

Body Image In Magazines for Young Adult Girls

By Kate Sichky

Magazines for girls include many images and textual references that influence perceptions of body image. What types of images are young women and girls internalizing while they read these magazines? Should librarians be concerned? To answer these questions I examined three popular “mainstream” magazines for content and images that might have implications for body image. These magazines are *Teen Vogue*, *CosmoGIRL!* and *Seventeen*, which can often be found at public libraries.

Magazines are often thought of as contributing to an unrealistic ideal of beauty. In terms of magazines for girls, the ideal is very thin, tall, clear skin, shiny hair, wide eyes et cetera. This ideal is simply impossible for everyone to achieve and yet it is consistently held up as the beauty standard. There is a distinct “type” of girl that is seen as beautiful in these magazines and it is very far from the average teenager. Images of such celebrities as Beyonce and Jennifer Lopez seem to be the exception to the rule. In rare instances a “plus size” young woman is shown in a magazine. Usually these young women are a size 12 at the most. This is a very average size, not overweight. However, because young women who are approximately this size are not often seen in magazines, they are thought to be fat or unattractive. In *CosmoGIRL!* I found 3 advertisements featuring young women in prom dresses that were “plus size”. In *Seventeen*

Magazine there were no images of “plus size” young women. In *Teen Vogue* there were also no images of girls who were at all curvy. In *Teen Vogue* there were also images of girls who looked particularly unhealthy — not necessarily the “heroin chic” of years past, but not far from it. The overwhelming masses of images that portray beauty in a certain way are only a part of the cultural map directing young women’s body image.

The textual content of magazines for young girls is also a source of distorted ideals of beauty. Most magazines include sections on exercise and diet tips as well as information on skin care, makeup and hair. There is a great focus on appearance and more specifically, on improving your appearance. Magazines are often a vehicle for advertisements selling self-improvement of a physical variety. Rarely do magazines promote the idea that girls and young women are fine just the way they are. An example of this focus is in *CosmoGIRL!*. There is an exercise section entitled Prom Pilates which aims to help the reader get in better shape before prom. This is not to say that all of the content in popular magazines such as the three I have mentioned is promoting poor body image. It is just that, self-affirming content in magazines is usually overwhelmed by the number of items that are not promoting healthy body image.

CosmoGIRL!, *Seventeen* and *Teen Vogue*, while only a small portion of the available titles, are very

popular with young adult girls and women.

One of the elements of body image that can be problematic in these magazines is the portrayal of young women of non-white ethnicity. Assuming that a young woman's healthy body image includes an appreciation of her own cultural or racial appearance, we must also assume that images that distort this view or don't reflect it at all are impacting body image. With this in mind I examined a recent edition of each of these magazines for images that portray women of a variety of ethnicities. I counted the number of advertisements and regular content of the magazines that included women of colour.

In terms of the number of images that include women of non-white ethnicity, *CosmoGIRL!* ranked the highest and *Teen Vogue* the lowest. In all of the magazines the representation of different cultures wasn't balanced. That is, by far most of the content of the magazines portrayed white females. An example of this can be seen in the low number of magazine covers that show women who are African American. In *CosmoGIRL!*, I counted four out of twelve covers that showed females who were not white. Two of the covers portrayed African American celebrities: Destiny's Child and Alicia Keys. The other two covers were of America Ferrera and Jennifer Lopez. *CosmoGIRL!* was actually the most balanced of the three magazines. In *Seventeen*, one out of ten covers showed an African American woman, celebrity Beyonce. *Teen Vogue* had the lowest number of African American women per number of covers, two out of fifteen are singers Ciara and Ashanti. There are pictures, advertisements, and features in these magazines that portray women of non

Alternatives

By Rebecca Ferrie

Teen magazines are notorious for their negative influence over teenaged girls' body image. I found it nearly impossible to find mainstream fashion magazines that contribute to a positive body image for teens. Even if articles talk about self esteem there will always be skinny models in the ads and features. Here are some resources for alternative e-zines who are doing their part to counter the mainstream teen magazines.

gURL.com

<http://www.gurl.com/>

gURL.com is an online community and content site for teenage girls. It contains stories, games and interactive content. They address issues pertinent to teen girls such as body image, health, fashion, self esteem, and dating. They use an ample dose of humour and visuals to reach the teens and try to deal frankly with taboo subjects such as sexuality, emotions and body image.

Extra Hip

<http://www.extrahip.com/>

An e-zine dedicated to young plus-size women. Extra Hip relays information on fashion and nutrition. Fashion articles cover topics such as the latest styles that fit, where to find them, and how to wear them. Each issue profiles celebrities of size and top plus-size models who share their personal stories. This e-zine is not supported by advertising.

BBTeen

http://www.size-acceptance.org/without_measure/BBTeen/zine_graphics/index.html

BBT stands for Big and Beautiful Teens, and is an electronic magazine for plus-sized teens the target audience being girls aged 13-19 years old. The focus of this e-zine is fat acceptance.

-Caucasian ethnic backgrounds, but they are disproportionate to the number that do show Caucasian young women.

The other problem that surrounds portrayals of ethnicity in popular magazines for girls is the types of images that are available and the messages that are within them. For instance, in the prom issue of *CosmoGIRL!*, three fashion spreads of prom dresses are included. One is titled "Sweet" and this spread shows a Caucasian young woman wearing a variety of frilly pastel dresses. The next is titled "Sexy" and shows an African American young woman wearing—you guessed it—much more sexy dresses. Finally the third fashion spread in this series is titled "Wild", and portrays a young Asian woman wearing a range of funky dresses. Perhaps unintentionally this magazine is dropping young women into stereotypical boxes: the innocent white woman, the overly sexual African American woman and the exotic "otherness" of the young Asian woman. *CosmoGIRL!* Does not, by itself, undermine healthy body image, but it contributes to a larger pool of distorted representations of women.

Sexuality, as portrayed in magazines for young women, can also negatively impact body image, as younger and younger women are being exploited to sell products using their sexuality. This is particularly true in *Teen Vogue*, although it is present in most fashion magazines. Images in *Teen Vogue* are often of very young women who are dressed in a very sexually sophisticated manner. They look exactly like their older counterparts in

Vogue, only they are teenagers. The frequency of these images wasn't something I could count, as it's much more subtle and subjective than the other elements of body image that I've mentioned. Often magazines have some good content dealing with sexuality and sexual health, but images that exploit young women's sexuality contradict these positive messages. They promote the idea that sexuality is a commodity.

Body image is certainly a concern in magazines aimed at young adult females, but the answer is not to simply discontinue subscriptions to these magazines. They have a lot of content that is worthwhile. They're also popular and fun reading for many young women. Instead, the library should try to raise awareness of body image and self-esteem. Programming that focuses on body image is a great way to participate in opening up dialogue and provoking thought on the topic. A library could offer programs that focus on the female body in art and foster discussion of changing ideals and what they mean to young women. Another programming option is to host a magazine club as opposed to a book club, creating a focus on media awareness and body image. I'm certain there are many programming ideas that can raise awareness of body image. Another option for libraries is to ensure that collections include magazines that promote a healthier body image. While it's not our job as librarians to decide what's right or wrong for young people to read, it is our job to provide access to as much information as possible, to increase awareness and broaden perspectives.