

**Ambivalent Messages in *Seventeen* Magazine:
A Content Analytic Comparison of 1997 and 2007**

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Abstract

Previous content analyses of teen girl magazines have investigated the concept of sexual ambivalence—that is, messages about sex and sexuality that contradict each other. However, no study to date has examined a more encompassing notion of sexual ambivalence by focusing on relationship ambivalence (i.e., contradictory notions of what constitutes, and is acceptable in, romantic relationships between two partners) and gender role ambivalence (i.e., contradictory ideas about what it means to be masculine or feminine). Moreover, no study has compared the coverage at different points in time. Thus, this study offers a content analysis of sexual, relationship, and gender role ambivalence of texts and images in the teen girl magazine *Seventeen* from the years 1997 and 2007. Results show that ambivalence occurred for type of sex (casual vs. committed), the consequences of a romantic relationship (positive vs. negative), and type of clothing (sexy vs. non-sexy). In conclusion, this study has extended the ambivalence concept—which is increasingly used to understand adolescent femininity—to the analysis of the teen girl magazine *Seventeen*. Findings may be used to develop media literacy programs for teenage girls.

Keywords: ambivalence, content analysis, gender roles, magazines, relationships, sex(ual), teenagers

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Introduction

Next to parents, peers, school, and religion, the media are consistently cited as one of the strongest influencers of adolescents' sexual socialization (APA, 2007; Brown et al., 2006; Desichard, 2002; Epstein & Ward, 2008; Peter & Valkenburg, 2007; Prinstein, Meade, & Cohen, 2003; Ward, 2003). Of the media that adolescents refer to for information about sex, teen magazines are particularly important because they influence knowledge, attitudes, and values about sex and sexuality, especially for teenage girls (Carpenter, 1998).

Consequently, various content analyses of topics related to sex in teen girl magazines have been conducted (for a review, see Ward, 2003). One focus of these content analyses has been sexual ambivalence—that is, messages about sex and sexuality that contradict each other. For example, Carpenter (1998) noted that *Seventeen* magazine offers traditional scenarios of sex by urging teenage girls to refrain from intercourse until love or marriage is present, yet the same magazine simultaneously offers recreational scenarios of sex in which teenage girls are encouraged to explore their sexuality before marriage and with multiple partners.

Although past research has studied the notion of sexually ambivalent messages in teen magazines (Carpenter, 1998; Duffy & Gotcher, 1996; Duran & Prusank, 1997; Durham, 1996; Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998), no research to date has considered other kinds of ambivalence—specifically, relationship ambivalence and gender role ambivalence. Relationship ambivalence involves contradictory notions of what constitutes, and is acceptable in, a romantic relationship between two partners. For example, a long-term committed relationship with one partner is in direct contradiction to casual, short-term relationships with many partners. Similarly, based on the notion of gender as a performative act (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004), gender role ambivalence may be defined as contradictory ideas about what it means to be masculine or feminine. For example, the notion of women being passive in relation to men contradicts the idea of women actively pursuing men. It is important to study these two other kinds of ambivalence because sex is inextricably linked to gender roles and relationships (Bradshaw, Kahn, & Saville, 2010; Giddens, 1992). As a result, sexual ambivalence can only be fully understood when placed in the context of relationships and gender roles.

This study's focus on relationship and gender role ambivalence advances our understanding of young women's sexuality in three ways. First, a more encompassing notion of sexual ambivalence helps to conceptualize and understand the coverage of

women's sexuality from an overarching principle. Previous content analyses of teen girl magazines have described the coverage in detail but have rarely organized the analysis using ambivalence as a guiding theoretical concept. Second, the focus on relationship and gender role ambivalence helps to further the missing discourse of ambivalence (Cacioppo & Bernston, 1994; Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005; Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). Several researchers have pointed out that conceptualizations of girls' sex and sexuality often neglect the contradictions and uncertainties that confront adolescent girls during their sexual development (Lamb, 2001; Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005; Tolman, 2002). Third and finally, our focus on relationship and gender role ambivalence in teen girl magazines might help parents, teachers, and researchers gain a better understanding of contradictory messages in the media, thereby allowing adults to help adolescent readers make better sense of the material.

