

**Negotiating femininity: SA teenage girls' interpretation of  
teen magazine discourse constructed around *Seventeen***

by

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## **Declaration**

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## **ABSTRAK**

Adolesente meisies se oorgang na vrouwees word deur blootstelling aan 'n groot verskeidenheid mediaprojekte gekenmerk. Massakommunikasieprojekte het in opvoedingsmeganismes ontaard wat jong vroue na 'n begrip van vroulikheid en al die gepaardgaande elemente lei. Ons word regdeur ons lewens gender-lesse geleer, maar ons tienerjare is in hierdie opsig besonder noemenswaardig. In 'n gemeenskap wat al hoe meer media-deurdrenk raak, slaan adverteerders munt uit die verskillende begeertes en ideale wat in die media gekonstrueer word. Aanvanklik is slegs volwasse vroue betrek, maar deesdae is 'n groot hoeveelheid massamediaprojekte spesifiek op jong vroue gemik – 'n hele nuwe mark.

Tot 'n paar jaar gelede het Suid-Afrikaanse tienermeisies slegs vrouetydskrifte, gemik op volwasse vroue, gehad om na te verwys. Deesdae bestaan daar egter 'n groot getal plaaslike tiener tydskrifte. Die doel van hierdie studie was om te kyk na tiener tydskrifte as 'n voorbeeld van tekste wat spesifiek op tienermeisies gemik is. Meer spesifiek het die studie gekyk na die diskoers van vroulikheid binne die teks se bladsye – wat sê die tydskrif in wese oor vrouwees?

Ten einde die navorsing 'n stap verder te neem, is daar besluit om te kyk hoe die lesers met die tydskrif omgaan ten einde hul eie begrip van vroulikheid in te lig. Die doel van die studie was om te bepaal hoe die diskoers van vroulikheid tussen die teks en die leser uitspeel.

Kwantitatiewe en kwalitatiewe elemente is gekombineer, wat die studie binne 'n kulturelestudie-raamwerk geplaas het. Daar is onder andere na Stuart Hall se enkodering/dekodering-model as 'n voorstelling van die kommunikasieproses verwys.

Daar is gevind dat die tydskrif wat ondersoek is, twaalf spesifieke tematiese kategorieë het wat die prominentste is, en dat die vroulikheid wat in hierdie teks geënkodeer is, om verbruikers, modes en seuns draai.

Die studie het bevind dat lesers wat aan die fokusgroepe navorsing deelgeneem het, oor genoegsame “kulturele kapitaal” beskik het om dominante boodskappe wat in die teks geënkodeer is, te weerstaan. Tog het dit geblyk dat hulle dit nie weerstaan nie. Die studie het ook aangedui dat die vroulikheid wat in die teks gekonstrueer word, nie die groter Suid-Afrikaanse konteks in ag neem nie, en dat dit eerder lesers van hoër LSM-groepe as alle Suid-Afrikaanse meisies in ag neem.

## **ABSTRACT**

Adolescent girls' passage to womanhood is frequently exposed to a vast array of media products. Mass communication products have become educational devices, guiding young women towards an understanding of femininity and all its accompanying intricacies. We are taught gender lessons throughout our lives, but our teen years are of special significance in this regard. In a society that is becoming all the more media saturated, advertisers are capitalising on different desires and ideals that are being constructed in the media. Initially, only adult women were targeted, but these days a number of mass media products aimed specifically at young women have opened up a whole new market.

Until a few years ago, South African teenage girls had only women's magazines aimed at adult women to refer to. These days, however, a number of teen magazine titles exist locally. The aim of this study was to look at teen magazines as an example of texts that are aimed specifically at adolescent women. More specifically, the study looked at the discourse on femininity within the pages of the text – what is the magazine in essence saying about womanhood?

To take the research one step further, it was decided to look at how readers of the magazine engaged and negotiated with the text in order to inform their own understanding of femininity. The goal of the study was to determine how the discourse on femininity played out between the text and the reader.

Combining quantitative and qualitative elements, the study was located within a cultural studies framework and referred to Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model as a representation of the communication process.

It was found that the magazine under scrutiny had twelve specific thematic categories that were most prominent. It was found that the femininity encoded in these texts revolved around consumerism, fashion and boys.

The study found that the readers taking part in focus group research possessed a sufficient amount of educational "cultural capital" to be able to resist the dominant messages encoded in the texts, yet they seemingly chose not to. This study also indicated that the femininity that was constructed in the studied text did not take the greater South African context into account, and that it served to entertain readers from higher LSM groups rather than all South African girls.

## **Acknowledgement**

Thanks to the Lord Jesus Christ, my wonderful parents as well as Gabriël Botma for your dedication to me and this project. You have opened my eyes to a world of possibilities.

## **Table of contents**

<b>Chapter 1: Research design</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background and research problem	3
1.3 Research focus	9
1.4 Literature review	9
1.4.1 Contextualising the study	9
1.4.2 Teen magazine research	11
1.5 Problem statement	12
1.6 Research questions	14
1.7 Research goals	14
1.8 Theoretical Approach	15
1.8.1 Cultural studies	15
1.8.1.1 Stuart Hall	18
1.8.1.2 Femininity as discourse	17
1.8.1.3 Post-structuralism	17
1.8.1.4 Feminist media studies	18
1.9 Methodology	19
1.10 Structure of the thesis	20
<b>Chapter 2: Theoretical framework</b>	<b>22</b>
2.1 Introduction	22
2.1 The cultural studies approach	22
2.3 Feminist theory	25
2.3.1 Feminism and cultural studies	25
2.3.2 Feminist media studies	26
2.3.3 Feminism in South Africa	27
2.4 Discourse	29
2.4.1 Defining discourse	29
2.4.2 Femininity as discourse	30
2.4.3 Analysing discourse	31
2.4.3.1 Stuart Hall	31
2.5 Concluding remarks	33

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

3.1 Introduction	34
3.2 Phase 1: Quantitative content analysis	34
3.3 Phase 2: Production research	36
3.4 Phase 3: Audience research	37
3.4.1 Focus group interviews	37
3.4.2 Selecting participants	38
3.5 Phase 4: Analysing interview transcripts	39
3.6 Concluding remarks	40

### **Chapter 4: Content analysis** **41**

4.1 Introduction	41
4.2 Discourse in <i>Seventeen</i>	41
4.2.1 Advertisements and advertorials	42
4.2.2 Fashion and make-up	44
4.2.3 Relationships (love)	47
4.2.4 Socio-cultural issues	49
4.2.5 Celebrity interviews	52
4.2.6 Music and film	55
4.2.7 Nutrition and exercise	55
4.8 Concluding remarks	57

### **Chapter 5: Audience research** **59**

5.1 Introduction	59
5.2 Focus group interviews	60
5.3 Girls' interpretation of the textual ideal	61
5.4 Interpretive repertoires	63
5.4.1 Repertoire of practical knowledge	63
5.4.2 Repertoire of collected knowing and emotional learning	66
5.4.3 Morality repertoire	69
5.4.4 Repertoire of patriotism	71
5.4.5 Repertoire of consumer know-how	74
5.5 Concluding remarks	76

<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion</b>	<b>77</b>
6.1 Introduction	77
6.2 Results	78
6.3 Conclusion	82
6.4 Recommendations for further research	85
<b>References</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Appendice</b>	<b>99</b>



# CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH DESIGN

## 1.1 Introduction

*“The world smiles favourably on the feminine woman” (Brownmiller, 1984, p. 15)*

Women’s engagement with the mass media reveals a fascinating dichotomy. Some will claim the media’s presentation of the feminine ideal to be unrealistic and simply unattainable, yet their consumption of texts prescribing these unrealistic ideals is persistent. Media texts (and the way they are interpreted by audiences) can therefore be said to play an intricate role in contemporary conceptions of femininity. Of all the different media where the discussion is prevalent, women’s magazines can arguably be placed at the forefront, and younger women are increasingly being exposed to media aimed specifically at them.

Margaret Mead (2005, p. 88-89) remarks that young people are no longer brought up by their parents, but rather by the mass media products that they choose to consume. Women’s magazines can be regarded as educational devices in the sense that they have “displaced a tradition of direct instruction by mothers and older women” (Beetham, 1996, p. 66).

Mass communication has created a type of peer pressure that overrides values taught by parents and society. According to Kilbourne (2002, p. 285):

[Adolescents] are in the process of learning their values and roles and developing their self-concepts. Most teenagers are sensitive to peer pressure and find it difficult to resist or even question the dominant cultural messages perpetuated and reinforced by the media.

Mead’s observation leads one to ask what these dominant cultural messages are. With the above observations in mind, it was decided to focus on a South African women’s magazine specifically aimed at the adolescent market. During my own teenage years, the only titles available in South Africa that were aimed at teenage girls were from the United States, dated copies sold at a fraction of their original price in second-hand bookstores. These days, however, a number of local teen magazine titles exist locally (such as *Seventeen*, *Saltwater Girl* and *Wicked*). I decided to focus specifically on *Seventeen* for three reasons:

1. *Seventeen* is South Africa’s “leading youth title” according to statistics

released in August 2008 (8inkmedia at [www.8inkmedia.com](http://www.8inkmedia.com)). The magazine posted a circulation of 37 774.

2. A scrutiny of international literature regarding adolescent magazines revealed that *Seventeen* was the teenage title most frequently referred to.
3. The fact that *Seventeen* is an international brand that is now published locally (with local content adding to the syndicated content) lends itself to an interesting discussion regarding the interaction between the global and local youth culture.

An investigation of *Seventeen*'s South African version, as well as a more in depth look at how readers respond to its content, would be an interesting academic point of entry into the local women's magazine market. With this study, I hoped to delve into the "mysterious" world of the adolescent girl's psyche, her engagement with these texts that surround women from a very young age and to understand how they make sense of the myriad of messages regarding femininity to which they are exposed.

However, as this study focuses on how girls read the text within a South African context, it will also look specifically at how femininity is constructed in the text, bearing the greater South African context in mind. As magazines are luxury commodities, the study will not necessarily be representative of the reading experience of the greater community of South African girls, but rather of those girls with a common socio-economic background, regardless of ethnic differences.

I would not consider myself a feminist ethnographer. On the contrary, I would not even necessarily consider myself a feminist, but my experience while I was researching this particular subject area was that a feminist framework (located within a cultural studies approach) allowed me, as a woman, greater scope and understanding. This project is not an attempt to either praise or condemn the feminist cause, nor is it my attempt to find incriminating evidence against women's magazines.

The goal is simple – I want to know what women's magazines are teaching young girls about femininity and also how young women make sense of these texts that are introducing them to the mysterious and exciting world of womanhood.

In a sense this project is thus of a personal nature. I did not approach the research with any conscious personal agenda, although I have to admit that my interpretation of the text is probably clouded by my own perspectives regarding womanhood. Yet I do hope that my research findings will speak for themselves and serve to shed light on the ever-elusive concept of femininity.

My particular approach will not necessarily be as "objective" as some researchers would prefer. It may be tainted by my personal views to some extent, but I would like to argue that this makes my approach all the more significant. In this

regard I would like to allow the feminist ethnographer Coates to speak on my behalf (1996, p. 14):

There is an enduring belief in the academic world that ‘truth’ (whatever that is) can only be arrived at via impartial research. On the contrary, I believe that all researchers are necessarily partial and that all research is subjective and political. I would argue that being ‘interested’ rather than ‘disinterested’ is strength, not a weakness: it means that I am engaged in what I do.

## **1.2 Background and research problem**

This study is based on Dorothy Smith’s (1988, p. 43) notion of femininity as being vested in a “textually mediated discourse”. An argument that the mass media play a role in defining the concept of femininity (and perhaps in women’s subjective understanding of the concept) alludes to Simon de Beauvoir’s idea that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (1984, p. 9), hereby drawing a distinction between sex and gender. Our gender (unlike our physical sex) is not determined biologically, but rather by the vast array of cultural constructions pertaining to (and in cases also prescribing a type of) femininity. Gender forms a part of every person’s identity and a person will integrate and express his or her gender in a particular way (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 14). Femininity, in other words, forms part of an individual’s gendered make-up.

As women engage with the discourse on femininity, they are in essence shaping themselves, as the discourse provides them with a space to make sense of their experience. Hall (1999, p. 56) says the following about discourse:

[discourse] produces a place for the subject (i.e. reader or viewer, who is also ‘subjected to’ discourse) from which its particular knowledge and meaning makes most sense. Not all will become subjects of a particular discourse. But those who do must locate themselves in the position from which the discourse makes the most sense, and thus become its ‘subjects’ by ‘subjecting’ themselves to its meanings, power and regulation. All discourses then construct subject-positions from which they alone make sense.

Discourse, in other words, assists us in shaping our gendered identity. In essence, the concept is difficult to define. For the purpose of the study, the following working definition by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000, p. 272) was found useful:

Discourse is an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning (e.g., words, structures, cohesion) that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a given audience/interlocutor. Furthermore, the external function or purpose can only be properly determined if one takes into account the context and participants (i.e., all the relevant situational, social and cultural factors) in which the piece of discourse occurs.

Following this definition, it becomes apparent that discourse takes place within a particular cultural context, a context in which women's magazines have the potential to shape consensual images and definitions of femininity (Currie, 1997, p. 455). These texts exert "cultural leadership" in struggles surrounding what it means "to be a woman" (McCracken, 1993, p. 3). This potential can be attributed to these texts "[shaping] both a woman's view of herself, and society's view of her" (Ferguson, 1983, p. 1). According to McCracken (1993, p. 3) there exists an "ostensibly common agreement about what constitute[s] the feminine" in magazines. This definition is achieved through a discursive struggle waging between words and pictures in women's magazines and the real world. Within a paradigm that views femininity as being culturally constructed, it can therefore be argued that women's magazines (as cultural leaders in defining femininity) play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of what it means to be feminine, a subject that is "slippery to grapple with" (Brownmiller, 1984, p. 37).

This study will look specifically at the *discourse* of femininity – in the pages of women's magazines as well as in women's interaction with these pages. It will be argued that discourse allows for the formation of particular practices and subject positions regarding femininity.

