

# The Effects of Magazines on the Self-Esteem and Portrayal of Stereotypes in Teenagers

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Senior Composition

Research Paper

November 23, 2004

# The Effects of Magazines on the Self-Esteem and Portrayal of Stereotypes in Teenagers

Thesis: Magazine content portraying negative stereotypes or unrealistic representation of people has a negative effect on the self-esteem and personal interpretation of young people.

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## The effects of magazines on the self-esteem and portrayal of stereotypes in teenagers

Every day, millions of teenagers are exposed to magazines glamorizing the latest fashions, beauty products, gadgets, and other “useful” tidbits of information displayed on only the most physically attractive models. These magazines serve as a carrier for stereotypes, usually negative, directed at both men and women. Readers of these magazines, such as *Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Maxim*, *Esquire*, etc. often develop self-esteem problems, because they want to look like the unrealistically portrayed models. Models in women’s magazines are usually underweight and are often the cause of teenage girls becoming anorexic or bulimic. Men’s magazines generally have unrealistically thin female models and also excessively tan, slim, and muscular male models that cause anxiety in male readers. Many teenagers, in an especially impressionable stage in their lives, have various problems, ranging from the eating disorders to depression, from viewing “perfection” in magazines and striving for it themselves. Magazine content portraying negative stereotypes or unrealistic representation of people has a negative effect on the self-esteem and personal interpretation of young people.

All of these magazines promote stereotypes, defined by Nachbar, J. G., Lause, and Nachbar, J. as “a standardized conception or image of a specific group of people or objects (1992).” Stereotypes can then be broken down further and thus summarized: Simple (able to be summarized in two-three sentences), Acquired Secondhand (stereotypes absorbed from cultural mediators rather than direct experience with the group being stereotyped), Erroneous (all stereotypes are false by

their very nature), and Resistant to Change (old stereotypes still color our perceptions) (Nachbar, J. G., Lause, & Nachbar, J., 1992). Stereotypes are used mainly to save thought about people or objects (Plotnik, 2005). Inescapable magazine stereotypes are everywhere and include the idea that all women are thin, scantily clad sex fiends, all men are rich, muscular, drive exotic cars, and drink only the finest Canadian beer, and that one is not socially acceptable if a specific popular stereotype does not apply directly to them. Of course, these stereotypes are completely false, but they serve to show the ideas that readers of magazines get when they view the magazine's content. Some magazines, such as Seventeen, are aware of the popular view of their magazine and attempt to generalize the content, to much applause. "I love the models you use in Seventeen! I can always find girls looking drop-dead gorgeous with flat breasts or thick thighs somewhere in the magazine, which helps boost the confidence of girls like me who don't have Hollywood-perfect bodies ("Elizabeth," letter to the editor, 2004)!" Another well-known teenager magazine, YM, also stated that it would include larger, more average models in its pages (Media Awareness Network, 2004, *Resisting*). On the contrary, a few still attack magazines that show larger models, stating that the fashion and beauty content put forth in the articles themselves is still the same (Media Awareness Network, 2004, *Beauty*).

Some other problems plaguing magazine-reading teenagers have to do with self-esteem. Self-esteem is defined as pride in oneself. Many teenagers view other teenagers in these magazines and feel that unless they look as perfect as the models do, they are not good enough. Magazines only depict the perfect members of society,

who number very few compared to everyone else. A young girl may read Cosmopolitan and think that just because she does not wear Celine Dion perfume or Prada dresses, she is not socially acceptable and no one will recognize her for who she is. A teenager guy may read Maxim and think that because he doesn't wear a Nautica suit or drink Absolut vodka he is not an acceptable man. Susceptible teenagers who do not think highly of themselves do not realize that their worth does not lie in what other people think of them, but in what they think of themselves (McFarland, 1988). Magazines contribute to the perception of self-esteem by portraying the perfect models and preying on impressionable youth

Magazines aimed toward women, such as YM, Cosmopolitan, Seventeen, etc. usually contain information about beauty, makeup, fashion, guys, and some women's issues. For example, the July 2004 issue of Seventeen contained 146 pages, 43 pages (29%) of which were completely advertisements. The August issue contained 43% advertisements, and the October issue contained 35% advertisements, for an average of 36%. The vast majority of advertisements are devoted to companies showing off the newest makeup, the hottest fashions, or the best shampoo, with very few ads showcasing causes like breast cancer awareness, alcohol, or automobiles. The articles in all of the women's magazines analyzed are overwhelmingly centered on makeup, hair, beauty tips, clothes, fashion, health, relationships, and, to an extent, sex. Very little space is devoted to more serious topics, like avoiding rapists, raising self-esteem, succeeding in academics, having positive lifestyles, and other more useful topics. According to the Media Awareness Network (2004, *Media*), 70% of the content of women's magazines is devoted to beauty and fashion, whereas only 12% is

devoted to subjects like school and careers. The October 2004 edition of *Cosmopolitan* tops the issues of *Seventeen* with 56% of 324 pages being advertisements. While the advertisement content of *Cosmopolitan* can be similarly compared to the content of *Seventeen*, the article content is strongly focused on sex and relationships, with an emphasis on expensive fashions, beauty, and makeup. All models depicted (of course) are highly attractive and very slim, with perfect skin and proportions. These serve as the ideal form that normal women, most of whom do not have the ability to look like the magazine models, compare themselves to and strive to imitate.