Specifically, this study investigates the depiction of sexual, relationship, and gender role ambivalence in the teen girl magazine *Seventeen* in the years 1997 and 2007. We chose *Seventeen* because it is the oldest, most popular teen girl magazine in the United States and, therefore, serves as a point of orientation for other teen girl magazines (Carpenter, 2001; *Seventeen* Media Kit, 2010). *Seventeen's* readership consists mainly of females between the ages of 12 and 24 years (*Seventeen* Media Kit, 2010). In 2009, 7.5 million females in this age group read *Seventeen*, and 20 million copies were sold (*Seventeen* Media Kit, 2010). We chose to examine the years 1997 and 2007 because the majority of content analyses on sex have investigated only one point in time (Carpenter, 2001; Durham, 1996, 1998; Garner et al., 1998). In contrast, an analysis of two distinct years helps put single-year studies into perspective by allowing us to assess the specificity and generality of the coverage (Simon & Gagnon, 1973). The years 1997 and 2007 were chosen because our aim was to investigate the most recent full-year publication of *Seventeen* at the time of data collection (2007) and compare it with a full-year publication of the same magazine from a decade earlier (1997).

We opted for these two years in particular for three reasons. First, between 1997 and 2007, the Internet became a serious competitor for print media (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Because a vast amount of sexual information had become available on the Internet by 2007, teen girl magazines were motivated to offer the same variety of information to their readers. Second, between 1997 and 2007, the continuation of post-feminism has further redefined femininity. For example, the notion of the strong, independent woman had broadened to include make-up and high heels (Aronson, 2003). A result may be a more diverse coverage of women and girls within teen girl magazines. Finally, between 1997 and 2007, an increase in parental support for more comprehensive sex education for their children countered the existing abstinence-only sex education programs (Irvine, 2002). This juxtaposition of conservative versus progressive ideas may well be mirrored in the content found in teen girl magazines. All three factors might contribute to more contradictory messages in *Seventeen* magazine's coverage in 2007 compared with 1997.

Teen Magazines, Cultural Scenarios, and Ambivalence

The sexual scripts framework (Simon & Gagnon, 1984) has been used in past research to analyze topics related to adolescent sexuality in teen magazines (Carpenter, 1998, 2001; Hust, Brown, & L'Engle, 2008; Kim & Ward, 2004). The sexual scripts approach argues that sociocultural processes and media are important in determining what is considered sexual and how individuals behave sexually. The sexual scripts framework involves three levels of scripts: cultural scenarios, which correspond to the collective level of society; interpersonal scripts, which relate to small group interactions; and intrapsychic scripts, which reflect individual dimensions of society. Teen magazines apply to the collective level of society, and thus they create and maintain cultural scenarios. Cultural scenarios serve as guidelines that inform individuals about when, where, with whom, why, and how to engage in sexual interactions (Laumann, 1994). They can also provide us with guidelines for gender roles and relationships.

Cultural scenarios usually differ in heterogeneous societies such as the United States. For instance, one popular cultural scenario is that the media encourage teenage girls to look sexy even though this demographic knows very little about what it means to be sexual, have sexual desires, and make responsible decisions regarding intimacy in relationships (Tolman, 2002). The scenario implies that girls are often represented as the object of someone else's desire but are rarely considered sexual subjects who have desires of their own (Garner et al., 1998; Tolman, 1994). The distinction between girls as *objects* of desire and girls as *subjects* of desire represents diversity in cultural scenarios. However, because these scenarios are also inherently contradictory, the depiction of girls' sexuality in teen magazines is better captured by the concept of ambivalence rather than by diversity.

In a content analysis of teen girl magazines, ambivalent cultural scenarios can be presented at the textual level in two ways: intra-textual or inter-textual. Intra-textual ambivalence implies an inherently contradictory message within one story. Inter-textual ambivalence occurs when two separate stories contradict each other. For this study, we focused on inter-textual ambivalence because intra-textual ambivalence is not likely to occur within feature stories (Ricketson, 2004), which is the type of content screened for in this study (see the Method section). A feature story informs a reader about a particular topic and is written from a specific angle or focus, often with emotional techniques (Ricketson, 2004).

Sexual ambivalence

Previous research suggests that sexual ambivalence may occur in teen girl magazines (Carpenter, 1998; Duffy & Gotcher, 1996; Duran & Prusank, 1997; Durham, 1996; Garner et al., 1998). However, studies to date have not conceptualized sexual ambivalence against the backdrop of two recent developments in adolescent sexuality. First, the type of adolescent sex has changed. Since the 1960s, scholars have characterized adolescent sex in Western countries as permissiveness with affection (Dush & Amato, 2005). Research indicates that sex between adolescents is legitimate if it happens in an affectionate, committed, monogamous relationship

(Dush & Amato, 2005). Other research, however, indicates that an increasing number of adolescents endorse permissiveness without affection (Furman, 2002; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). Affection between partners is no longer a necessary prerequisite for having sex. As a result, sex outside a committed relationship and/or with multiple partners is becoming more common among teenagers (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2005).