At this point one should establish a link between the portrayal of femininity (as discourse) and women's consumption of women's magazines. While reading any given women's magazine, women are subject to numerous interpretations and representations of femininity. According to Van Zoonen (1994, p. 124), feminine texts offer women "fantasy modes" to "try out different subjectivities" without the risks involved in real life. Drawing from Berger, Ellen McCracken's *Decoding women's magazines* show how these texts draw on women's insecurities by offering a glimpse of a "window to a future self" (1993, p. 13), which is rooted in "male visions of idealised femininity and consumer solutions" (Ouellette, 1999, p. 367). Femininity has, in other words, become essentially commoditised. According to Wolf (1990, p. 177):

[F]emininity is code for femaleness plus whatever society happens to be selling. If 'femininity' means female sexuality...women never lost it and don't need to buy it back.

Teen magazines, as a site of analysis of the discourse on femininity, is an important theoretical and also meaningful choice (Milkie, 2002, p. 845) for the discussion surrounding commoditisation and gender. There are two reasons for this:

1. Women's magazines focus explicitly on femininity and come "directly defined and packaged to girls and women in the form of a tangible product" (Milkie, 2002, p. 845), which make these texts an "optimal site to examine processes of critique of the feminine image" (ibid). McRobbie (1999, p. 46) notes that these texts have been singled out by feminists as "commercial sites of intensified femininity and hence ripe fields of analysis and critique".
2. Narrowly defined and unrealistic images of femininity have become common and also pervasive (Milkie, 2002, p. 845), and can be observed in other media (for example television and film) as well. With images of femininity that have become "narrowly defined" (as noted by Milkie, 2002), teenage girls are offered limited constructions of their gender and therefore a limited amount of subject positions to be taken up. In effect, the media therefore marginalise some girls while others experience unrealistic pressure to conform to these narrowly defined images.

The following specific research inquiries regarding the role of the media in teen girls' lives also interest me:

***1. The role of the media in girls' perception of femininity during the adolescent years – a period typically marked by uncertainty and peer pressure***

Gender lessons are constant throughout women's lives, but the adolescent years are a period of particularly intensive gender study for young women (Massoni, 2004, p.471). Furthermore, women are constructing their gender identities in a world that is becoming all the more media saturated (ibid), leaving one with the question of the media's role in young women's understanding of their femininity, given their exposure to popular culture from a very young age.

## ***2. The media's role in the construction of the feminine ideal***

The media's role in the construction of the feminine ideal (and how readers negotiate with this particular construction) is of particular interest to this study, especially in a society where femininity is often closely linked to the female physique and particular physical features. According to Smith (1990, p. 187), the discourse on femininity "structures desire" in such a way that women are led to believe that "there is always work to be done" (p. 187) as far as their physique is concerned. The body becomes a project that needs to be worked upon (ibid):

...it is the imperfection which motivates [the woman's] work. In it, she is situated as subject, she who stands at the beginning of her project. It is defined as she reflects on herself in terms of the discourse, examining her body to appraise its relation to the paradigmatic discourse.

This "beginning of [a women's] project" to improve her "imperfection[s]" poses as a very prominent selling point not only for women's magazines, but also for the products advertised in their pages. Within the same text, feminine ideals are described and the means of attaining those ideals are also offered via the consumption of particular products. In the process, a connection is made between femininity and the consumption of specific products (Donnelly, 2008). According to Ferguson (1983, p. 2), the prescriptive nature of women's magazines, combined with the power of advertising, amounts to a "very potent formula indeed for steering female attitudes, behaviour and buying along a particular path of femininity, and a particular female worldview of the desirable, the possible, the purchasable."

South African girls have greater spending power than ever before. A study conducted by Youth Dynamix in 2006 (Da Silva, 2006) found that the South African youth market constitutes 54% of the population, including approximately 13,5 million school-going children. "This means," the study emphasises, "the youth market is [a] highly lucrative with large amounts [of] disposable income and decision-making and power" (Da Silva, 2006), which is of course of significance to advertisers.

## ***3. How can the feminine ideal prescribed by teen magazines be characterised and how do teens engage with this construction to inform their own understanding of femininity?***

According to Winship (1987, p. 136) "it is one thing to describe the construction of femininity in magazines, another to suggest that readers identify with or behave in the

ways advocated.” Unlike adult women who seem to be “unaffected” by what they see in fashion magazines, according to Crane (1999), Peirce (1993, p. 66) found readers of teen magazines to be much more receptive to messages relayed in teen magazines. This study will therefore not look only at how femininity is constructed, but also at how readers relate to these constructions.

#### ***4. Research regarding teen magazines is a relatively uncharted territory within the South African media landscape***

Despite the fact that magazine titles in South Africa are enjoying an ever-growing readership (Mediatoolbox, 2004), the medium has received very little scholarly attention (relative to magazine-related studies undertaken in Great Britain and the USA, for example).

Minimal research has been done in South Africa concerning women’s magazines, and practically no studies have looked specifically at teen magazines. A literature review (including a perusal of the internet, the NRF-Nexus, Google and the Google Scholar search engines as well as the database of the J.S. Gericke Library of the University of Stellenbosch) revealed possible gaps that might be filled by the current study.

A search of the South African NRF-Nexus database revealed the following relevant studies relating to women’s magazine research:

- Of particular interest with reference to women’s magazine research within the South African media context is Lizette Rabe’s MA dissertation (1985) focusing on the establishment and development of *Sarie Marais* as a mass medium for the South African woman. Rabe’s research is significant in the sense that it demonstrates the role of *Sarie Marais* in constructing the South African woman as a consumer since its inception in the late 1940s.
- Donnelly’s Master’s dissertation (2001) discusses the construction of femininity in the adult women’s magazines *Cosmopolitan* and *True Love*<sup>1</sup>. Adopting a post-structuralist view on the gendered self as socially constructed within discourse and combining a textual with an audience analysis, Donnelly sought to determine whether these titles served as cultural development markers for young girls. Donnelly found that readers with a greater amount of “cultural capital” (educational credentials linked to relative material affluence) were more

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<sup>1</sup> At that stage, no teen magazines existed in South Africa.

successful at oppositional readings of the text.

- In 2007 Amelia de Vaal completed a study concerning women magazines as “socio-cultural journals”, with specific reference to the “socio-cultural discourse” regarding women and the career world that is to be found in magazines. De Vaal found that the magazines analysed did not necessarily reflect reality, but that readers derived pleasure and satisfaction from the almost larger-than-life dream aspects in the pages of the magazines.

This study seeks to fill the gap that was identified by Donnelly (2001) during her research on adolescent women’s engagement with women’s magazines. Since the completion of Donnelly’s study, a number of titles aimed at teenage girls surfaced in the South African media landscape.

##### ***5. What is the possible impact/influence of the media on teenagers in their understanding of femininity?***

It has been suggested that the mass media play a role in young women’s perception of femininity. Furthermore, it has also been suggested (Ballentine & Ogle, 2005, p. 285) that the mass media have a significant influence on young women:

Given the ubiquity of the media in society, it is difficult to assess the influence of any given media form on consumers. However, there is some empirical work suggesting that young women’s gender- and body-related attitudes and behaviours may be shaped, in part, by media messages targeting them.

The impact of the mass media is of considerable importance for the purpose of the current study, as it deals specifically with how young women engage with a sub-genre of the women’s magazine that is particularly focused on them and their expectations as consumers of the text.

There are two sides when it comes to the possible influence of the mass media on women’s perception of themselves and femininity. There are those who argue that the unrealistic, narrowly framed images of femininity create an “uneasy gap” for women between “an idealised image and the reality of their own appearance” (Milkie, 2002, p. 841). However, recent feminist enquiries question the media’s power to define femininity, advocating the perspective that women and girls alike *actively* criticise and even resist dominant images in the media (Milkie, 2002, p. 839-840).



### **1.3 Research focus**

In the light of the preceding discussion, this study will focus on *Seventeen* as an example of a text aimed specifically at teenage girls, as noted in the introduction. In 1.2 it was noted that I am specifically interested in how magazines influence women and girls. However, the current study is limited in scope and therefore I decided to focus on one specific magazine only. Furthermore, as it is a problem that cannot possibly be researched in one study, further research will be required.

Being an internationally recognised brand with a South African version that has been published monthly (occasionally bi-monthly) since November 2003 by 8 Ink Media (owned jointly by Media24), *Seventeen* lends itself to the purpose of this research. It was also anticipated that because some of the content is syndicated from the American version, interesting observations with regard to issues relating specifically to the South African context could serve as points of discussion.

The average age of the reader is 17 and, according to the latest ABC figures (reported on the magazine website at [www.media24.com](http://www.media24.com)), the magazine has a circulation of 37 774. Khwezi Magwaza is the editor.

The study was done within a cultural studies framework with the aim of combining methods from several research fields. It was essentially qualitative, but as it was inspired by scholars such as Silverman (2001), who argue for an inclusive approach to social research, it implemented some quantitative content analysis methods as well. The study looked at the discourse on femininity in the text of *Seventeen*, how readers make sense of it, and also what the role of the editor (as part of the production stage) was in the encoding of messages pertaining to femininity.

### **1.4 Literature review**

#### **1.4.1 Contextualising the study**

Women's magazines only became a subject of academic scrutiny with the emergence of feminist scholarship; this despite them being one of the most widely read media texts (Earnshaw, 1984, p. 11). Emerging in the midst of second-wave feminist thinking was Betty Friedan's *The feminine mystique* (1963). Arguing that the "highest value and only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity" (Friedan, 1963, p.37), Friedan perceived the mass media audience to be an anonymous mass of passive consumers. However, these and similar studies were eventually challenged by scholars of cultural studies, who highlighted the audience's active engagement with media texts (Hollows, 2000, p. 13).

On the basis of the assumption that readers struggled to identify with the presentation of femininity in the mass media, feminist scholars started focusing increasingly on the different images of women as portrayed in the mass media (Currie, 1999, p. 24). Through content analysis, the so-called misrepresentation of women in mass media was extensively documented, researched and condemned.

The socialisation of women into a supposedly homogeneous group was of particular interest to Ferguson (1983), whose study described women's magazines as creating a "cult of femininity", setting the agenda for the female world, complete with rituals of compliance with its demands. Her analysis also pointed to the mechanism of "exclusionary construction" found in the magazines she analysed – the woman addressed being white, heterosexual and valued for her youth, beauty and domestic virtue (Ferguson, 1983, p. 7). What all these studies had in common was a disregard for the reader's voice. It was simply assumed that readers were socialised by magazines and saw the world according to the priorities set out in these texts. Hence, there was no perceived need to interview the readers (Hermes, 1995, p. 2).

Content analysis seems to have been the most obvious way to explore women's magazines as text from the 1960s up until the early 1990s (Currie, 1999, p. 23). It was argued that content analysis "would provide a systematic and objective account of the substance and themes of cultural texts" (ibid). The method was therefore adopted by feminist scholars and implemented in such a way that it allowed for the substantiation of their critique and complaints towards the mass media as being biased towards women.

The 1980s saw an infusion of the study of popular culture as an academic discipline, fuelled in part by feminist scholars' inquiry of popular genres favoured by women (Hermes, 1995, p. 2). This marked the commencement of a significant transition in media studies. Researchers began writing about their own pleasures and pleasures in general and soon afterwards started focusing on how others found pleasure in popular texts (Vance, as cited in Hermes, 1995, p. 2). This resulted in the perspective of readers being included increasingly, although these perspectives were studied in a fairly limited way (Hermes, 1995, p. 2).

One of the first studies to look specifically at readers' interpretation of the text was that of Ballaster, R., Beetham, M., Frazer, E. & Hebron, S. (1991). Exploring how women's magazines hold women's interest and allow for reading pleasures (through the eyes of the readers), they found readers to be selective and loyal as far as their choice of magazines was concerned. However, Ballaster, *et al.* rejected the principle underlying the position that pleasure can be pure or authentic. They argued that the pleasure of consumption when it comes to these texts was in fact socially determined (Ballaster, *et al.*, 1991, p.161) and dictated as well as determined by the texts

(Ballaster, *et al.*, 1991, p. 162).

Of particular interest to the current study is Hermes's (1995) research into how women make sense of magazine texts in the context of their everyday lives. Hermes decided to abandon an academic reading of the text to reconstruct the diffused set of genres called women's magazines. Arguing that textual analysis privileges an academic reading of the text (which implies that the audience is passive and unable to negotiate with the text to suit it to their unique needs), she vouched instead for a study of how women's magazines become meaningful to readers through their own perception.

Focusing her study on the activity of magazine reading as a mundane act of everyday life, Hermes (1995) found the reading of magazines to be a secondary activity that provides ways of filling empty time without any significant meaning when it comes to everyday life.

Hermes employed what she called repertoire analysis as a means of categorising the allocation of magazines to a position in women's everyday lives. This method consists of identifying the "interpretive repertoires" readers refer to in order to make sense of their reading experience. Potter and Wetherell (1987, p. 149) define interpretive repertoires as "recurrently used systems of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions". Repertoire analysis is grounded in post-structuralist theory – according to Hermes (1995, p. 26) it is different from other forms of discourse analysis in the sense that it regards the reader as an "active and creative language user" and not merely as an "intersection of discursive structurings" (*ibid.*). This was of particular relevance to the current study, which looked specifically at the way readers interact with and make sense of the text.

#### **1.4.2 Teen magazine research**

One of the most cited studies on magazines for adolescents is Angela McRobbie's (1991) discussion of the British text *Jackie* and, more specifically, how the magazine's readers make sense of the text. Originally launched by the D.C. Thomson publishing group in 1964, *Jackie* became one of Britain's best-selling teen magazines, mixing pop music features with advice columns and romantic cartoon strips. McRobbie was deeply critical of its agenda and argued that the magazine promoted and reinforced traditional sex-role stereotyping and conceived *Jackie* to be a "massive ideological block in which readers were implicitly imprisoned" (McRobbie, 1991, p. 141).

Specifically with regard to *Seventeen*, a number of studies have focused on the North American version of the title. Questioning the text's role in the socialisation of

teenage girls, Peirce (1990) documented the changing construction of the adolescent and notions of adolescent femininity in *Seventeen*. Peirce (1990) analysed 12 issues of *Seventeen* for the years 1961, 1972 and 1985 from a feminist point of view to determine how the editorial content represented traditional as well as feminist messages regarding femininity. She found that the magazine reinforced traditional roles for young women through the text's perpetuation of physical beauty as the standard for women, and in doing so also promoted a traditional ideology of womanhood (1990, p. 495).

A similar study was conducted by Evans, E.D., Rutberg, J., Sather, C. and Turner, C., (1991), who analysed the content of three prominent North American teen magazines (including *Seventeen*) that were distributed during 1988. They found that fashion-related topics accounted for 35 per cent of the content (1991, p. 104) and concluded that the texts approached the theme of self-improvement largely through fashion dressing and physical beautification (1991, p. 110). Topics related to identity development (such as the pursuit of tertiary education) and citizen education (for example, articles on politics or the importance of voting) were found to be "virtually absent" (1991, p. 112).

