 116

McCracken 13, 128


Currie 135, 128


Duncombe 3

Meaghan Elyse, Zelda in MidKiss, 5 (August 1999), no page numbers.

Duncombe 112, 124

Ginger Vytis, Yesterday’s Mistake, 7 (no date), 9.

Duncombe 99, 128, 129

Ginger Vytis, Yesterday’s Mistake, 5 (no date), 91.

Whitney the Great, Trials of A Thinking Being, 1 (no date), no page numbers.

Mary Celeste Kearney, “Producing Girls: Rethinking the Study of Female Youth Culture,” in Inness, 300.

Cory, Few Are Born Beautiful, 1 (no date), no page numbers.


Kearney 303

Duncombe 146
In Issue #3, the editors of C.H.O.P. print a letter from Bill Boozang, one of their high school teachers and “the only faculty member who really understood us.” He writes: “Ridicule and general scorn (such as...‘Dr. Beau’ content) drive those easily offended to discount all that you have to say as crap. I understand the parody and satire involved in these pieces, but those that wish to condemn your work will do so on these grounds” (2-3). In this issue, the girls have Beau arrested for “open and gross lewdness” – they paste in a real clipping from a local newspaper police report – and place him “on indefinite leave pending the investigation” (28). While this is an amusing, intelligent and mature way to address the problem, it also reveals that Cheung, Kwok and Kurpeski did not make up the aspects of sexual perversion which they parody in their zine, but simply drew on what was happening in their own community.
Appendix A

Many thanks to Debbie Schildkraut who gave me advice about how to conduct focus groups. I arranged five focus groups with high school aged girls in very different settings. The names of all schools and individuals have been changed. Midwestern High School is a mixed-race, suburban public high school in a working class community in the midwest; Northeastern High School is an almost all-white, suburban public high school in an upper middle-class community in the northeast. Prep School is a predominantly white, suburban, affluent, all-female private prep school in the northeast; Girls’ Group Home is a mixed-race group home for girls in state custody in a northeastern city; and Catholic Girls’ Academy is an almost all-white, suburban, all-female private Catholic school in an upper middle-class community in the northeast.

I talked to twenty-four girls total, ranging in age from twelve to eighteen. The size of the group I worked with ranged from two to eight. I spoke with seventeen white girls, five African-Americans, two Asian-American girls and one Latina (This does not add up to twenty-four because some girls listed more than one race). Three of the girls were 12 years old; one was 13, one 14, four 15, eight 16, five 17 and one 18.

I asked all the girls to fill in their race on a blank, rather than giving them options. Therefore, I have chosen to describe each girl’s race using the words she used herself. I think that this not only gives my subjects the most agency, but I also find it very interesting to see how racial self-description correlates to education and socioeconomic status.

I used a list of open-ended questions, included in this appendix, but I applied it informally. Often I did not ask all the questions on the list, and I always added a number of follow-up questions. I asked mostly preference questions, because I hoped that by making girls articulate why one particular magazine is better than another, I could get at the reasons why teen magazines are pleasurable. I also questioned them about their reading habits. I tape-recorded all my sessions and transcribed the tapes myself.

Focus Group Questions:
1. Which magazines do you read and how often? Do you subscribe to any?
2. Which one is your favorite and why?
3. How old were you when you started reading that one?
4. What's your favorite section – which part do you read first? Why is that your favorite?
5. Do you usually read alone or with friends?
6. How do you decide which magazines to buy?
7. Do you ever try out any of the advice in the magazines (makeup, fashion)?
8. What do you think of the ads? Do you think they're realistic? Do you ever buy stuff because you saw an ad for it in a magazine? Do you ever buy stuff because of editorial endorsements?
9. Do you ever read magazines when you should be doing something else? (I asked this question because the women Janice Radway studied felt a lot of guilt about shirking their responsibilities to read, and she thought that they claimed they could "learn" from their novels as a way to justify the time they spent. I though this might relate to teen girls' claim that they read magazines for useful information.)
10. What might improve your favorite magazine?
11. How do you picture the people who write for teen magazines?
12. What do you think is the most important thing we've talked about today?

This is a copy of the consent form signed by the parents or guardians of the girls who participated in my study:

**Consent Form**

This is a study for an Oberlin College honors project on teen girls' magazines. I am evaluating girls' responses to teen magazines. I will meet with a small group of 5-10 girls during their study hall to discuss their opinions about magazines and their reading habits. The session will be taperecorded.

The results of this study will be made part of a final research report for Oberlin College, and may be submitted for publication. All information gained in this and any subsequent sessions is completely confidential. All participants will remain anonymous, and the institution will also remain anonymous. All participants are free to leave the study at any time.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the following:
1. Participation is voluntary, and participants are free to leave the study at any time.
2. The session will be taperecorded.
3. All the information from this study will be strictly confidential. No names will be associated with the data in any way.
4. The results of this study will be made part of a final research report and may be used in papers submitted for publication, but under no circumstances will participants' names or other identifying characteristics be included.
The first day back from summer break I wore this killer ankle-length skirt. It was very slinky (almost sliplike) and totally see-through! Then I started raving about the new bras I had purchased my crush called me a slut. I started hopping up and down. I landed right on top of a senior citizen! Revolted, he ran off to wash his face, and when he came back he sat two rows away from me! I've never seen so many people look like they were ready to hurl in my life.

I went to the state fair on a blind date and people started to throw money at me. I was so excited, I started kicking my feet. Suddenly the back of my jeans split. Thinking I could change under a blanket I stripped down to my bra and underwear. That’s when I noticed that I had started my period and had leaked blood on the gorgeous guy’s tube top. Now I'll never have another date with him again! ***

My friends had told me how great I looked in my prom outfit: a to-die-for long skirt and the most styling shirt ever. I threw my arms up and danced around chanting that I was drunk. The guy I had a huge crush on walked by. I whacked him on the back. All of a sudden…snap! My top popped off, leaving me topless and red-faced in front of the entire prom. I zipped up my pants and excused myself, but nobody will let me forget it.

This is my favorite example of a zinester’s parody of teen magazines. Compare to “Say Anything” in YM.
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