As time progresses, models appearing in magazines are becoming younger, taller, and thinner (Media Awareness Network, 2004, *Beauty*). The stereotypical female model, as viewed in current issues of most every woman's magazine, is a large-breasted, tan, angular figure. As opposed to the generally scantily-clad female models, male models are usually tall, tan, muscular and decked out in fine clothes or jackets, with the models in warmer climates lounging around with their shirts unbuttoned and perfect abdominal muscles protruding. Many women have developed social and physical problems from reading these inaccurate articles and viewing non-typical advertisements. According to DiCaprio (1976), man lets an image of a woman get in the way of any realistic perception of a particular woman. Therefore, women feel that to get the guy, they must look like the models they see in the magazines.

Magazine also cause various health problems and eating disorders by promoting the models and publishing hundreds of articles on the newest fad diets,

how to lose a few pounds, and other ideas to make women strive for unobtainable thinness. Hager (1998) states that only 5% of women are genetically prepared and physically capable of having a model's body, whereas many more than 5% endeavor for that physique (p.6). Researchers generated a computer model of a Barbie doll, a "standard" feminine form, and found that a woman with Barbie's proportions would have a spine too weak to support her upper body and would not have enough space in her abdominal cavity for a whole liver or set of intestines (Media Awareness Network, 2004, *Beauty*). Advertisers use non-typical models to convince women to purchase their products, as insecure women are more likely to purchase the advertiser's products (Media Awareness Network, 2004, *Beauty*). In a paper survey of sixty students (34 females, 26 males) taken at Mason High School in November 2004, approximately 68% of girls read teenager magazines regularly and approximately 41% used the magazine's advice in their daily lives (Waltz, 2004). 65%, however, felt that the information in the magazines was not a positive influence in their lives. This data serves to show that many readers of these magazines are aware of the potential negative effects the articles and advertisements portray.

Men's magazines, as opposed to the major women's magazines analyzed, contain the equivalent subject material for the opposite gender. The October 2002 edition of Maxim contains 102 pages of advertisements out of a total of 220, or 46%. The majority of the advertisements are bought by companies promoting their high-end fashions, like Tommie Hilfiger and Nautica, by tobacco and liquor companies like Pall Mall and Bacardi, and the electronics/technology industries, with a small amount of advertisements taken out by government organizations (Army, Naval

Reserve) and other entities. Razor, a men's magazine promoting "style and substance," had advertising percentages in the July/August, September, October, and November 2004 issues at 29%, 25%, 22%, and 21%, respectively, the lowest of the magazines analyzed. The advertisements in this magazine tended to be located more at the front of the issue and purchased by retailers of cologne, clothes, automobiles, and various varieties of alcohol. Razor, as compared to Maxim, generally had more articles of some general merit, including vacation destinations, filmmakers, television inaccuracies, politics, and music. Complex, another men's magazine analyzed, happened to be the 2004/2005 Wishlist edition, showcasing hundreds of essentials like sneakers, watches, belts, bikes, toys, and exotic sports cars. The article content of this magazine was focused almost exclusively on "stuff." As far as actual advertising content, went, this magazine was about 34% actual advertisements. These magazines portray men as excessively rich, fashion-conscious, obsessive, and physically attractive to bikini-clad women. Not every man is as rich, fashionable, and muscular as the men in the inaccurate magazine advertisements.

Men's magazines show male models in the same light as the women's magazines show female models: perfect. The average male magazine model is tall, slender, tan, muscular, wearing designer clothes (or not!) and surrounded by many beautiful women. The average male, of course, does not fit this standardized magazine profile, just as the average female does not fit the profile of a model in a magazine. In men, these atypical images can cause anxiety and personal insecurity from the inability to attain magazine-like perfection (Media Awareness Network, 2004, *Masculinity*). Marketing campaigns also serve to sexually objectify men, as

though their sole purpose is to lounge about and have promiscuous sex all day long. Although it may seem to be the case in the magazine world, this stereotype is not true in the real world. Men, along with objectified women, lead typical, productive lives just like the vast majority of people. In November 2004, 31% of male Mason High School students reported that they read teenager magazines regularly, with 81% stating that the information in the magazine is not a positive life influence (Waltz, 2004).