A second major change in adolescent sexuality refers to the overall understanding of adolescent sex from a health perspective. With an increasing number of adolescents becoming sexually active, issues such as teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and sexual violence have gained importance (Ward, 2003). However, researchers have also pointed out the importance of focusing on positive sexual development by considering adolescent sexuality to be a normal, healthy, and beneficial stage of maturation (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004; Tolman, 2002). Of major importance to the discussion of adolescent sex is whether the positive or negative consequences of adolescent sexuality is emphasized. It makes a difference to parents and teenagers whether adolescent sex is seen as leading to disease, or if it is considered a source of pleasure and good health.

Given the potential for ambivalence in these two major recent developments of adolescent sexuality, it is interesting that neither the type of adolescent sex nor its overall understanding has been investigated in the context of ambivalence. Therefore, this study focuses on ambivalence within the following three indicators: the type of sex (casual vs. committed sex); number of sexual partners (multiple partners vs. one monogamous partner); and consequences of sex (positive vs. negative emotional, physical, and health consequences). To better understand if the content related to sex is ambivalent in teen magazines, this study asks the following:

RQ1: Is sex portrayed in an ambivalent manner in *Seventeen* magazine, and is this portrayal different in the coverage of 1997 versus 2007?

Relationship ambivalence

Content analyses indirectly point to ambivalent messages within romantic relationships (for a review, see Ward, 2003). For instance, women are frequently portrayed as good communicators within romantic relationships, especially with regard to emotions (Garner et al., 1998; Prusank, Duran, & DeLillo, 1993). However, women are also encouraged to suppress their concerns in romantic relationships so as not to appear too emotional (Garner et al., 1998). In the context of relationship ambivalence, content analyses have not considered three changes in adolescent relationships that existing research has identified. First, casual partnerships (e.g., friends with benefits) increasingly coexist with traditional forms of committed romantic relationships (Denizet-Lewis, 2004; Manning et al., 2006). Second, faithfulness and its importance have changed (Curtis & Coffey, 2007; Diamond, Savin-Williams, & Dube, 1999). Traditional notions of cheating within the norm of exclusivity are accompanied by more flexible definitions of what constitutes faithfulness (Furman, 2002). Third, the evaluation of the consequences of romantic partnerships has become more ambivalent (Ellen, Cahn, Eyre, & Boyer, 1996). For

example, for some people a casual relationship may lead to feelings of liberation, while for other people it may carry feelings of shallowness and superficiality. When teen girl magazines cover the type of relationship (casual vs. committed), faithfulness in a relationship (cheating vs. non-cheating), and the consequences of a relationship (positive vs. negative emotional, physical, and health consequences), relationship ambivalence may easily occur. Therefore, we ask:

RQ2: Are relationships portrayed in an ambivalent manner in *Seventeen* magazine, and are these portrayals different in the coverage of 1997 versus 2007?

Gender role ambivalence

According to previous content analyses, another prevailing theme in the coverage of teen girl magazines is how girls are instructed to perform gender roles (Ward, 2003). Traditional notions of masculinity and femininity have placed men as the hunter and women as the hunted (Levy, 2005; Vogel, Wester, Heesacker, & Madon, 2003). However, with the rise of queer theory, feminism, and feminist theory, traditional notions of men's and women's gender roles have been critically questioned (Pedersen & Kristiansen, 2008; Vogel et al., 2003). A shift in gender roles has taken place, creating ambivalence within gender roles (Pedersen & Kristiansen, 2008). This ambivalence may be most visible in adolescents' agency in terms of pursuing potential partners. For instance, the shy, passive woman has begun to coexist with the woman who actively shows interest in and pursues a potential partner (Levy, 2005).

An additional rationale for gender role ambivalence in teen girl magazines comes from gender differentiation theory. This theory posits that physical differences between the sexes are often used as a basis for differences in gender roles by translating physical differences into traits that are considered typically masculine or feminine (Harris, 1991; Stockard & Johnson, 1992). For example, if a man is seen as physically stronger than a woman, then this physical strength is often translated into emotional strength (Stockard & Johnson, 1992). Consequently, the traits associated with men's and women's gender roles usually contradict each other (Fiske, Haslam, & Fiske, 1991; Stangor, Lynch, Duan, & Glass, 1992) and can be depicted within teen girl magazines through pictures of physical differences between the sexes.

Two ways that pictures can depict contradictory gender roles are with clothing (sexy vs. non-sexy) and stance (dominant vs. subordinate). For example, clothing that is sexualized and may traditionally be considered more feminine includes, but is not limited to, tight clothing, low-cut blouses to show off cleavage, transparent tops, short skirts/ shorts, bikinis, and tops that bare the midriff (Duffy & Gotcher, 1996). Non-sexy or plain clothing would be garments that fit but are not tight, such as simple t-shirts or loose pants. Traditionally, these types of plain clothing are not considered as feminine.