A study by Ballentine and Ogle (2005) exploring content related to the feminine physique and its improvement in *Seventeen* from 1992-2003 revealed two main theoretical visions within *Seventeen*: 1) the making of body problems and 2) the unmaking of body problems. By constructing a physical ideal within its pages as well as bodywork regimes and dieting articles, the text was found to be sending mixed messages to adolescent women about their bodies.

### **1.5 Problem statement**

Women's magazines (and teen magazines for that matter) can be considered to be cultural products that are being mass-produced throughout the world. It has been suggested that the mass media play a role in young women's perception of femininity (Ogle & Thornburg, Garner, Sterk & Adams, as cited in Ballentine & Ogle, 2005, p. 282). Furthermore, it has also been suggested that the mass media have a significant influence on young women.

As was indicated by the preliminary study, including the literature review, teen magazines "[organise] adolescents' ways of thinking about femininity and what it means to 'act as women'" (Currie, 1999, p. 12). These texts can therefore be said to be one of the cultural voices in young women's passage from girlhood into womanhood. However, the extent of the role these "cultural voices" play in the lives of girls living in a South African context is virtually unknown.

A review of the literature has indicated that a study done by Donnelly (2001) investigated the role of women's magazines in the lives of young South African girls, but no South African study has looked specifically at the role of *teen magazines*. Contemporary teenagers are exposed increasingly to media specifically aimed at them and their needs as consumers. Young women are targeted by a myriad of television programmes, online communities and magazine texts claiming to have all the answers young women desire.

According to McLoughlin (2000, p. 101), advertisers (and for that matter fashion as well as cosmetic houses) draw on readers' desire to be attractive to the opposite sex. As a result, it is suggested that in order to be attractive, a great deal of labour is necessary, as well as the consumption of particular products, which readers are then encouraged to buy.

Ferguson (1983, p. 2) regards advertising as working with women's magazines and other elements to provide "a very potent formula indeed for steering female attitudes, behaviour and buying along a particular path of femininity, and a particular female worldview of the desirable, the possible, the purchasable."

Global youth culture is gravitating more and more towards an increased interest in consumerism, and youth culture as such is becoming commoditised. Miles (2000, p. 85) regards the relationship between youth culture and the commercial market to be of a mutually exploitative nature:

The proposition that young people actively engage with the mass media and to a degree forge in their own image is a sound one, but is only ever partially realised. Ultimately, the parameters within which young people are able to do so, are set down for them by a mass media that is inevitably constructed first and foremost on the need to sell magazines, programmes and what is essentially a consumerist way of life. Young people are therefore liberated and constrained by the mass media at one and the same time – it provides them with the canvass, but the only oils they can use to paint that canvass are consumerist ones.

This contradiction raises questions with regard to the role of these texts and how they inform young women's view of womanhood and femininity. Social texts are said to play a prominent role in young girls' perception of the world, but how big a role do they play in a society that is exposing teens to increasing imagery relating to their gender? This raises the following general questions – what are these teen magazine texts saying about femininity and how are audiences engaging with it?

According to Smith (1988, p. 39), femininity is not being imposed on women by the mass media, but they are actively taking part in the construction thereof:

Women aren't just the passive products of socialisation; they are active; they create themselves.

Women's active involvement in the construction of femininity claims a response from manufacturers, advertisers and the mass media – all of them shaping together the standards regarding femininity (Talbot, 1995, p. 145).

Having therefore argued that the mass media play an integral role in young women's passage to adulthood, this study looked expressly at the role of media specifically targeted at adolescent women. The significance of this inquiry was the investigation of the media's role in the construction of femininity and young women's negotiation with it.

## 1.6 Research questions

I pursued the following as my main research question:

How do teenage girls **negotiate** with the **discourses on femininity** in *Seventeen* to inform their own understanding of femininity?

Bearing my primary research question in mind, I pursued the following secondary research questions

1. Which dominant themes relating to femininity can be identified in *Seventeen*?
2. How are the discourses on femininity constructed in *Seventeen*?
3. Which interpretive repertoires do South African adolescent girls refer to in order to make sense of the discourse on femininity as portrayed in *Seventeen*?

## 1.7 Research goals

With the main research question as well as the secondary research questions in mind, the following research goals were formulated:

1. Explore which dominant themes relating to femininity are present in the text of *Seventeen*.
2. Explore the editorial role in the construction of the content and thus the production perception of the way femininity is constructed in the magazine.

3. Explore how readers of *Seventeen* engage with the presentation of femininity in *Seventeen*.

Ultimately, the goal of this study was to investigate readers' personal, subjective understanding of femininity and their interaction with *Seventeen* as a text prescribing a particular ideal.

## **1.8 Theoretical approach**

In order to address the research questions outlined in 1.6, this study employed theories and methods from the field of critical cultural studies. Most contemporary studies into women's magazines can be located within a critical cultural studies framework, an approach that is essentially interdisciplinary and that regards media consumption as part of a greater socio-cultural context. Cultural studies can be distinguished from other disciplines (such as sociology and anthropology) by the characteristic combination of politics and methodology (Hermes, 2006, p. 170).

### **1.8.1 Cultural studies**

As a response to Marxist theory, cultural studies have emerged as a major site of development regarding theories focusing on cultural production and consumption (Franklin, S., Lury, C. & Stacey, J., 1992, p. 93-94). It is not an "easily defined academic subject", but among its features is its inherent challenge to the approaches of more traditional disciplines to power relations (Franklin, *et al.*, 1992, p. 94).

The focus of cultural studies is not necessarily the aesthetic aspects of any given text, but rather what these texts reveal about the social system in which they are located (Silverblatt, A., Ferry, J. & Finan, B., 1999, p. 3). One of the main areas of investigation of cultural studies is the media, which are believed to present a worldview that not only reflects or reinforces culture, but also in fact shapes thinking by promoting the dominant ideology of a culture (Silverblatt, *et al.*, 1999, p. 4).

Ideology has frequently been described as a problematic term in the sense that it is not easy to define. Fourie (2001, p. 244) offers a rather straightforward definition:

[I]t consists in the patterns of ideas, belief systems and interpretive schemes found in a society or among specific people groups.

The fact that ideology is referred to as "patterns" implies in a sense that ideology as such is part of our everyday socio-cultural context. Marchak (1988, p. 2) notes how

ideologies become common sense:

Ideologies are screens through which we perceive the world...They are seldom taught explicitly and systematically. They are rather transmitted through example, conversations and causal observation.

### **1.8.1.1 Stuart Hall**

On the theoretical front of cultural studies, Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model (1981) has "proved to be particularly influential" (Barker, 2003, p. 30). Typical of earlier authoritative presentations of British cultural studies, Hall was among those who stressed the importance of a "transdisciplinary approach to the study of culture that analysed its political economy, process of production and distribution, textual products and reception by the audiences" (Kellner, 1997, p. 19). Hall's "encoding/decoding" model, for example, traces the articulations of a "continuous circuit", encompassing "production-distribution-consumption-production" (ibid), while traditional mass communication research conceptualised the communication process as being a type of circulation circuit or loop (Hall, 1991, p. 128).

Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model was identified by Barker (2003, p. 30) to be of particular relevance in the field of cultural studies, especially in a case such as this where the audience's engagement with the text is concerned. The relevance of Hall's model for the current study was due to its emphasis on the non-linear aspects of mass communication (this study focused on discourse, which is essentially also non-linear in nature).

Within Hall's model, encoding refers to the process by which the media construct a message in order to elicit a preferred reading from audiences. Central to the encoding stage of the process are media professionals (such as editors, which will be discussed and demonstrated in chapter 4). It has to be noted, however, that the encoding process is not closed: messages are polysemic in nature and can be decoded in different ways, which links to the other phase of the communication process, namely decoding (the different meanings audiences gather from texts) (Rojek, 2007, p. 44)

Hall's model is a good fit for an overarching approach to the discussion of femininity as discourse in the teen magazine text.



### 1.8.1.2 Femininity as discourse

According to Smith (1988, p. 55), the discourse on femininity as found in Western women's magazines constructs girls and women as consumers. Smith (*ibid*) regards femininity as an active enterprise in which women construct their femininities through interaction with the media and the consumption of products (Smith, 1988, p. 39).

Smith's notion of femininity as discourse implies that women are "active subjects and agents" (1990, p. 161). Women are "creating themselves", and everything they do (which includes self-creation) is coordinated with consumerism. It is a textually mediated discourse that is vested in a "dialectic relationship" between the "active and creative subject" and the "market and productive organisation of capital" (*ibid*).

### 1.8.1.3 Post-structuralism

The assumption that the definition of femininity occurs at the level of discourse, is essentially post-structuralist. A post-structuralist position advances the notion that subjectivity (femininity) is *determined* rather than determining (Valverde, 1985, p. 183). Within post-structuralist thought, language becomes the site of the cultural production of gender identity and subjectivity is regarded as being discursively constructed (Talbot, 1995, p. 143). Discourse, in other words, contributes to our perception of self. Women engage with different subject positions found in text, and will select certain subject positions over others. New subject positions are constantly being taken up, constructed and enacted through our discourse practices (*ibid*). This perspective makes it clear that our sense of identity is vested in discourse and therefore changeable. According to Weedon (1997, p. 102):

A poststructuralist position on subjectivity and consciousness relativizes the individual's sense of herself by making it an effect of discourse which is open to continuous redefinition and which is constantly slipping.

Of relevance for feminist researchers is Foucault's view that power operates as knowledge through human bodies to produce women as gendered subjects. The conversion between Foucault and feminism arises from the view of both schools that knowledge has bodily effects (Currie, 1999, p. 16). Foucault's conceptualisation of power is crucial to feminist theory, as it accounts for the individual subject's choice to resist oppression (Mills, 2004, p. 38). Marxist theory views language as a vehicle whereby people are forced to believe ideas that are untrue and not necessarily of

interest to them (Mills 2004, p. 38), but Foucault regards language as the site where the struggle for power is being acted out. According to Foucault (1981, p. 52-53):

As history constantly teaches us, discourse is not simply that which translates into struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which we struggle.

Much of Foucault's work on discourse is intricately linked to discussions regarding ideology (Mills, 2004, p. 28). At times he defines discourse in relation to ideology (*ibid*). Traditional conceptions of ideology do not allow for different effects to be experienced by different groups of women (Mills, 2004, p. 78), but Foucault's conception allows for women to have different experiences with dominant messages (as will be demonstrated in chapter 5).

#### **1.8.1.4 Feminist media studies**

According to De Jong (1992, p. 123-124), feminism can be defined as the practice and theory that centre around and are aimed at the recognition of the suppression of women and the reparation of their rights on economic, political and cultural terrains. More specifically, feminism refers to activism – the movements or ideals taking up the struggle or the equal rights of women while acting as women (*ibid*). According to Fourie (2001, p. 385), one should recognise that feminist theory itself is a complicated and a contested terrain incorporating a wide variety of attitudes and assumptions.

Van Zoonen (1994, p. 105) maintains that most feminist projects regarding media actually have the audience as their main focus, whether one is studying sex role stereotypes or sexist media content. At the centre of these projects is the woman as the receiver of these messages.

A major reason for the increased popularity in studying media audiences as opposed to texts lies in the “textual determinism” associated with content, semiotic and psychoanalytic approaches to media content (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 105). A feminist framework therefore calls for a more audience-based approach, as noted by Lewis (1991, p. 47):

If we are concerned with the meaning and significance of popular culture in contemporary society, with how culture forms work ideologically or politically, then we need to understand cultural products (or “texts”) *as they are understood by audiences*” (*italics in original*).

Teen magazines, in other words, are seen from this vantage point as products situated within the context of a particular culture, and the discourse on femininity as it plays out in the text cannot be seen in isolation from the cultural context in which it takes place. However, this ideology is not something that can only be read off the texts, one needs to take the audience into account, as was noted by Lewis above.

According to some scholars, consumerism and the media have effectively undermined the feminist cause by incorporating the ideology of feminism into consumerist culture by adopting surface terminology of the counter discourse on feminism (Macdonald, 1995, p. 92). This aspect will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.

## **1.9 Methodology**

This study was essentially qualitative, but also employed quantitative methods to gather information. In the words of Kirk and Miller (1986, p. 10):

By our pragmatic view, qualitative research does imply a commitment to field activities. It does not imply a commitment to innumeracy.

Integrating quantitative elements into a qualitative approach allows the reader to “gain a sense of flavour of the data as a whole” (Silverman, 2001, p. 35). It also allows the researcher to test certain generalisations (*ibid*).

The relationship between producer, text and audience is one of the key issues in audience studies (Rayner, P., Wall, P. & Kruger, S, 2004, p. 96). It is an equation that is essentially about a balance of power and assesses the degree to which audiences are “influenced and swayed by media texts”, and to what extent this is appropriated in ways that might differ quite extensively from the producer’s intentions (*ibid*).

Central to the work carried out in the 1970s and 1980s at the Centre for Cultural Studies (CCS) during what many consider to be the founding stages of British cultural studies, was an attempt to devise a model that would account for the operation of the communication process within a specific cultural context (McCabe, 2004, p. 39). Stuart Hall’s “preferred reading theory” (originally devised in 1973) proposed an encoding/decoding model (*ibid*). Encoding happens in the domain of the producer, while decoding happens in the domain of the audience (Rayner, *et al.*, 2004, p. 96), which means messages have to be encoded in such a way that audiences are able to decode them. Rooted in Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, the model regards text as being polysemic and able to elicit different responses from its audience (*ibid*).

Research in the current study occurred in three phases with the purpose of

addressing and answering one general and three more specific research questions, and consisted of an eclectic approach that is typical of cultural studies research. Cultural studies moves beyond the deterministic nature of Marxist studies to explore the cultural aspects relating to power relations (Franklin, *et al.*, 1992, p. 94).

In order to analyse interview transcripts, repertoire analysis was employed. Repertoire analysis is a method that was developed by two social psychologists and works with the concept of “interpretive repertoires” as a means of analysing discourse (Hermes, 1995, p.26). Repertoire analysis is grounded in post-structuralist theory, but regards the social subject as “an active and creative language user” (*ibid*). This is in contrast to traditional post-structuralist anti-humanist notion of the human subject as being the origin of stable meanings (Barker, 2003, p.17).