Teenage girls, who are at an especially impressionable stage in their lives, are often the typical victim of the magazine industry's portrayal of models and other women. The Media Awareness Network (2004, *Beauty*) estimates that 25% of college girls use some form of unsafe weight control method, be it anorexia (starving oneself in an attempt to lost weight), bulimia (eating extreme amounts of food and then throwing up), drugs, or other extreme diets or exercise regimens. The Media Awareness Network (2004, *Beauty*) also reasons that women are sold to the diet industry through magazines, which frequently display headlines and articles about the newest fad diet or how to lose those extra holiday pounds. The portrayal of women in popular magazines can cause women to have an unhealthy body image. Having a healthy body image, according to DiCaprio (1976), is essential for the adequate development of one's personality. Women also feel pressured by the magazines like they are pressured by their peers, feeling that they must purchase the products and subscribe to the depicted lifestyles in order to fulfill their lives properly. The lifestyle the magazines promote is not even a lifestyle that will help one in life. Magazines also portray women as hyper sexualized, passive, and nurturing, (Meyers, 1999). The

magazines focus on hot guys, hot clothes, hot makeup tips, and other frivolous bits of information, without focusing on skills and information that is really needed to progress in society, such as career information, help with school, college information, actual women at work, and so on. Magazines are only hindering the progress that women hope to make in society today.

Men's magazines have some of the same effects on teenage guys that the women's magazines have on the teenage girls. To a lesser extent, some boys develop eating disorders, though there is a higher prevalence of eating disorders in females (Hager, 1998). Other effects are more similar to women. Guys experience a lowering of self-esteem due to the unrealistic portrayal of the gender. Teenage boys may also be pressured by the magazines and their friends to dress a certain way, act a certain way, or use a certain product. The effects of powerful, dominant, muscular models are also apparent, as guys go on diets and exercise routines in order to change their body image. Men's magazines are filled with content of similar merit as women's magazines. The average men's magazine contains articles about alcohol, clothes, sex, sports, cars, and other objects, with little or no emphasis on staples like education, current events, life management skills, and others. Therefore, many men are gaining knowledge in areas that are not crucial for general success in life.

The survey conducted at Mason High School in November, 2004 returned a variety of results from the questions asked (see data sheet). For girls ranging in age from 15 to 18 years, Seventeen was the most commonly read magazine, with 50% of the girls reading it. 47% of the participants read Cosmopolitan, followed by 21% for YM and 21% other magazines. 41% of the survey-takers use the tips offered in the

magazine, with 35% of the women reporting a positive change in their lives. Only 9% felt that Seventeen, Cosmopolitan, YM, and others portrayed genders accurately, while 79% felt that popular stereotypes were enforced by the variety of magazines. Comments ranged from “I like them” and “Something interesting to read” to the extreme “They’re absolutely disgusting... they destroy creativity and originality and promote an unrealistic view of life and what is desirable.”

The male surveys returned some interesting results among the 15-18 crowds. 31% of men surveyed regularly read teenager magazines, with Maxim topping the list at 23%. 4% read Esquire, 0% read Razor, and 12% read other magazines. Surprisingly, 19% admitted to reading the “girl” magazines, whereas no women circled the “guy” magazines. Only 8% of men used the information in the magazine regularly, but 19% of men questioned reported a positive change in life. 12% thought that genders were realistically portrayed, while 50% thought that stereotypes were enforced by the magazines. Comments returned on the survey forms ranged from “Usually magazines have little or no depth, focusing on shallow advice and marketing new products” and “They are interesting” to the blunt “Hooray for boobies!”

In conclusion, magazines are responsible for many problems and incorrect stereotypes being forced on and negatively affecting teenagers today. The inaccurate and negative stereotypes being portrayed by these magazines are giving youth an incorrect impression and interpretation of the world and the people in it. Women’s magazines do nothing to help this epidemic of false stereotype portrayal by cramming their magazines almost half-full of these influential advertisements. The overly skinny models wreak havoc on the self-esteem of female readers and can cause eating

disorders and personal insecurity. Men's magazines cause similar problems in men, but to a lesser extent. Advertisements in men's magazines promote the possession of stuff as a valuable, important attribute to have, while lowering the self-esteem of men who do not own the trendiest fashions or have perfect six-pack abs. Readers of magazines intended for teenagers should beware of the possible effects of their harmful influence and take care that they, the reader, are not hindered in their quest for success as a contributing member of society.

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## Magazine Stereotypes Survey and Results

**Magazine Stereotypes Survey**

1. Gender: M          F          Age: \_\_\_\_\_          Weight: \_\_\_\_\_          Height: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Do you read “teenager” magazines, such as Seventeen, Cosmopolitan, Maxim, Esquire, etc. regularly?          Yes          No

3. If you do, which magazines?  
Seventeen      Cosmopolitan      YM      Maxim      Esquire      Razor  
Others: \_\_\_\_\_

4. If you read the magazines, do you use the fashion/beauty/relationship/stuff tips and advice?          Yes          No

5. If you use the magazine information, does it improve your life positively?  
Yes          No

6. Do you think that these magazines realistically portray both genders? Do they enforce any popular stereotypes?

7. Any general comments about teenager magazines?

60 students at Mason High School were surveyed in November, 2004.