Ambivalence can also be reflected through stance. Men and women can be depicted in a traditional manner (e.g., women as subordinate and men as dominant) versus a non-traditional manner (e.g., women as dominant and men as subordinate)

(Fiske et al., 1991). For example, a man or woman portrayed in a dominant stance is taller than, higher than, and/or on top of the other person. A subordinate stance would depict the man or woman as shorter than, lower than, and/or below the other person.

Considering the potential for gender role ambivalence in the text and pictures of teen girl magazines, this study focuses on gender role ambivalence in the following three indicators: agency of girls in relation to boys (passive vs. active agency), girls' clothing (sexy vs. non-sexy), and the stance of girls in relation to boys (dominant vs. subordinate). We focus solely on girls' clothing because the primary readership of teen girl magazines is girls. Therefore, more girls' fashion appears in these magazines. Thus, this study asks:

RQ3: Are gender roles of adolescent girls portrayed in an ambivalent manner in *Seventeen* magazine, and are these portrayals different in the coverage of 1997 versus 2007?

Method

Sample

The unit of analysis was a feature story. A feature story is a nonfiction story that intends to inform or amuse the reader through standard articles, interviews, quotes, sidebars, fillers, or question and answer pieces (Q&A). To qualify as a feature story, a nonfiction story had to be presented as a semantic unit by paying attention to content, colors, a border around the story, and separate headlines. The text and pictures of every feature story from all 12 issues of *Seventeen* in the years 1997 and 2007 were screened for whether they explicitly mentioned or dealt with sex and/or courting and/or dating and/or relationships. Of the 167 stories that passed the screening, 91 (54.5%) were from 1997, and 76 (45.5%) were from 2007. These stories were coded for sexual, relationship, and gender role ambivalence. The complete coding protocol is available upon request from the first author.

To be coded for sexual ambivalence, stories had to explicitly refer to sex. Of the 167 stories about sex, 45 (27%) in 1997 and 42 (25%) in 2007 mentioned the type of sex (casual vs. committed sex); 14 (8.4%) in 1997 and 10 (6%) in 2007 mentioned the number of sex partners (multiple partners vs. one monogamous partner); and 20 (12%) in 1997 and 15 (9%) in 2007 mentioned the consequences of sex (positive vs. negative emotional, physical, and health consequences).

To be coded for relationship ambivalence, stories had to clearly deal with relationships. Of the 92 stories about relationships, 15 (16.3%) in 1997 and 9 (10%) in 2007 mentioned the type of relationship (casual vs. committed relationship); 49 (53%) in 1997 and 43 (47%) in 2007 dealt with the degree of faithfulness (cheating vs. non-cheating); and 22 (24%) in 1997 and 29 (31.5%) in 2007 mentioned the consequences of a relationship (positive vs. negative emotional, physical, and health consequences).

To investigate gender role ambivalence, we used all the stories because gender roles were prevalent in every story. Of the 167 stories relevant to gender roles, 91 (54.5%) in 1997 and 76 (45.5%) in 2007 were related to agency (passive vs. active);

23 (14%) in 1997 and 70 (42%) in 2007 dealt with clothing (sexy vs. non-sexy clothing); and 23 (14%) in 1997 and 70 (42%) in 2007 were related to stance (dominant vs. subordinate stance).

Procedure

The reliability of coding was assessed with both intra- and inter-coder reliability tests of two randomly selected subsamples of the stories. The primary researcher served as the main coder for this study. Intra-coder reliability was tested by coding and recoding 12 randomly sampled stories (7% of the material). A second coder was trained for an inter-coder reliability test. This coder coded 15 randomly sampled stories (9% of the material). These stories were not identical with those included in the intra-coder reliability test. Overall, the intra- and inter-coder reliability tests indicated very good reliability (see below).

Sexual ambivalence. Sexual ambivalence was operationalized with three indicators: type of sex, number of sex partners, and sex consequences. We measured type of sex (casual vs. committed) in each story by assessing the context in which sex was presented. For the purpose of this study, we excluded the categories of “masturbation,” “abstinence,” “other,” and “not mentioned” from the analysis. For the type of sex indicator, the intra-coder reliability was 100 percent (Cohen’s kappa = 1.0), and the inter-coder reliability was 93 percent (Cohen’s kappa = .85).

We measured the number of sex partners (multiple vs. one) by assessing the number of partners for the girl(s) in the story. The category “not mentioned” was excluded from the analysis. For number of sex partners, the intra-coder reliability was 100 percent (Cohen’s kappa = 1.0), and the inter-coder reliability was 93 percent (Cohen’s kappa = .85).