Interpretive repertoires refer to the “ways of speaking and writing which are already in the culture and which are available to be drawn on by social actors in their everyday dealings with each other” (McGhee & Miell, 1998, p. 69). These repertoires may be evoked in conversations or texts and offer a means of classifying incidents, problems and ideas in terms of constructions that are available in a culture (*ibid*). They may also contain components such as “true love” narratives, “loyalty at all cost” theme etc. (*ibid*).

Repertoire analysis (the method of identifying these repertoires that are evoked by readers to make sense of their reading experience) will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3) and used to analyse interview transcripts (results discussed in chapter 5).

## **1.10 Structure of the thesis**

The thesis consists of five chapters, which will be presented as follows:

### **Chapter 1: Background, problem statements and research goals**

The background, relevant literature and relevant theoretical approaches are discussed.

### **Chapter 2: Literature review and theoretical framework**

A more thorough exploration of relevant literature and theoretical approaches will be covered in this chapter.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The research is divided into four phases and discussed accordingly.

**Chapter 4: Content analysis**

The content of 12 copies of *Seventeen* (published over one calendar year) is analysed and discussed. (An interview with *Seventeen* editor Khwezi Magwaza is incorporated into the discussion on the encoding phase of the communication process.)

Secondary research questions 1 and 2 will be addressed in this chapter, which will look specifically at themes relating to femininity in the magazine.

**Chapter 5: Audience research**

Results from focus group discussions will be presented and analysed using discourse analysis (the decoding phase of the communication process).

Secondary research question 3 will be addressed.

**Chapter 6: Conclusions**

Results will be discussed and main research questions will be answered. Conclusions and recommendations will be offered.

## **CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Culture has become an increasingly intense site of struggle with multiple dimensions afforded to it in a so-called post-modern society, making cultural studies “very much the intellectual discipline (or trans-discipline) of the moment” (Ang 2005, p. 478). Furthermore, the prominence cultural studies gives to the context within which cultural products are consumed makes it of particular relevance for this study.

In order to address the central/main research question, the following theoretical approaches/theories are relevant:

- Cultural studies
- Discourse theory
- Feminist theory
- Audience studies

The chapter starts by outlining the theoretical terrain of cultural studies as well as highlighting some of the critique levelled at this field of interest/research. The discussion on cultural studies is followed by a discussion on the cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model and also mentions audience research. Feminist theory and the relationship of the field with cultural studies is discussed, followed by a discussion on discourse theory (with reference to theorists Michel Foucault and Dorothy Smith).

### **2.2 The cultural studies approach**

According to Corner (1991, p. 131), culture concerns “the conditions and the forms in which meaning and value are structured and articulated within a society”. The origin of cultural studies, like the methodologies related to a cultural studies approach, is somewhat mixed and includes the literary and linguistic analysis of texts, semiology as well as Marxist theory (McQuail, 2005, p. 384).

Cultural studies is not exempt from criticism. A problematic theme concerning cultural studies is the insistence of the field that culture should be regarded as a “site of semiotic warfare” – in other words, an arena where tactics are implemented to resist the meanings ascribed to popular products by producers (Barker, 2003, p. 36). This rests on the theoretical assumption that culture is somehow autonomous, leading critics of cultural studies to argue that it has moved too far away from critical thinking

and political economy (*ibid*).

However, it should be noted that an active audience (as proposed by cultural studies) does not imply “inevitable resistance to ideology”. A cultural studies approach assists the researcher in coming to terms with the contextual nature of media consumption, as noted by Barker (2003, p. 39):

We would be well advised to talk not of an audience so much as audiences who construct a range of meanings in the context of the wider circumstances in their lives. This process depends on people’s engagement with discourses found in other cultural sites. That is, we use discursive resources that spring from one zone of our lives to resist discourses that are embedded in an alternative cultural text.

In her study concerning the discourse related to work in South African and Dutch women’s titles, De Vaal (2007) refers to Guerin, *et al.* (2005) in order to connect her study with a cultural studies approach. According to Guerin, *et al.* (2005, p. 277-279) cultural studies approaches usually have the following common goals (each will be discussed in terms of its relevance to the current study):

### ***1. Cultural studies transcends the confines of one particular discipline***

Cultural studies is generally regarded as a broad-based academic field or inquiry and characterised as an interdisciplinary enterprise that developed in many different contexts and directions (White & Schwoch, 2006, p. 3). The intellectual focus of the discipline can be defined by a broad set of overarching theories on the one hand, and its investigation of the vast array of cultural objects on the other (White & Schwoch, 2006, p. 2).

Within this approach, the concept of “text” takes on a completely new meaning and can refer to a vast array of cultural forms of expression, including graffiti art, body piercings, pop music, cartoon strips or social groupings (Guerin, *et al.*, 2005, p. 277). According to De Vaal (2007, p. 84) this particular characteristic of “texts” within a cultural studies approach forces the researcher to work across different theoretical fields. In step with a cultural studies approach, this study also refers to a myriad of related theoretical fields, such as feminist media studies, discourse theory and also audience studies.

### ***2. Cultural studies is politically engaged***

The body of work that has resulted from a cultural studies perspective has, through

textual analysis and audience reception studies, highlighted dominant messages encoded in media content, underscored those that have experienced marginalisation and also emphasised the significance of these practices (Valdivia, 2003, p. 364). Cultural studies questions the power structures and inequalities in society, working from the assumption that any cultural activity is a construction that can either be broken down or reconstructed (De Vaal, 2007, p. 84). This perception renders to such an approach the assumption that any cultural position is socially constructed. Teresa de Lauretis (as cited in Guerin, *et al.*, 2005, p. 237) sums it up as follows:

There is nothing outside or before culture, no nature that is not always and already encultured.

According to De Vaal (2007, p. 85), such an approach highlights any given magazine's persuasive, educational as well as norm-establishing influences that are transmitted via its editorial goals as well as its content. If one applies this to the current study and its focus on "the discourse on femininity" in teen magazines, it would refer to the construction of the assumptions of what the feminine woman wears, where (if/why/how) she shops, how she engages with men (and women) on a relational level and also what is expected of her in society in her capacity as a woman. It also begs the question how these expectations are generated and how women engage with them, in other words, the different (levels of) power inscribed in these relationships and thus the degree of freedom to resist.

### ***3. Cultural studies denies the separation between high and low/elite and popular culture***

Historically, the character of the new mass culture made possible by mass communication was one of the first questions on the cultural agenda (McQuail, 2005, p. 114). Popular culture products were regarded as "low culture" and initially the aim was to "redeem the people on whose supposedly 'low tastes' the presumed low quality of mass culture was often blamed" (McQuail, 2005, p. 115). The end of World War II, however, arguably coincided with the fall of the distinction between high and low culture and, as a result, the focus was no longer on which products were the "best" cultural products, but rather on describing *what* is being produced as well as the relationship between the different producers (De Vaal, 2007, p. 85).

An investigation of magazines as a product of women's everyday lives therefore links to this particular goal, the goal of investigating the different elements at work in the production of popular culture products. Having been regarded for a



long time as products of a lower standard (and stature than, for example, literary works), women's magazines are now considered worthwhile texts to investigate academically. In addition, to overcome this division between high and low culture, the current study favours readers' reports on their everyday experience with the particular discourse in the text. In this last respect the example was set by Hermes (1995).

#### ***4. Cultural studies not only analyses the cultural product, but also the production process***

Culture and cultural products are not developed in a vacuum, but form part of larger sociological processes. The relationship between the product, producer and consumer is of particular interest to cultural studies and an investigation of, for example, where a magazine is published, or revealing more about the readers will give a good indication of the greater cultural processes at work (De Vaal, 2007, p. 86). According to Guerin, *et al.* (2005, p. 279):

Cultural studies thus joins *subjectivity* – that is, culture in relation to individual lives – with *engagement*. (emphasis in the original)

Subjectivity refers to “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1987, p. 288). Teens' engagement with the text can be seen as a significant “moment” in the production process and will be investigated by this study.

### **2.3 Feminist theory**

#### **2.3.1 Feminism and cultural studies**

There is a close link between feminism and cultural studies, possibly inspired by their mutual concern with manifestations of popular culture and issues of representation and collective identities (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 6). Both disciplines also demonstrate an exploration of the connections between experience and theory (Franklin, *et al.*, 1991, p. 2). The feminist movement is said to have played an integral role in the development of modern cultural studies (Tudor, 1999, p. 137) and also to have “transformed” it. According to Hollows (2000, p.25):

The idea that the personal is political opened up the range of areas studied in cultural studies and forced critics not only to reflect on how they conceptualised

power relations but also on how these power relations were bound up with issues of gender and sexuality.

Feminists working in the field of cultural studies started working towards an understanding of the so-called textual spectator to “a consideration of the continuity between women’s interpellation as spectators and their status as a social audience” (Kuhn, 1992, p. 310). This investigation of socio-cultural readership soon started to reveal, however, a “gap between feminism and real women, between political ideology and personal experience, between how feminist theory interpreted texts and how actual women audiences made use of them (McCabe, 2004, p. 38). An alliance with cultural studies made it possible to approach this relationship between texts and women audiences differently for the first time, as it introduced different methodologies and research protocols to the field (*ibid*).

The emergence of the so-called “Second Wave feminist movement” (the ideas and practices associated with the Women’s Movement during the 1960s and 70s) coincided with the development of post-structuralist theory, both fields having a strong link to progressive and radical political movements outside the academic domain (Tudor, 1999, p. 137; Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 6; Franklin, *et al.*, 1992, p. 90).

### **2.3.2 Feminist media studies**

The feminist interest in media studies was greatly affected by a development in the 1970s when the distinction was drawn for the first time between sex (based on biological differences) and gender (masculinity/femininity) (Carter & Steiner, 2004, p. 3). Arguing that gender was a social construction rather than a “natural fact” implied that no universal or homogenous definitions of gender that were applicable across all cultures existed (*ibid*). This distinction proved to be crucial within the second wave feminist framework, as it accounted for the way women were “colonised” by patriarchy (Hollows, 2000, p. 10).

Building on this movement that started in the 1970s, feminism experienced an “extensive turn to culture” in the early nineties (Barrett & Phillips, 1992, p. 204) and moved away from focusing on the models of social structure (be it capitalism or patriarchy) to questions on meaning, sexuality and political agency. The mid-1980s saw post-modern and post-structuralist theory registering an impact on feminist approaches to popular media (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 11). This resulted in feminist researchers (drawing on post-modernists and post-structuralists like Foucault) recognising that the meanings in women’s magazines were not “waiting to be discovered” by researchers, but instead that they started considering the concept of

discourse (*ibid*). According to Van Zoonen (1994, p. 107) the focus has shifted from an analysis of social and economic structures to people's engagement with these structures (in other words how they make sense of them). This can be seen as a shift to cultural studies.

Feminists like Ferguson (1983) and Wolf (1991) have all drawn attention to the perpetuation of what Wolf refers to as the "beauty myth" in women's magazines. Women are made to believe that by engaging in the proper routines of beautification (be it exercise, surgery or diet) they may achieve the idealised presentation of femininity being portrayed in these texts. "Culture" is gaining new importance on not only the academic, but also on the feminist agenda (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 5).

### **2.3.3 Feminism in South Africa**

While feminists in the Western world were debating the presentation of the feminine ideal in mass media texts, South African feminists were enveloped in a struggle of their own. South Africa's unique political and cultural landscape has offered feminism quite a challenging project.

Because they come from different racial and cultural backgrounds, South African women's lives have been shaped by huge differences (Frenkel, 2008, p. 1). It is estimated that 53% of the South African population is women, concentrated specifically within the rural areas (Steyn, 1998, p. 42). This can largely be attributed to the Apartheid labour laws that saw black women being marginalised (*ibid*). The Apartheid years saw white women under the Roman-Dutch law while African and Muslim women were being "subsumed under a greater discredited system of customary law<sup>2</sup>". Even today, great socio-economic differences still exist between white women and their black counterparts (Steyn, 1998, p. 42).

All cultural differences aside, however, patriarchy has been the constant "profoundly non-racial institution[s]" in South Africa (Sachs, 1990, p. 1), which results in a rather unique feminist movement within the South African context. In the past, black and white women were subject to very different rights (Fourie, 2001, p. 407). Furthermore, with feminism having its origins in the West, black women were sceptical towards and suspicious of it as they saw their struggle to be more of a political than a gendered nature (*ibid*). In 1998, however, four years after the first

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<sup>2</sup> Customary law is a type of codification of African law, but in effect amounted to a colonial construction, a "judge-made common law" It resulted in separate legislatures for whites and others and effectively led to a severe form of oppression by the Apartheid government. This so-called "living law" has been particularly contested in terms of the impact it has on women (Gwagwa, 1994, p.103).

racially inclusive democratic elections had been held in South Africa, Steyn argued that an authentic feminist movement was being constructed (Steyn, 1998, p. 43). With the feminist movement moving away from its former “largely white upper class intellectual profile of the apartheid era”, South African feminists had the opportunity to shape feminism from the ground up (*ibid*).

Feminism has a rich history within the South African context, but (like in the rest of the world) is seemingly disregarded by younger generations of women. Amanda du Preez (2006), affiliated with the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Pretoria in South Africa as well as the Institute for Women and Gender Studies at the same university, remarks the following with regard to SA women in general:

When you ask young women (18-24 years) whether they are feminists, the answer is an overwhelming *no*. They do display a degree of sympathy towards cases regarding women empowerment and gender inequalities, but they are most definitely not feminists.

This seems to be the international experience as well. Contemporary young women seem to be living off the royalties of the feminist struggle without buying into the very philosophy that has contributed to the “de-traditionalisation” of their lives (McRobbie, 2000, p. 210). Few young women identify with feminism, they find it “old and weary” (*ibid*). Feminism to them refers to the battles fought by their mothers in the 1970s, before most of them were born (McRobbie, 2000, p. 212). According to McRobbie (1999, p. 126), there is a new kind of feminism prevalent in young women’s lives, namely popular feminism. It is a feminism that has moved out of the political arena into the mainstream of young women’s lives. According to McRobbie (1999, p. 126):

To [contemporary] young women official feminism is something that belongs to their mothers’ generation. They have to develop their own language for dealing with sexual inequality, and if they do this through a raunchy language of ‘shagging, snogging and having a good time’, then perhaps the role this plays is not unlike the sexually explicit manifestoes found in the early writings of [feminist figures] Germaine Greer and Sheila Rowbotham. The key difference is that this language is now found in the mainstream of commercial culture – not out there in the margins of the ‘political underground’.