We measured sex consequences (positive vs. negative) by assessing the emotional, physical, and health consequences of sex for the girl(s) in the story. The category “not mentioned” was excluded from the analysis. The intra-coder reliability for sex consequences was 100 percent (Cohen’s kappa = 1.0), and the inter-coder reliability was 80 percent (Cohen’s kappa = .74).

Relationship ambivalence. Relationship ambivalence was operationalized with three indicators: type of relationship, faithfulness, and relationship consequences. In each story, we measured the type of relationship (casual vs. committed) by assessing the context in which the relationship was conceptualized. For the purpose of this study, we excluded the category “casual *and* committed relationship” from the analysis to keep the variable dichotomous. The intra-coder reliability for type of relationship was 92 percent (Cohen’s kappa = .85), and the inter-coder reliability was 100 percent (Cohen’s kappa = 1.0).

We measured faithfulness (cheating vs. non-cheating) by assessing any violation of mutually agreed-upon rules of a relationship and/or a breach of faith in a relationship. For faithfulness, the intra- and inter-coder reliabilities were 100 percent (Cohen’s kappa = 1.0).

We measured relationship consequences (positive vs. negative) by investigating the emotional, physical, and health consequences of a relationship for the girl(s) in the story. For the purpose of this study, the category “not mentioned” was excluded from the analysis. The intra- and inter-coder reliabilities for relationship consequences were 100 percent (Cohen’s kappa = 1.0) and 92 percent (Cohen’s kappa = .85), respectively.

Gender role ambivalence. Gender role ambivalence was operationalized with three indicators: agency, clothing, and stance. Agency (passive vs. active) was measured by assessing the activity of the girl(s) in the story. The intra- and inter-coder reliabilities for agency were 100 percent (Cohen’s kappa = 1.0) and 93 percent (Cohen’s kappa = .85), respectively.

Clothing as shown in pictures (sexy vs. non-sexy) was measured by assessing if the clothing of the girl(s) was sexualized. The intra- and inter-coder reliabilities for clothing were 100 percent (Cohen’s kappa = 1.0).

We measured stance (dominant vs. subordinate) by assessing the dominance of the girl(s) in relation to the boy(s), as shown in pictures. The intra- and inter-coder reliabilities were 100 percent (Cohen’s kappa = 1.0).

Operationalization of ambivalence and data analysis

Perfect ambivalence occurs when two contradictory ideas are equally represented in a frequency distribution of 50% to 50%. However, in many cases, using such a rigorous criterion for analysis is unrealistic because of bias in the relevant units of investigation (Cover & Thomas, 2006). This is the case with our study of teen magazines, which have been shown to over-represent the majority position (see Table 1 for the majority positions of the indicators) toward a specific issue while under-representing the minority position of that same issue (Carpenter, 1998; Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004; Martens et al., 2006; Vogel et al., 2003). For example, in the U.S., a casual relationship is the minority position because the prevailing norm is to engage in a committed relationship (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). As a result, *Seventeen* is likely to include coverage of committed relationships more often than coverage of casual relationships.

Because we expected this biased pattern to occur in the coverage of *Seventeen*, it would be almost impossible to detect ambivalence for our indicators if we used a 50/50 distribution as the criterion for ambivalence. Therefore, we applied information theory to identify a more realistic criterion for ambivalence (Cover & Thomas, 2006). Traditionally, information theory belongs to the field of applied mathematics and involves quantifying information. Because information theory has been broadened and used in many other fields (Yeung, 2002), especially with regard to statistical inference and data analysis (Anderson, 2003), it can also be applied to the detection of ambivalence. More specifically, according to information theory, adjusting threshold values (in our case, for ambivalence) is justified if a bias in the indicators of a particular construct can reasonably be assumed (Cover & Thomas, 2006; Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004; Martens et al., 2006; Vogel et al., 2003). As described in the

previous paragraph, bias in our indicators of ambivalence is likely to occur. Therefore, in a first approach to the issue, we used a 33/67 distribution rather than a 50/50 distribution as the criterion to determine whether sexual, relationship, and gender role ambivalence occurred. This adjusted criterion still presents a conservative, yet realistic, threshold value for the assessment of ambivalence in the coverage.