This is rather apparent in magazines for young women, which are emphatic in their

insistence that women must do their own thing (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 251). This being said, one has to ask whether feminism has a place in contemporary texts at all. According to Jackson (1996, p. 57), the content of magazines has not changed at all and they still portray the woman as being a sexually provocative creature. According to McRobbie (1999, p. 55), however, feminism exists as “a productive tension” in the pages of these texts. She recognises a simultaneous dependence upon and disavowal of the feminist movement. According to McRobbie (1999, p. 55):

[feminism] has become both common sense and a sign of female, adult authority. This generation proves itself to be a stronger and more divisive force than might have been expected. Young women want to prove that they can do without feminism as a political movement, while enjoying its success in culture and in everyday life.

As it becomes apparent in the literature, feminism has had a rather rocky relationship with what goes on between the pages of women’s magazines. This issue was also explored in relation to *Seventeen*.

## **2.4 Discourse**

### **2.4.1 Defining discourse**

Studying the content of discourse has taught researchers a lot about the normative conception of “appropriate womanly and manly behaviours that pervade a variety of mass media, ranging from newspapers for the general public to magazines for adolescent girls” and has also allowed society to see how the world becomes a gendered place (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 127).

Defining discourse, however, is not a simple task. The term ‘discourse’ has been used by researchers in a variety of ways by a number of disciplines, such as linguistics, psychology and literature studies. Like femininity, it is a concept that is difficult to pin down to one specific definition.

Within a cultural studies framework, discourse comes to take on a very particular meaning and function. Van Dijk (1997, p. 2) regards discourse as a “practical, social and cultural phenomenon”. Engaging with particular discourses in society leads to a dialogue, which in other words ultimately then manifests itself in cultural practices. This interaction with discourse is “embedded in various social and cultural contexts” (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 2).

The working definition offered in chapter 1 (by Celce-Murcia & Olshtain

2001, p. 272) also alludes to the notion of discourse as being part of a greater socio-cultural context. Within a mass media framework, argues De Vaal (2007, p. 90), discourse implies that the producer of the message (in this case the magazine producer) and the recipient (the one interpreting the message) share a specific frame of reference or worldview.

#### **2.4.2 Femininity as discourse**

According to Smith (1988, p. 55) the discourse on femininity as found in Western women's magazines constructs girls and women as consumers. Smith (*ibid*) regards femininity as an active enterprise in which women construct their femininities through interaction with the media and the consumption of products (Smith, 1988, p. 39).

Smith's notion of femininity as discourse implies that women are "active subjects and agents" (1990, p. 161). Women "creating themselves" and everything they do (which includes self-creation) is coordinated with consumerism. It is a textually mediated discourse that is vested in a "dialectic relationship" between the "active and creative subject" and the "market and productive organisation of capital". Such discourses on femininity clearly serve a commercial purpose, creating a "motivational structure", which ensures that the purchaser will return to particular products again and again (Smith, 1990, p. 263).

In their study, *Women's Worlds: Ideology and the woman's magazine*, Ballaster, *et al.* (1991) explore the pleasures of the popular magazine for women. A substantial part of the study was devoted to investigating women's experience with the magazine text, looking specifically at the prevalent discourse to be found in these texts. Ballaster, *et al.* found the discourse manifested in women's magazines to be forged through the "meshing of discourses *that co-exist elsewhere in modern culture*" (Ballaster, *et al.*, 1991, p. 162 - emphasis added). Upholding certain ideologies (or positions of power) can be achieved, for example, through the discursive power of social texts.

Foucault (as cited in Currie, 1999, p. 15) describes power as systems of knowledge prescribing certain standards and ideals (also as far as femininity is concerned) that operate through and are implicated by texts such as those in the teen magazines selected for the purposes this study. As social texts, teen magazines "inform daily life" so to speak. Power, in other words, is not seated solely in dominating institutions, but is constantly circulating throughout the social body (*ibid*). Currie (*ibid*) interprets this as follows:

Power acts through regimes of truth embodied in social texts which make

specific discourses and their effects possible...power, through discourse, is productive – it ‘produces’ social life.

For Foucault, discourse is the key to understanding the structure of societies, human interaction as well as power relations (Babin & Harrison, 1999, p. 275). In a Foucauldian sense, discourse represents statements or texts that are shaped by common beliefs, values and interpretations. Within this definition, society becomes a complex field in which different discourses compete for power. According to Foucault, as we take part in a particular discourse, we are constructing subject positions for ourselves (and in the event also subscribing to the regulatory power of that discourse) (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 31).

### **2.4.3 Analysing discourse**

#### **2.4.3.1 Stuart Hall**

Compared to earlier communication models (such as Gerbner, 1956; Lasswell, 1948; Shannon & Weaver, 1963), Hall’s encoding/decoding model does not present a radical change (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 3). It also approaches mass communication as a process whereby “certain messages are sent and then received with certain effects” (*ibid*). Where the model differs from its predecessors, however, is that it involves a shift from a technical to a semiotic approach to messages (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 3), which regards the message not as a “package or a ball that the sender throws to the receiver”. Hall regards the message as being encoded by a producer and then decoded by the receivers. The sent and received messages are therefore not necessarily identical.

Hall proposes a model of three hypothetical reading positions (Hall 1999, p.136-138):

- the dominant-hegemonic encoding/decoding that accepts the ‘preferred meanings’
- a negotiated code that acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic in the abstract, but makes its own rules and adaptations under particular circumstances
- an oppositional code where people understand the preferred encoding, but reject it and decode in contrary ways.

A dominant reading is produced by a recipient who agrees with and thus accepts the dominant ideology and also the meaning that it offers (Fourie, 2001, p. 376). Within the context of this study, this position would imply that readers accept the preferred reading of the text regarding the definition of femininity. Such a view would of course be beneficial to advertisers who capitalise on the acceptance of particular

constructions that legitimise the purchase of their products.

A negotiated reading, on the other hand, is proposed by recipients who “fit into the preferred reading of the dominant ideology in general, but who need to modify it to meet the needs of their specific social situation” (Fourie, 2001, p. 376). Such recipients will therefore adjust the dominant ideology to fit their own needs. Applied to this study, this implies that girls will recognise prescriptions regarding femininity, but adjust them to fit their needs, personality or social situation.

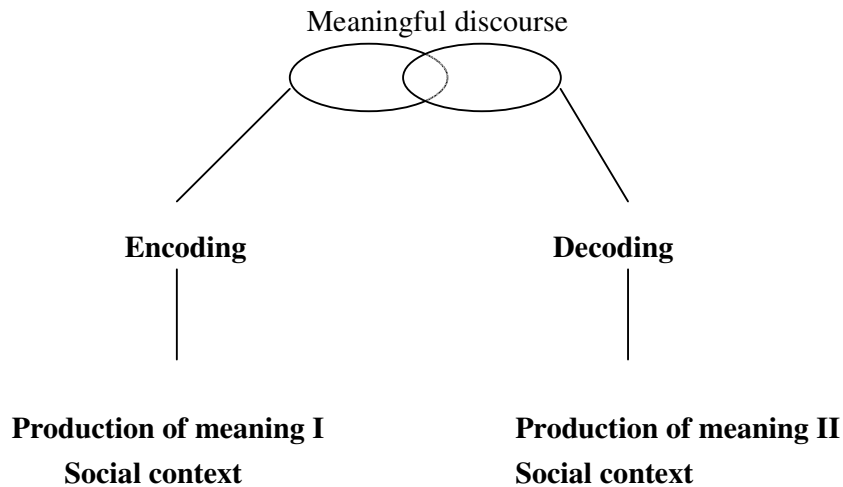
Thirdly, an oppositional reading position is produced by individuals “whose social situation and experience put them in direct opposition to the dominant ideology, and who understand both the literal and connotative meaning of the text, but intentionally decode or deconstruct it in a contrary or subversive manner” (Fourie, 2001, p. 376-377). Such a reading would then of course imply a complete rejection of whatever is prescribed in the magazine regarding appropriate feminine behaviour or appearance.

Hall’s notion of “preferred reading” is applied to research material in chapters 4 and 5. The encoder (in the current study represented by the magazine editor) is said to prefer an audience to have a certain interpretation of media texts above all others (Rayner, *et al.* 2004, p. 97). The decoder (in the current study the magazine reader) could still adopt any of the three positions proposed by Hall in relation to the dominant message that was encoded.

Van Zoonen (1994, p. 9) offers a modified version of Hall’s encoding/decoding model, which is of particular use to the current study:

Regarded in this light, the central problematic of the model concerns the “construction of meaning in media discourse which is presupposed to take place at different ‘moments’ in the process” (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 8). According to the model, audiences do not necessarily produce meaning similar to that produced by the media institutions. A crucial feature of the model is that media discourse is simultaneously produced by audiences and media institutions; it is a social process “embedded in existing power and discursive formations” (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 8). Gledhill refers to this process as “cultural negotiations” (1988, p. 67). According to Gledhill, meaning is not “imposed, nor passively imbibed” but “arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation or experience” (1988, p. 68). Gledhill sees this negotiation as taking place across a number of sites, such as institutions (where production takes place), texts (such as the woman’s magazine for example) and audiences.





**Figure 1: Hall's encoding-decoding model**

## **2.5 Concluding remarks**

This chapter discussed the significance of a cultural studies approach for this study on teen magazine discourse. The field was identified as being a politically involved field of inquiry that transcends the confines of one particular discipline, denies the separation between high and low culture and also analyses the production process of a particular product. A cultural studies approach therefore implies that the study not only observed the media text, but also the context in which it was produced, as well as audiences' engagement with it.

Secondly, the chapter referred to feminist enquiries into the media. Feminist studies were identified as a significant field of inquiry when it comes to texts aimed specifically at women. A feminist perspective would imply that one looks specifically at how *women* are being positioned and addressed within a particular text (and, as in cultural studies, bearing the greater socio-cultural context in mind).

The thesis regards gender as being constructed in discourse, which is essentially a post-structuralist approach. The discourse that was found in women's magazines is seen as constructing girls and women as consumers. The study's conception of discourse, however, allowed for the possibility of resistance from the audience.

Reference was made to Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding communication model and how it is used to discuss the encoding process and guide the analyses of the interview and focus group transcripts.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Introduction

Guerin, W., Labor, E., Morgan, L., Reesman, J.C. & Willingham, J.R. (2005, p. 16) in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* note that a more eclectic approach as well as a fusion of a “variety of techniques” has become all the more common in critical approaches to literature.

Writers on method frequently refer to the profound pluralistic nature of approaches that are based on cultural studies (Johnson, R., Chambers, D., Raghuram, P. & Tincknell, E. 2004, p. 26). Barker (2003, p. 34) refers to it as a “plural field of contesting perspectives”. Alasuutari (1995, p. 2) also comments on the eclectic nature of this approach:

Cultural studies methodology has often been described by the concept of bricolage: one is strategic in choosing and applying different methods and practices.

As was noted in 1.9, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allows for a greater “sense of flavour for the data as a whole” (Silverman, 2004, p. 35) and serves to enhance the discussion.

Quantitative content analysis (a largely positivist approach to content analysis), although not traditionally associated with cultural studies, was combined in this study with an ethnographic content analysis of the text to allow for a more thorough discussion of the text. An overarching theory in the approach to the research was Stuart Hall’s (1981) encoding/decoding model (discussed in chapter 2). Hall’s model allows for a more thorough discussion of the process of constructing the discourse(s) on femininity around *Seventeen*.

The research process can be mapped into four phases, which will now be discussed in turn.

### 3.2 Phase 1 - Quantitative content analysis

This phase of the research involved looking specifically at the encoding stage of Hall’s (1981) model. The analysis was based on an ethnographic content analysis to reveal underlying themes in the text and was supplemented by a degree of quantitative analysis, which consisted of a subjective counting of the number of pages pertaining to each identified category.

According to Van Zoonen (1994, p. 68), content analysis is “often employed to

assess the manifest characteristics of large quantities of media output”. In general its aim is to compare features of media output with associated features in reality (*ibid*). However, content analysis of manifest content does pose certain limits. According to Van Zoonen (1994, p. 69), it prevents the researcher from “reading between the lines of media output”. However, this limitation could be considered an asset of content analysis since it brings scientific requirements to the table (*ibid*). Van Zoonen (1994, p. 69) proposes that the following steps have to be followed during content analysis. In accordance with cultural studies, these steps were modified and combined with other methodologies to allow for a more “colourful” interpretation of the text:

- Step 1: Decide from which “universe” or sample of women’s magazines the study will draw.
- Step 2: Construct a coding scheme and decide on units of analysis (determined by what the researcher actually wants to know).
- Step 3: Match the coding scheme with the chosen sample.

The following procedure was decided upon to investigate how “femininity” as such is discussed in *Seventeen*:

- **Copies analysed:** *Seventeen* was monitored over a twelve-month period (May 2007–May 2008), which involved a total of twelve copies (bearing in mind that only one issue was published during the July/August 2007 period). This demarcation of the research period arguably provided an overview of observable trends in the content.
- **Thematic analysis:** Each copy was systematically worked through to determine which thematic categories were present in general. This wholly subjective process was based on Donnelly (2008) and also informed by Ferguson’s (1983, p. 29) view that the overlapping of themes and categories is rather common in women’s magazines. The following thematic categories were identified in *Seventeen*: advertisements and advertorials, fashion and make-up, relationships (love), celebrity interviews, socio-cultural issues, music and films and nutrition and exercise and will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.
- In order to thematically analyse the twelve copies, reference was also made to Strauss and Corbin’s (1990, p. 101) process of open coding. According to Strauss and Corbin, open coding assists the researcher in uncovering, naming and developing concepts by opening up the text. Open coding basically consists of breaking information down into discrete parts, and examining it closely for similarities and differences (1990, p. 102). This relates, in other words, to the

subjective processes employed by Ferguson (1983) and Donnelly (2008). Elements that are “conceptually similar in nature” or “related in meaning” are grouped together under categories. Articles dealing with (love) relationships can, for example, be grouped together under the same thematic category. The crux of this procedure is that common characteristics allow elements (articles in the current study) to be grouped together (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 103).

- Pages dedicated to every thematic category were subsequently counted and the number of pages calculated as a percentage of the total number of pages in the twelve issues. These figures serve as a departure point for discussion on the different themes in chapter 4.

*(At this point it should be noted that the essence of this phase of the study is to enter into discourse with the text. Quantitative analysis can only reveal statistics. As a proponent for studying the greater cultural context within which the study was conducted, a more in-depth discussion of specific articles/features is therefore warranted.)*

### **3.3 Phase 2 – Production research**

This phase looked specifically at the encoding stage of the communication process, which takes place in the domain of the producer (see 1.8.2).

As was noted in chapter 2, cultural studies is “politically involved”. A semi-structured interview with the editor provided further insight not only into *what* is being published, but also into the editorial policy behind the magazine’s approach to the different thematic categories. The identified thematic categories (with their different sub-categories) are discussed in conjunction with the editor’s opinion and insights regarding the topics discussed in the magazine in chapter 4.

As was noted in chapter 1, the editor plays a significant role in the encoding process. Women’s magazine editors are regarded as “cultural gatekeepers of the female world” (Ferguson, 1983; Milkie, 2002). Furthermore, the readers trust the editor and have confidence in her opinion (McCracken, 1993, p. 40). In other words, the editors play a key role in the “relations of ruling” defining femininity (Smith, as cited in Milkie, 2002, p. 855). What this means, is that they play an integral role in upholding the political economy of the fashion industry. Their role involves a constant juggling of the audience’s input with the larger industry it is connected with (Milkie, 2002, p. 855).

Engaging the editor with regard to her editorial powers as far as content is concerned might therefore reveal valuable insights into the way femininity is

constructed in *Seventeen*. Milkie (2002, p. 846-847) found that many girls are unsatisfied with the way the feminine body is presented in magazines. Editors are said to legitimate these calls for authenticity, but due to struggles at organisational and industry levels, such as with advertisers and fashion houses, they cannot change these images. The view of the current editor of *Seventeen* in South Africa, Khwezi Magwaza, of how femininity is constructed in the magazine (bearing the demographics of the readers as well as the greater South African population in mind) is discussed in chapter 4.

### **3.4 Phase 3 – Audience research**

This phase focusses specifically on the decoding stage, which takes place in the domain of the audience (in this case the reader of the magazine text) (see 1.8.2). With my focus on how femininity is constructed in the relationship between the magazine and its readers, my exploration went beyond Donnelly (2001), in her study concerning South African adolescents' reading of women's magazines. Discourse is, after all, a conversation taking place between two or more parties and (as noted by Smith, 1998, p. 40) cannot be studied in isolation as it is not limited to the text. According to Christine Gledhill (1988, p. 67), a distinction needs to be drawn between femininity as constructed by the text and the female audience as a product of cultural construction.

Therefore, in order to take a closer look at the discourse on femininity, one also needs to account for the way audiences engage with the text. According to Reinhartz (1992, p. 19):

Interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women, because in this way learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women.

#### **3.4.1 Focus group interviews**

Focus groups were considered a viable data collection method for this particular study, since previous work on magazine readers had been conducted via this method (see Frazer, 1987; Ballaster, *et al.*, 1991; Brown, 1993; Currie, 1999). Focus groups typically have five characteristics, according to Krueger and Casey (2000, p. 10): (1) they consist of people who (2) possess certain characteristics and (3) provide qualitative data (4) in a focused direction (5) to help understand the topic of interest.

There are certain limitations to focus groups. One of the prominent points of critique to the so-called “bias and manipulation” risk is related to the fact that focus groups can indicate what participants say they think or believe, but not always what they actually think or believe (Litosseliti, 2003, p. 23).

### **3.4.2 Selecting participants**

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants for focus group research, as it allowed the researcher to select the individuals for observation who were most useful or representative for the purpose of the study (Babbie, 2005, p. 189). As the goal of focus groups is to gain in-depth understanding, a purposive sampling allowed for the most productive discussions in focus groups (Morgan, L.D., Krueger, R.A., King, J.A. & Scannell, A.U., 1998, p. 56).

This study required research subjects who were regular readers of *Seventeen* and/or familiar with the magazine’s content (individuals who were no longer readers of the magazine could in other words also qualify), as the focus groups focused specifically on how readers engage with the magazine’s content. As the magazine is targeted at the LSM 7-10 group ([www.media24.com](http://www.media24.com), 2008), which is indicative of higher income groups, sampling took place at a high school in an affluent Cape Town neighbourhood.

After the necessary permission had been obtained from school authorities, a referral sample of 40 girls was selected, and a contact session was then held with the whole group. Girls were introduced to the study as well as to the concept of a focus group. It was explained that participation in the study would be on a voluntary basis, after which indemnity forms were handed out to those who still indicated an interest in taking part in the study.

Criteria for participation included reading experience of *Seventeen* magazine, a willingness to talk about reading experiences, as well as the return of the indemnity form, which had to be signed by a parent/guardian and the participant. From the referral sample, 19 girls met the criteria. Their ages varied from 13-18 years.

Of the 19 girls, 16 came from families where at least one parent had post-secondary education. None of the girls came from a family where both parents were unemployed (in cases where one parent was unemployed, it was a matter of choice). Only one girl came from a single-parent family. The selected sample presented themselves as “ordinary” teenagers who were able and willing to share meaningful insights about their lives and reading experiences. A focus group schedule was developed in consultation with the guidance counsellor in order to schedule times that would not impact on academic or extra-curricular activities or responsibilities. Girls

of the same age group were grouped together, resulting in four focus groups. Each session lasted approximately one hour.

The goal of the focus groups was to identify reading habits and the girls' interaction and perception of the way not only femininity, but also the realities surrounding everyday teenage life, was being presented in the magazine. As was done by Donnelly (2008), one aim was to determine whether girls identified with the subject positions offered by the magazine. Focus group discussions were digitally recorded.

Copies of *Seventeen* were made available during the focus group sessions and the girls were encouraged to leaf through the magazines and to point out anything specific they regarded as noteworthy for the discussion. The departure point for the discussion was how they read the magazine – which articles they preferred etc. This led to other topics being discussed. Topics included real-life articles, boys, the fashion pages, the relevance of advertisements, what they believed the typical *Seventeen* girl to be like, and their fears and questions regarding adolescent life.

### **3.5 Phase 4 - Analysing interview transcripts**

As was mentioned in chapter 1, repertoire analysis was implemented as a means of analysing discourse in this study. Repertoire analysis is a method that was developed by two social psychologists and works with the concept of “interpretive repertoires” as a means of analysing discourse (Hermes, 1995, p. 26). Repertoire analysis is grounded in post-structuralist theory, but regards the social subject as “an active and creative language user” (*ibid*). This is in contrast with traditional post-structuralist anti-humanist notions of the human subject as the origin of stable meanings (Barker, 2003, p. 17).

Interpretive repertoires refer to the “ways of speaking and writing which are already in the culture and which are available to be drawn on by social actors in their everyday dealings with each other” (McGhee & Miell, 1998, p. 69). These repertoires may be evoked in conversations or texts and offer a means of classifying incidents, problems and ideas in terms of constructions that are available in a culture (*ibid*). The repertoires may also contain components such as “true love” narratives, “loyalty at all cost” theme, etc. (*ibid*).

Hermes (1995), who used repertoire analysis to analyse interview transcripts for her study on how the reading of magazines become useful to readers in the context of their everyday lives, refers to repertoires as “cash and carry knowledge” (p. 26). Repertoires are available knowledge that readers refer to in everyday talk to make sense of their reading experience.

The process basically consists of going back and forth through the text, summarising interview transcripts according to different criteria, for however long it takes to assemble the pieces into meaningful structures (Hermes, 1995, p. 27).

Key elements that recurred in different focus groups were identified in this way and grouped together according to different interpretive repertoires (as identified by Hermes). The following of Hermes' repertoires were identified:

- Repertoire of practical knowledge
- Repertoire of connected knowing and emotional learning

The following other repertoires were also identified and added:

- Morality repertoire
- Repertoire of patriotism
- Repertoire of consumer know-how

The interview transcripts were used to determine which reading positions were adopted by a girl in relation to the dominant readings encoded by the producer of the message (in terms of Hall's encoding/decoding model).

### **3.6 Concluding remarks**

This chapter discussed the four phases in which the research took place:

1. Quantitative content analysis
2. Production research
3. Audience research
4. Analysis of interview transcripts

It was noted that the implemented methodology is a fusion of quantitative and qualitative methods, in step with cultural studies' traditional eclectic approach to research.



## CHAPTER 4: CONTENT ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 addresses secondary research questions one and two, which concern the encoding/production stage of the text:

1. Explore which dominant thematic categories are present in *Seventeen* and how these contribute to the discourse on femininity in the magazine.
2. Explore the editorial role in the construction of the content and thus the production perception of the way femininity is constructed and discussed in the magazine.

It can be argued that most of the topics in *Seventeen* will allude to a discussion regarding “femininity” (it is, after all, a magazine aimed at young women). Therefore the focus is to determine which topics regarding femininity enjoy attention within the pages of the text and what one can deduce about the implied reader. In this chapter, continual reference is made to a semi-structured interview that was conducted with the editor of *Seventeen*, Khwezi Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008).

This phase of the research concerned itself with the encoding phase of communication, which takes place in the domain of the producer. As was discussed in chapters 2 and 3, Hall views the encoding and decoding processes as distinct moments, while also being related (Hall, 1999, p. 509). It is during this phase of the communication process that messages are encoded in the form of meaningful discourse (*ibid*).

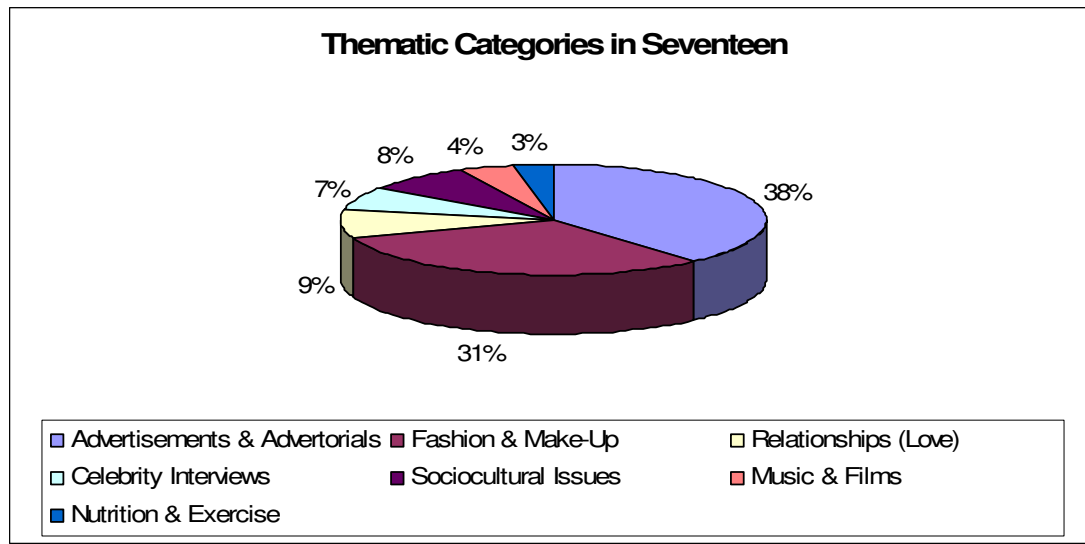
As was indicated in chapter 3, the thematic categories identified were the following: advertisements and advertorials, fashion and make-up, relationships (love), celebrity interviews, socio-cultural issues, music and films and nutrition and exercise.

### 4.2 Discourse in *Seventeen*

The following graph is a representation of the percentage of pages in the magazine that

[Type text]

are dedicated to the identified thematic categories:



**Figure 2: Thematic categories present in *Seventeen* (May 2007 – May 2008) Total number of pages analysed: 1 272. Total number of copies: 12**

As advertising is by and large the greatest income generator for most commercial media publications, it is not surprising that thirty eight per cent of pages were dedicated to this category. The fashion and make-up industry, also largely built on the consumption of particular products, took up almost the same number of pages.

The three most prominent feature categories were relationships (love) with 9%, celebrity interviews (7%) and socio-cultural issues (8 %). It should be noted that (local) socio-cultural issues took up only one per cent more of the total content than interviews with (mostly) American celebrities. Nutrition and exercise (which refers to health and exercise tips) took up three per cent of the total content.

#### **4.2.1 Advertisements and advertorials**

Almost forty per cent of the pages analysed consisted of full-page advertisements or advertorials. The only other thematic category contributing to more than thirty per cent of the content was fashion and make-up – a category that can also be closely associated with the act of consumption. *Seventeen* mainly featured advertisements and advertorials

[Type text]

for products related to one's physical appearance (such as accessories, clothes and cosmetics).

Judging by the brands featured (such as Levi's, Tommy Girl, Roxy Girl, Billabong, Fossil, Puma, Swatch and Clinique) it can be deduced that the teen market is considered extremely lucrative, with a lot of spending power. Typically aimed at higher LSM-groups, the presence of these brands in the magazine was an indication that the typical *Seventeen* reader is implied to be someone who is brand conscious, has spending power and looks to the media for fashion and cosmetic advice.

According to the editor of *Seventeen*, Khwezi Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008), the magazine does not necessarily have a specific guideline on the type of advertisements it will use. There are, however, certain products that are not endorsed. Anything that encourages smoking or drinking or relates to diet products would not be considered for publication. Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008) regards this as part of her responsibility as editor:

We've been approached by cellulite [cream] companies. It's not likely that you're going to find those kinds of ads in our magazine. Also, if a product does not feel right, we will not place the ad. Anything that claims to help you lose weight, anything outside of a healthy diet or balanced lifestyle we won't use. That's our contribution to healthy girls and a healthy lifestyle.

Interestingly, Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008) placed cellulite cream in the same league as smoking and drinking, products that cannot be sold legally to minors anyway. This raised the question of whether Magwaza was in fact concerned about the girls' health, or whether it rather boiled down to concerns regarding the image of the magazine.

According to Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008), there is an incentive to encourage girls to live a healthy lifestyle. However, judging by the health and exercise articles (discussed in 4.2.1.7), a healthy lifestyle seems to be intrinsically linked to a beautiful/"new" (cellulite-less) body.

According to Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008), advertisements that

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do “not feel right” include some visuals she personally objects to:

I’m not going to say no to an advert with skinny jeans and a short top, but we won’t for example use a woman in lingerie.