In addition to frequency distributions, we also used Shannon's H (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) to detect ambivalence. The H statistic developed by Shannon and Weaver (1949) is typically used to measure diversity (Peter & De Vreese, 2003). However, Shannon's H can also be used for the purpose of this study because diversity within our indicators through contrasting categories—which are by definition in contradiction with each other—can be interpreted as ambivalence. We computed Shannon's H using the frequencies of 1997 and 2007 for each indicator of sexual, relationship, and gender role ambivalence. The formula to compute Shannon's H is

$$\text{Shannon's H} = - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n P_i (\log_2 P_i)}{(\log_2 k)}$$

where \log_2 is the logarithm with base 2, and where k and n are always 2 (the number of the two contradictory categories). Generally, Shannon's H ranges between 0 and 1. With an equal representation of categories through a 50/50 ratio, Shannon's H would be 1. With our distribution of 33% to 67%, Shannon's H is 0.92. Thus, when Shannon's H is greater than or equal to 0.92, the indicator is ambivalent. Conversely, when Shannon's H is less than 0.92, the indicator is not ambivalent.

We used Shannon's H in addition to frequency distributions because the frequencies of our categories may suggest the occurrence of ambivalent coverage through relative richness but cannot express the strength of ambivalence for each indicator as specifically and parsimoniously as Shannon's H. Moreover, reporting only the frequencies of the categories lacks the mathematically defined properties of Shannon's H, which takes the relative abundance of the category distribution into account. This may be particularly useful for future researchers interested in using the ambivalence of magazine coverage as an independent variable—for example, in effect studies.

To determine whether differences between the 1997 and 2007 coverage occurred, we ran chi-square tests with Yates' continuity correction, as they are conventionally reported when differences in the distributions of two nominal-level variables are tested for significance. For presentational purposes, we reported the results of the chi-square tests in the text. Two limitations of the use of chi-square tests are noteworthy. First, our sample of stories was relatively small and not random. This renders it difficult to find significant differences and generally limits the meaningfulness of the chi-square test results (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). Second, chi-square tests use a probabilistically defined criterion to determine globally whether the coverage differs between 1997 and 2007 (Frey et al., 2000). This criterion may differ from our specific criterion for establishing ambivalence and, consequently, may

lead to different results.

Results

Sexual ambivalence

The first research question asked whether sex was portrayed in an ambivalent manner in *Seventeen*, and if the portrayal was different in the coverage of 1997 versus 2007. The frequencies and Shannon's H values for all three indicators of sexual ambivalence for 1997 and 2007 are presented in Table 1. Ambivalence occurred for type of sex (casual vs. committed) in 1997 (Shannon's H = 0.97) and 2007 (Shannon's H = 0.92). For the other two indicators of sexual ambivalence, Shannon's H was less than 0.92 in 1997 and 2007. Thus, no ambivalence emerged for the number of sex partners and sex consequences.

<i>Table 1</i> <i>Sexual, Relationship, and Gender Role Ambivalence in Seventeen Magazine, 1997 and 2007</i>				
	1997		2007	
	Frequency (%)	Shannon's H	Frequency (%)	Shannon's H
Sexual ambivalence				
Type of sex (casual vs. committed)	40/60	0.97	33/67	0.92
Number of sex partners (multiple vs. one)	14/86	0.59	10/90	0.47
Sex consequences (positive vs. negative)	15/85	0.61	13/87	0.57
Relationship ambivalence				
Type of relationship (casual vs. committed)	12/88	0.54	2/98	0.16
Faithfulness (cheating vs. non-cheating)	20/80	0.73	5/95	0.27
Relationship consequences (positive vs. negative)	45/55	0.99	65/35	0.93
Gender role ambivalence				
Agency (passive vs. active)	32/68	0.90	20/80	0.72
Clothing (sexy vs. non-sexy)	17/83	0.67	34/66	0.93
Stance (dominant vs. subordinate)	9/91	0.43	11/89	0.51

Note: The category on the right side is the majority position (i.e., for casual vs. committed sex, the “committed sex” category is the majority position).

Shannon's H values of 0.92 or higher indicate the indicator is ambivalent.

In terms of differences in the 1997 versus 2007 coverage, for type of sex, the percentage of casual sex coverage was slightly higher, and of committed sex was slightly lower, in 1997 compared with 2007. Furthermore, the frequency of multiple sex partners occurred a little more often, and of monogamous sex partners occurred a little less often, in 1997 than in 2007. In addition, the coverage of positive sex consequences was faintly higher, and of negative sex consequences was faintly lower, in 1997 related to 2007. None of these differences were statistically significant when chi-square tests were run.

Relationship ambivalence

The second research question asked whether relationships were portrayed in an ambivalent way in *Seventeen*, and if these portrayals were different in the coverage of 1997 versus 2007. As Table 1 shows, ambivalence emerged for the relationship consequences indicator (positive vs. negative) in 1997 (Shannon's $H = 0.99$) and 2007 (Shannon's $H = 0.93$). Shannon's H was less than 0.92 in 1997 and 2007 for the other two indicators. Thus, no ambivalence occurred with respect to the type of relationship or the degree of faithfulness.