The March 2008 issue, however, featured an advertisement that serves to contradict Magwaza’s (personal communication, May 2008) objections to any visuals displaying underwear. An advertisement on p. 13 (March 2008) featured an advertisement for the Charade model of Daihatsu cars. “Sexy’s back” was the tagline and featured next to the car was a model with waist-length blonde hair, wearing skinny jeans and a tight black top revealing her midriff (the type of advertisement Magwaza claimed she would “say no to”). The same issue, however, (p.67) also featured an advertisement for Girl Inc underwear with the tagline “attitude incorporated” and featured a young girl posing in nothing but her underwear and jewellery.

Magwaza claimed that “to a certain degree [the editorial staff] do not decide [which advertisements they] want [to be published]” as they “do not have a lot of control over the adverts”. Such comments (taken in conjunction with the comment about the underwear) made it difficult to deduce the editorial role in the encoding process as far as the advertisements were concerned. However, since most of the advertisements were either for cosmetic or beauty products, it could be deduced that the discourse on femininity in *Seventeen* revolves around beautification, consumption of particular products and brand awareness. Encoded in the text were prescriptions regarding particular products. As became evident from discussions with the editor, editorial policy has a limited influence on the content of these ads.

#### **4.2.2 Fashion and make-up**

Fashion and make-up made up a little less than a third of the total pages. This thematic category can be linked to advertising and advertorials, as it also endorsed certain products (cosmetics, clothing and accessories).

Whereas *Seventeen* does not explicitly prescribe any specific hairstyle or clothing

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trends, there are subtle allusions to advice that might lead to self-improvement. Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008), refers to *Seventeen's* fashion and make-up sections as “inspirational communication”. Talbot’s observation (1995, p. 171) that femininity or a “gendered appearance” requires a great deal of “beauty work” is underscored by Magwaza’s (personal communication, May 2008) account of *Seventeen's* beauty and fashion tips:

It’s all about tips, instruction...it’s not about how to be, but how to do, should you wish to....I’m not saying you have to [experiment with the looks in the magazine]....the girls try it sometimes and then it doesn’t work for them and then they know. And if you don’t try, you’ll never know. We’re very conscious of it from that level. It’s a hard process. You don’t just become a woman.

What Magwaza is in effect saying, is that the road to self-discovery of femininity is based on experimentation with different looks and tips prescribed by the media. What does this say about femininity as such? In the first place, being a woman biologically does not necessarily imply that you are feminine. Femininity is to be discovered, it is a process that goes hand in hand with the consumption of/experimentation with particular products prescribed by the media.

A regular feature in *Seventeen's* fashion and beauty sections is “trend to try”. The feature looks at a particular fashionable item (be it a hat, skirt, pair of shoes or eye shadow) and suggests ways of adapting it to the reader’s personal style. A typical example was the “trend to try” section of May 2008: “Whatever your style, we show you how to wear the volume skirt” (Joubert 2008, p.22).

Exposure to fashion magazines has on occasion been linked to an unhealthy body image amongst women, but according to Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008), the media are only partly to blame for this:

I think the correct body image have been used too long as an excuse in the fashion industry to encourage unhealthy eating habits....[but it has to be kept in mind] that clothes look better on a certain type of body and we’re totally aware

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of that and we don't apologise for that....so in terms of creating that artistic look [in the fashion pages] we will use models, but we are also very conscious that we should also use real girls representing all body types in our other pages.

Magwaza says the "real girls" used are usually *Seventeen's* so-called urban scouts, readers who have volunteered to act as fashion scouts in their residential areas. These girls are not usually called on for the fashion pages, however, and will mostly feature in the trend to try or make-up sections. For the bulk of the fashion pages, professional models are still employed.

Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008) links the process of finding yourself to experimentation with different clothes and looks:

You learn to love yourself. And that's what we recognise in girls. The process of loving yourself is about deciding who you are, and that's about choosing what clothes work for you, what eyeliner you like...and that doesn't happen overnight....And we're about helping, about being the big sister...we don't know everything and we don't necessarily know what's going to work for you, but it's about finding yourself.

Magwaza makes it apparent that the implied *Seventeen* reader likes to experiment with new and different looks, but also that it is part of the process of discovering her own sense of style. She also considers *Seventeen's* fashion pages to be based on a more Eurocentric approach:

Our fashion is also mostly local. We have a little bit more of the European aesthetic than the Americans do. We have our own style. So, we will also use local photographers, models, etc. And so our fashion is what we're very much well-known for, that high quality of fashion.

The fashion feature (usually five to ten pages towards the back of the magazine) features

clothes from local retail stores and designers.

Judging from the percentage of pages dedicated to advertising, fashion and make-up, it can be deduced that the discourse in the pages of *Seventeen* revolves around self-discovery that is essentially centred on the consumption of, and experimentation with, different products. It is a femininity that is based on not only the physique, but also on the way the physique is dressed and beautified. Encoded in the text, therefore, is the message that in order to be beautiful, accepted and attractive, one has to adhere to certain ritualistic prescriptions. You could still work with what you have (so to speak), but even this has to be modified according to the prescriptions of fashion.

#### **4.2.3 Relationships (love)**

After advertisements and advertorials (38%) and articles on fashion and beauty (31%) this formed the biggest category, covering 9% of the content. Seen in this light, (love) relationships are given quite a large percentage of the total of editorial copy. This topic, in other words, was the feature category receiving the most coverage (more than articles on socio-cultural issues, for example). Each of the twelve copies, without exception, had at least two feature articles dealing specifically with love relationships. Every issue had a specific section called “guys”, which then included a series of articles on boys and love relationships. “Guys talk” was a regular feature, and basically consisted of six guys on average being asked what their answer would be to a random question. In the event, an artificial dialogue was created. Questions included, for example, “Should you ask him?” (Martin 2008), and “Can guys and girls just be friends?” (Van Rensburg & Linnow 2007), and “Who’s the perfect girl” (Martin 2007). This then “provides information via boys’ voices”, as Duke and Kreshel (1998, p. 58) describe this trend. This could lead one to conclude that the implied reader regards the male voice as authoritative. This view is supported by scholars who argue that teen magazines are positioned in such a way that the texts have a unique influence in girls’ understanding of boys (Duke & Kreshel, 1998, p. 57). Such texts on boys are tailored specifically with girls’ “concerns and uncertainties” in mind, acting as a source of information to readers (*ibid*).

It seems therefore that the editorial policy of *Seventeen* can lead to a dominant

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view of the male perspective in the discourse on femininity that it is promoting. According to Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008), boys are one of the factors binding teenage girls together universally:

But actually girls just want to be universal. I know many girls want to be unique, but most girls just want to fit in, to have friends and to have guys like them.

The discourse in *Seventeen* (aided by the artificial dialogue with boys) serves to comment on the “perfect girl”. The “perfect girls” are (without exception) actresses and singers from the male perspective. Actress Jessica Alba is noted by Mark (19) (Martin 2007, p. 65) to be his idea of the perfect girl:

Jessica Alba is pretty, comes across as a good girl, has a really nice body and beautiful skin. You know you can have fun with her. And I’m sure she’s a good kisser.

Local celebrity Lira is Unathi’s (21) perfect girl of choice (Martin 2007, p. 65):

My perfect local celeb girl would definitely be Lira. She’s stunning, down-to-earth and very intelligent. She’s confident enough to be herself and not worry about what others think.

Together with the description of the ideal girl, come allusions to sensual and sexual undertones (references to “(a) nice body”, “good kisser”, for example). References to physical appearance seem to be ingrained in the discourse on femininity in the text. The text does not explicitly address sex as such, but articles on flirting, kissing and what guys are thinking about, indicate that attracting the opposite sex is of paramount importance to the reader.

According to Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008), *Seventeen* addresses sex “when [the editorial team] needs to”. As far as *Seventeen*’s editorial policy



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regarding sex is concerned, Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008) defines it as follows:

I think our stance is if you're doing it, be safe, but know that not everyone is. Our place is we don't want to give the impression that every teenage girl is having sex. And that every teenage girl is promiscuous or should be.... We tell you how to go about if you're in a sexual relationship, this is how, and here are the facts, this is what you need to know to be safe. And if you're a teenage girl who decides *not* to, we're all for it. It's your decision, it's your body. We totally support girls that have the freedom to choose.

It seems from this study that *Seventeen* does indeed adopt a socially responsible attitude when it comes to sex and perhaps a slightly more “conservative approach to sex” than women's magazines *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*. What Magwaza is not saying, however, is that sex does indeed sell. And, without being too liberal, the mere mention of the word will still attract readers' attention.

On the surface, at least, *Seventeen* is more conservative, but the issue is much more complex because *Seventeen* structures the single state as something to resolve – a girl is always looking for a boyfriend, independence is temporary. *Seventeen*'s approach to the topic of sex is arguably conservative, but the magazine also features articles on attracting the opposite sex.

In a three-page feature addressing girls who are contemplating having sex for the first time (Moretti 2007), readers are warned about all the risks of having sex (such as contracting HIV, unwanted pregnancies, or the effect it might have on one's self-esteem). The feature starts with three facts that one should consider before having sex, followed by three girls testifying to the downside of having sex “too soon” (none of them reported it as being a positive experience), a box containing three wrong reasons to have sex as well as a quiz that is meant to determine whether you are ready to have sex.

Readers are therefore not encouraged to engage in sexual intercourse, but rather to consider the consequences before engaging in any sexual activity. Four of the twelve issues featured articles dealing explicitly with sex. One “Real Life” article, “Deadly

Denial” (Magwaza 2008), linked irresponsible sexual behaviour with HIV/Aids and emphasised the importance of having yourself tested for the virus by stating: “The latest stats prove girls just like you are most at risk” (p.55).

The implied reader of *Seventeen* therefore can be assumed to be aware of her sexuality. Love relationships are important to her, and the male voice/opinion carries more weight than that of her peers or elders (judging by the content of the magazine). There are certain realities she might have to deal with when it comes to sexual relationships (such as HIV/Aids), but she prefers to make informed decisions regarding this.

#### **4.2.4 Socio-cultural issues**

Most of the articles dealing with socio-cultural issues in *Seventeen* do so from a “Real Life” point of view. These types of stories typically consist of a complication defining the basic episode of the story, a resolution in which elements crucial to the telling of the tale are encoded, and finally a moral to the story (McLoughlin, 2000, p. 60).

The January 2008 issue, for example, featured an article called “Crime Watch” (Martin 2008a). The article featured 23-year-old Rifqah’s account of how she survived a violent attack at her parent’s house. This type of article activates the discourse on the (affluent) female victim in the South African society. Rifqah’s ordeal was used to convey practical tips on how to deal with specific life-threatening crime-related situations such as a hijacking, break in and mugging. The Take Action section of the article offered contact numbers as well as advice from the executive director of The Trauma Centre and a self-defence expert.

The feature on the ’s attack on Rifqah is an example of the discourse on femininity overlapping with the discourse on crime. Seen within a South African context (where crime is also perceived in the media to be a regular occurrence), it is linked to the issue of violence against women, also a much-publicised phenomenon. The mention of crime in the *Seventeen* discourse alludes to the fact that it is seen as a reality with which young South African women have to deal on an everyday basis.

The only other article dealing explicitly with crime-related issues was in the October

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2007 issue (p. 64-65). “So busted” (Clark 2007c) relayed different potentially incriminating situations that teens might find themselves in, such as being caught while drinking and driving, clubbing while being under-age, as well as substance abuse. The article also stated the consequences of these situations should you get caught, and offered real-life accounts from two readers who had had criminal charges laid against them after they had used fake IDs to enter clubs.

In chapter 5, reference is also made to the role of crime in the construction of the discourse on femininity within a South African context.

Crime is not the only socio-cultural issue dealt with in *Seventeen*. According to Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008), *Seventeen* regards “their” girls to be part of a global culture, but the magazine still aims to expose them to issues unique to the South African experience:

You’ll see that we place articles on things that some girls might not have experienced, but they’ll know about it coz it’s part of the country that they’re growing up in. There was for example a story of virginity testing, something that might not even appeal to the black girls, because a lot of them don’t live in that sort of society you know, but it’s interesting to them to know about issues in the country that they’re growing up in that are relevant to their place in time.

By saying that these issues might “not even appeal to black girls”, Magwaza is in effect marginalising a lot of black women. *Seventeen* aims to attract the South African girl, yet certain assumptions are made without careful reflection.

*Seventeen* also seemingly deals with emotional disorders on a regular basis. The emotional disorders that were dealt with were depression (Clark, 2007b), exercise bulimia (*Seventeen*, June 2007) and anorexia related to the fashion industry (Clark, 2007a). This would be an example of the discourse on beautification (intrinsically linked to the discourse on femininity) and its dangers. An article also dealt with self-mutilation/-cutting (commonly referred to as “cutting”) (Loubser McGuffog, March 2008).

The September 2007 issue seemingly took a holistic approach to the link between

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the media and fashion industries and eating disorders. The cover featured America Ferreira, along with a quote from the interview with her that “even beautiful girls feel insecure” while one of the feature articles dealt specifically with eating disorders in the fashion industry (Skinny Scandal, Ealgeson 2007).

Although Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008) refers to the typical *Seventeen* reader as a girl that is “fun and light”, the inclusion of these articles indicates that the implied reader does in fact sometimes struggle with insecurities regarding her place in the world, but that she can also be empowered to deal with these issues in the way that she sees fit. She likes to be active in the process of making a difference in the world around her.

In effect, this particular section highlights the stark contrast between the discourse on beautification and that of the dangers related to adhering to the prescriptive nature of discourse on fashion. On the one hand, girls are encouraged to exercise to attain beautiful bodies and also to dress fashionably. The presence of articles dealing with eating disorders, however, implies that participating in and acting on this particular discourse might have dire consequences.

#### **4.2.5 Celebrity interviews**

Interviews with celebrities made up seven per cent of the content (only one per cent less than socio-cultural issues). Every issue featured a three to eight page feature article on the cover celebrity (who, without exception in the selected sample, were American). Furthermore, all of the feature celebrities were either singers or actors. Seven of the cover models were white women, four of the cover models were black women and one cover model was a white male.

With reference to the fashion and make-up section, where Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008) says they like to use local girls for fashion shoots, it is interesting to note that this does not seem to be the case when it comes to featured celebrities.

Interviews with cover celebrities are (without exception) presented in question-and-answer format and are syndicated from the American version of the magazine.

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According to Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008), the (South African) editorial team could probably source interviews from other news sources, but since the interviews sourced from the American editorial are “created specifically for teenage girls”, these happen to be the interviews of choice. Judging from the type of questions asked in these interviews, it becomes apparent that girls are preoccupied with two things – boys and their own physical appearance (a preoccupation that manifests in the form of insecurities in some cases).