With respect to differences in the 1997 and 2007 coverage, for type of relationship, the coverage of casual relationships was somewhat higher, and of committed relationships was somewhat lower, in 1997 than in 2007. For faithfulness, the coverage of cheating occurred more often, and of non-cheating less often, in 1997 than in 2007. In terms of relationship consequences, the coverage of positive consequences appeared less frequently, while the coverage of negative consequences appeared more frequently, in 1997 than 2007. Chi-square tests indicated no statistically significant differences between 1997 and 2007.

Gender role ambivalence

The third research question asked if the gender roles of adolescent girls were ambivalent in *Seventeen*, and if the portrayals had changed between 1997 and 2007. Table 1 shows that ambivalence occurred for the clothing indicator (sexy vs. non-sexy) in 2007 (Shannon's $H = 0.93$) but not in 1997 (Shannon's $H = 0.67$). In addition, Shannon's H was less than 0.92 in 1997 and 2007 for the other two indicators. Thus, no ambivalence emerged for agency and stance.

In terms of differences in the 1997 and 2007 coverage, for agency, girls' passivity was higher, and activity lower, in 1997 than in 2007. For clothing, the frequency of sexy clothing occurred less often, and of non-sexy clothing more often, in 1997 than in 2007. For stance, dominance was depicted slightly less frequently, and subordination a little more frequently, in 1997 compared with 2007. However, chi-square tests revealed these differences were not statistically significant.

Discussion

This study has extended existing research on ambivalent messages in teen magazines (Carpenter, 1998; Durham, 1996, 1998; Garner et al., 1998) by conducting a content-analytic comparison of ambivalent coverage in *Seventeen* magazine in 1997

and 2007. Our content analysis shows that most of the indicators used to establish sexual, relationship, and gender role ambivalence did not point to ambivalent coverage. However, ambivalent coverage did emerge for the following three indicators: type of sex, relationship consequences, and clothing.

Sexual, relationship, and gender role ambivalence in Seventeen

In *Seventeen*, sex was depicted in an ambivalent way according to the type of sex (casual vs. committed). On the one hand, sex was portrayed as a long-term, affectionate commitment. On the other hand, it was shown as a short-term adventure. Thus, the coverage of sex in *Seventeen* mirrors trends in “hooking up” (Manning et al., 2006, p. 459) and non-romantic sexual activity among adolescents (e.g., Manning et al., 2005). This finding has important implications for a country such as the U.S., which is more sexually conservative than some other countries, such as those in Europe (Carpenter, 2001; Glick et al., 2000; Schalet, 2000). The majority of U.S. teenagers still learn that abstinence is the only appropriate way to approach sexual development (Irvine, 2002). *Seventeen*, in contrast, covers sex not only in the context of commitment but also in the context of permissiveness without affection. Consequently, a question for future research may be whether this ambivalent coverage of sex elicits uncertainty in the readers of *Seventeen* about the type of sex they read about and experience for themselves.

The other two indicators used to establish sexual ambivalence—number of sex partners and sex consequences—did not show ambivalent coverage. According to *Seventeen*, sex is largely a monogamous activity (even if it is casual, it may resemble serial monogamy) and has mainly negative consequences. While the coverage of *Seventeen* was consistent regarding the negative consequences of sex, this indicator may deserve further attention. For instance, a previous content analysis of television shows in the U.S. revealed that adolescents are rarely shown the consequences of sex, regardless of whether they are positive or negative (Kunkel et al., 2005). Thus, it is possible that an *inter-media* ambivalence about sex consequences occurs when the coverage of *Seventeen* magazine is compared with the coverage of U.S. television programs.

Relationships were also depicted in an ambivalent manner in *Seventeen*, especially with regard to relationship consequences. The coverage in both 1997 and 2007 suggested that the consequences of adolescent relationships resemble a roller-coaster ride. Emotional ups and downs follow a contradictory, often unpredictable pattern similar to that mentioned by Thompson (1995). Nevertheless, *Seventeen*'s coverage was not ambivalent regarding the type of relationship and faithfulness within a relationship. Adolescent relationships were predominantly committed and adhered to traditional standards of faithfulness. The rare occurrence of casual relationships seems interesting, considering that references to casual sex occurred frequently in *Seventeen*. We would assume that casual sex would take place within the context of casual relationships. Thus, with the frequent occurrence of casual sex, we would anticipate a higher frequency of casual relationships. However, according to *Seventeen*'s coverage, sex seems to happen casually, but this does not necessarily entail a more casual relationship context. Therefore, while the depiction of

adolescents' relationship type was hardly ambivalent, contradictory messages occur in the way *Seventeen* relates adolescent relationships to sex.

Girls' gender roles were also depicted in an ambivalent way in *Seventeen* with regard to outward appearance. Specifically, the type of clothing in 2007 was ambivalent. The coverage was not ambivalent for the other two indicators—agency and stance. Girls were predominantly shown in subordinate stances in both 1997 and 2007. Consequently, the traditional depiction noted by gender differentiation theory of boys being physically stronger than girls and, therefore, more dominant in stance, did not differ in 1997 and 2007 (Fiske et al., 1991; Stangor et al., 1992). However, girls were also mainly depicted as active as opposed to passive in the text. Thus, although the portrayal of girls' agency was consistent, it seems to conflict with the representation of girls as subordinate in pictures. This points to an inter-channel ambivalence within the magazine—that is, the occurrence of ambivalence by presenting contradictory gender roles in different channels, for instance texts and pictures.

Limitations

Although our study sheds more light on the ambivalent discourse of adolescent femininity, it should be taken into account that this study was exploratory. The majority of our indicators did not show ambivalence in the coverage. We derived our indicators from existing literature, which has largely been conducted among emerging adults because of ethical constraints in research with adolescents. As a result, some of our indicators (e.g., casual relationships) may have too much of a young adult bias and not be as applicable to adolescent-centered research—in our case, to a content analysis of the teen girl magazine *Seventeen*.

The conceptualization and operationalization of ambivalence may be another reason the majority of our indicators did not elicit ambivalence. We limited the conceptualization and operationalization of ambivalence to clearly conflicting messages (i.e., contradictions in the overall coverage). A broader definition of ambivalence may have helped to capture a more comprehensive picture of ambivalent coverage. For example, this study did not probe inter-channel ambivalence. Girls within *Seventeen* were mostly portrayed in subordinate stances in pictures but were mostly depicted as active agents in texts. Similarly, this study did not consider inter-media ambivalence. We focused on ambivalence within *Seventeen* and did not compare it with other media, such as television. It is possible that these two media depict the same issue (e.g., sex consequences) in contradictory ways. These contradictions between visual and textual representations, as well as between the coverage of different media, may be theoretically interesting instances of how and where ambivalence may occur.

Future research

Overall, ambivalence in *Seventeen's* coverage emerged for three indicators. Type of sex and relationship consequences were ambivalent in 1997 and 2007. Clothing was ambivalent in 2007. However, it is important to note that the results

from this study are for one magazine and for just two years. Our findings should not be interpreted as indicating trends and could be influenced by a change of editors or editorial policy. Thus, future research should consider analyzing more than one magazine and extending the time component to include coverage from more years or specific time periods. For instance, scholars could analyze magazine coverage starting in the 1960s, when adolescent sex in Western countries became characterized by permissiveness with affection (Dush & Amato, 2005), to present-day coverage, which tends to depict permissiveness without affection (Furman, 2002; Manning et al., 2006).

A more conservative take on nearly all the indicators occurred in 2007 compared to 1997, although this did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. For example, the mention of casual sex and casual relationships was lower in 2007 than in 1997. There are two striking exceptions to this finding: Girls were depicted in less sexy clothing, and they were portrayed as more passive in 1997 than in 2007. Thus, while girls in *Seventeen* were progressively becoming sexier agents, they were simultaneously more engaged in traditional relationships and sexual encounters. This could be attributed to the heterosexist nature of *Seventeen* magazine, primarily by portraying heterosexual relationships. Future research should investigate these developments within *Seventeen* and similar teen girl magazines.

In line with previous research (e.g., Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005; Tolman, 2002), this study provides further evidence that one of the features of how teen magazines deal with girls' sexuality may lie in its ambivalence. Until recently, scholars have acknowledged a "missing discourse of ambivalence" when conceptualizing girls' sexuality (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005, p. 15). Our study helps to overcome this missing discourse by demonstrating that ambivalence surfaces in the coverage of *Seventeen* not only for sex but also for relationships and gender roles. To understand the implications of the ambivalent discourse of adolescent femininity more profoundly, it is necessary to study how ambivalent coverage in *Seventeen* affects the readers of the magazine.

In conclusion, this study has extended the ambivalence concept, which is increasingly used to understand adolescent femininity, to the analysis of the teen girl magazine *Seventeen*. While the concept of ambivalence revealed and systematized some previously hidden characteristics of the coverage, several options for theoretical and operational refinement have emerged. Therefore, future research may find it fruitful to fine-tune the concept of ambivalence and apply it to the analysis of other teen magazines, and to media in general. Doing so may help parents and educators discuss the ambivalent coverage of sex, relationships, and gender roles with teenage girls from a media literacy standpoint.

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