Examples of questions include the following:

“Would you ever make the first move with a guy?”

“When you’re feeling down, what’s your secret confidence booster?”

(Interview with actress Hillary Duff, December 2007, p. 98)

“There’s so much focus on skinny celebs...do you feel pressure about your weight?”

(Interview with actress America Ferreira, September 2007, p. 94)

“Do you feel any pressure to watch what you eat and stay thin?”

“You’ve locked lips with some pretty hot guys on screen...so who’s the best kisser?”

“You got engaged when you were nineteen...what have you learned about serious relationships?”

(Interview with Jessica Alba, December 2007, p. 98)

According to Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008), *Seventeen* (South Africa) is under no obligation to use only American cover models, but she still prefers to use American rather than local celebrities:

We put the American girls up that we do because we know they’re going to appeal to our readers and also sell the magazine.

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According to Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008), they have experimented with local celebrities on the covers, but “it did not really affect” their sales. When asked why they do not feature more local celebrities on the cover, she attributed this to budget constraints:

What we did find was that the quality of [local shoots] was not the same as the international quality. And also there are budget constraints; it’s difficult to shoot the type of cover that you want. It’s also difficult to find the type of cover model that anyone will connect with at every level. We don’t have that kind of stars in our country.

Magwaza’s claims are contradictory. On the one hand she argues local girls do not affect the number of copies sold, in the next instance she admits to having difficulty finding local celebrities to equal their American counterparts. It becomes therefore, in effect, a discourse that discredits the merit of promoting local talent. Girls are encouraged to participate in what Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008) refers to as “global culture”, but which is (judging by the use of cover models anyway) essentially American.

Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008) finds that content covering celebrities that is made available by the American *Seventeen* caters specifically for teens, hence its appeal to the readers:

It is great to be an international brand, because it means that we have access like no other to superstars that our girls really admire and we get interviews we would not normally get. We get stuff that is specifically created for teen girls....They are questioned so that a teenage girl would be interested in them, [the celebrity’s] thoughts on boys, on love, on fashion, you know what I mean?

The implied reader can be said to be someone “in the know”. In this argument, she is in touch with a global culture (which includes celebrity culture). It has to be pointed out, however, that judging from the nationality of cover models (and also the discussion on

featured music and films later in the chapter), this so-called “global culture” is as a matter of fact rather American.

Encoded in the text, one can therefore deduct that American celebrities are perhaps more successful. They are seen as universal in the sense that all girls can relate to them.

#### **4.2.6 Music and films**

The entertainment industry and consumption of its products have become ingrained in Western popular youth culture. About four per cent of *Seventeen*'s pages are dedicated specifically to music and films, indicative of the reach of the entertainment industry and also of the important part it plays in young people's lives, also in South Africa.

The twelve issues featured discussions about 43 films, none of which were locally produced. Films also occasionally received a “hottie factor”, which was linked to the leading male actor in the film. The implied reader could therefore be assumed to be as interested in the physical appearance of the leading male actor as in the storyline of the film. Local music productions, however, seem to get slightly more recognition. Of the 35 CDs featured in the twelve issues, five had been recorded by local artists.

The lack of local film and music talent in *Seventeen* could perhaps be attributed to Magwaza's (personal communication, May 2008) observation that “girls just wants to be universal”. Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008) regards “global culture” as “[joining] all girls together”.

The music and film section of *Seventeen* can perhaps be regarded as the best evidence of “cultural imperialism” within the magazine. Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008) argues that it is a “global culture” that joins girls together, but it seems to be rather a case of the American culture joining all girls together – a culture that is capitalised on all over the world (as was noted earlier in this chapter).

#### **4.2.7 Nutrition and exercise**

Three per cent of total pages were dedicated to features relating to diet and/or nutrition. *Seventeen*'s health pages mostly focus on exercise and/or diet and nutrition, a regular

feature being the health trainer, which features an arrangement of exercises to tone different body parts. Examples include “Get toned legs” (Teodoresar 2007) and “Get your body back on track” (

Abrahams 2007). An example of a nutritional feature is “Is the mall making you fat?” (Nel 2007), which advises on healthy options if one happens to eat away from home while shopping. It is interesting to note that shopping is automatically associated with overeating. A feature combining nutrition and exercise is “New body, new you!” (Martin 2007), which aims to inspire girls to “kick-start [their] new health and fitness regime”.

While it may appear that these features are focused more on toning and sculpting the female body than on encouraging a healthy lifestyle, according to Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008) the bottom-line is the promotion of a healthy body image:

It’s about no matter what you look like; you need to learn how to carry a good body image.

It is, however, difficult to see how this particular message of loving yourself is encoded in the text. Judging by the rest of the content of the magazine, it seems the impetus to exercise is intrinsically linked to becoming more attractive in order to attract attention from the opposite sex. The October 2007 feature on “Hotter legs instantly” (Teodorescu 2007,p.47) is a good example. The feature offers the following tips:

- 1) Try a knee length A-line skirt. The width at the hem slims your legs.
- 2) Wear heels – they make your calves flex so you look strong and sexy.
- 3) Sweep body shimmer down the front of your legs to highlight their length.

More emphasis seems to be placed on the potential to attract male attention than to harness a healthy body image. The only indication of a conscious effort to encode a healthy body image into the text is the body peace campaign. April 2008 witnessed the launching of *Seventeen*’s “body peace campaign”, a project encouraging girls to be more at ease with their bodies. Readers are encouraged to sign the so-called “Body Peace Treaty” on *Seventeen*’s website. According to Magwaza (personal communication, May



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2008), it's about "debunking all the nonsense" relating to weight loss being equated with physical beauty:

It's about how you treat yourself, how you see yourself that defines what your body is.

Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008) also regards this as their editorial contribution to health:

And that's what the body peace treaty is all about. Every month we have the girls decide how to build confidence, how to be happy with themselves. See, I'm very conscious about it because I believe through this we can have responsibility.

The body peace project is an admirable sentiment, but the fact remains that most of the models and celebrities featured in the magazine are not necessarily epitomes of the general public's physical ideal. Furthermore, linking health to sexiness is also problematic. In the event, the incentive for exercise becomes an opportunity to attract members of the opposite sex. The combination of mixed messages in the magazine might also be problematic – and then you just have to look at the content carrying the most weight – ads and beauty.

### **4.3 Concluding remarks**

In this chapter it became apparent that *Seventeen's* discourse on femininity is essentially post-feminist in the sense that it concerns itself with the progress and advancement of the individual rather than that of women as a group. At the same time, consumer discourses have "eagerly absorbed the terminology of self-assertiveness and achievement, transforming feminism's challenging collective programme into atomised acts of individual consumption, as Macdonald (1995, p. 91) described the phenomenon more than a decade ago.

Two of the research questions were explored. The thematic categories of advertisements and advertorials, fashion and make-up, relationships (love), celebrity

interviews, socio-cultural issues, music and films, and nutrition and exercise were discussed in detail with reference to the content analysis of 12 issues of *Seventeen* and an interview with the editor.

It was found that the discourse on femininity in *Seventeen* revolves around beautification rituals, the consumption of particular products. The reader is constructed as a lucrative, brand-conscious consumer. The fashion pages construct femininity as being vested in a process of self-discovery aided by experimentation with different styles. The male voice is constructed as an authoritative voice affecting the discourse (or the way femininity is talked about). Actively engaging with discourses on issues like fashion and make-up allows for the construction of a more attractive self as far as the opposite sex is concerned. Furthermore, the discourse revolves around a femininity that is essentially American in the sense that all of the cover models and most of the celebrity interviews involve American celebrities. The discourse on femininity is sometimes seen to overlap with other discourses, such as crime.

This chapter dealt specifically with the encoding stage of Hall's communication model. In the event, the editor's opinion regarding certain issues was sought. It was found that although the editor claims to have a say regarding the placement of certain advertisements, there were still advertisements that were placed seemingly without and above her editorial jurisdiction. During the interview, Magwaza (personal communication, May 2008) displayed a number of noble sentiments, but these were frequently nullified by the content of the magazine.

## CHAPTER 5: AUDIENCE RESEARCH

### 5.1 Introduction

How the text of *Seventeen* becomes meaningful to readers is a central concept in this chapter. Hermes (1995, p. 7) defines “[becoming] meaningful” as follows:

The process of making sense of a text by recognising and comprehending it and assigning it associative signification (levels of meaning production that are often referred to as denotation and connotation), as well as giving it a place in one’s knowledge and views of the world.

It has to be said that the assessments by readers delivered for the purpose of the current study were produced in a particular context – that of researcher eliciting information about the girls’ reading of the text, which is according to Ballaster, *et al.* (1991, p. 133) more likely to generate critical readings by those participating in the study. As was also noted by Ballaster, *et al.* (*ibid*), it might be possible that readers read magazines quite naïvely or uncritically at times. It is at this point that the limits of social research become clear – how can we possibly gain access to naïve readings of the text (*ibid*)?

As was noted in chapter 1, this project is (in a sense) personal. To a degree, I have assumed the position of a feminist ethnographer. Coates (1996, p. 14) ascribes this position to a researcher who:

...put[s] women at the centre of [his/her] work. Secondly it means that [the researcher does] not pretend to be ‘objective’ but acknowledge[s] from the beginning where [he/she] is coming from....all research is subjective and political....being ‘interested’ rather than ‘disinterested’ is a strength, not a weakness: it means that [the researcher] is engaged in what [he/she] is researching.

This context of a researcher attempting to elicit information then produces what

Richardson and Corner (1986, p.159-160) refer to as “displaced” and “mediated” readings rather than “transparent” ones. However, as Barker (2003, p. 10) cautions, texts are polysemic and contain a number of different meanings to be realised by readers, and these meanings cannot simply be read off the texts. Meaning is produced in the interplay between text and reader (*ibid*), and this was the aim of the focus group research applied in this study – an attempt to understand what happens in that moment when the reader engages with the text.

This chapter starts with a discussion of the girls’ perception of the textual ideal. After the discussion on the textual ideal, Hermes’ interpretive repertoires will be mentioned. As was discussed in chapter 3, I have added repertoires to Hermes’ repertoires to accommodate additional repertoires that the girls refer to in order to make sense of their reading experience.

## **5.2 Focus group interviews**

A total of four focus groups were conducted. The smallest focus group consisted of two girls and the largest of seven girls. Two of the focus group interviews were conducted in Afrikaans and two in English. (See appendix for biographical details on the girls).

During the focus groups, I could not help but contemplate how the discussion would have differed had I not been a woman, someone with whom the girls taking part in the study could arguably identify. Finch (1993, p. 79) remarks how it is to one’s advantage in interview situations where the group consists solely of women:

One’s identity as a woman therefore provides the entrée into the interview situation...that does not mean that only interviewers whose life circumstances are exactly the same as their interviewees’ can conduct successful interviews. It does mean, however, that the interviewer has to be prepared to expose herself to being ‘placed’ as a woman and to establish that she is willing to be treated accordingly.

Like Finch, I had the experience that my identity as a woman provided instant entrée into

the interview situation – it was as if I managed to establish rapport with the girls almost immediately. Conversation flowed relatively easily and girls were keen and eager to answer questions – they frequently interrupted one another.

A general misconception is that Afrikaans girls tend to be slightly more conservative than English girls of the same age. During the focus groups I found both language groups to demonstrate the same aversion when it came to sexually explicit material (this usually came up whenever relationships with boys were discussed and they spontaneously referred to adult women’s magazines such as *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan*). This could perhaps be attributed to group/social class socialisation.

What I did find, however, was that *Seventeen* did not seem to inspire the same amount of enthusiasm among girls older than sixteen. Girls from the sixteen to eighteen-year groups remarked that they had a need for a magazine that caters for their specific “in-between” stage.

### **5.3 Girls’ perception of the textual ideal**

In order to ascertain what the girls believed the magazine’s underlying discourse to be concerning the feminine ideal, they were asked to look at a cover of a particular issue – the choice of model as well as the cover lines. They were instructed to keep their reading experience in mind in order to come up with a general “message” so to speak that the magazine was (in their view) sending out to readers:

I think the magazine kind of makes you feel like you must be happy with who you are, but there are certain things you can do to make you feel better about yourself, like for instance have gorgeous hair. You might, for example, not be very thin but you can make yourself look more appealing to others by having gorgeous hair - (Berry, 16).

Imperfection is okay. It’s okay to be who you are. You don’t have to be super skinny; you can be who you want to be. They’re not saying don’t care about your appearance, but they say don’t *hate* your appearance. You must be happy, but not

satisfied - (Chelsey, 15).

Chelsey and Berry's observations are good examples of readers adopting the dominant hegemonic encoding of the text. Harshly put, they seem to be the proto-type of an influenceable consumer.

What was of particular interest was how the girls related the feminine ideal to the feminine physique. Discussions regarding the fashion and beauty pages demonstrated that it was there that the project of femininity came into being, that these pages (centring specifically on girls' appearance and physique) were studied with much more intensity. The so-called feminine ideal was regarded as something to be achieved or to be worked towards.

According to Smith (1988, p. 47), in a particular type of women's magazine discourse "women's bodies are always imperfect. They always need fixing". This becomes apparent in the way the girls talked about the models who were being used in the magazine. Interestingly, girls preferred skinny models (although they were critical of models who were "unhealthy") and they were quick to point out whenever a model was (in their opinion) "slightly overweight".

What became apparent from girls' discussion of the feminine ideal revolved around constructions of precisely what the girls were not.

There are always these girls with the perfect bodies and then sometimes I think why don't I have the perfect body? Nobody can be perfect, but this girl has the perfect tan and everything. But I can see that the computer has worked on her - (Tina, 13).

What is interesting about Tina's comment is the fact that she recognises the dominant hegemonic reading of the text (which is prescribing a thin ideal). She notes that "[girls in the magazine] have perfect bodies]" but also that "the computer has worked on [them]". Yet she still struggles with feelings of insecurity. Tina is in a position to resist the dominant message, yet she almost willingly subscribes to its unrealistic prescriptions.

What was also apparent was how girls were very critical of models who were "too skinny", but at the same time, whenever a model was featured who did not conform to the

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skinny ideal, her physical appearance was also criticised:

I think it's better if models are skinny, like for example this model is not very skinny. If models are bigger, we're not even going to try to look like them. I think it's okay that models are skinny. I prefer skinny models, but not too skinny you know - (Laura, 13).

Whenever they use real-looking girls for models, the photographs or the models are not very attractive. The girls are not portrayed in an attractive way - (Paula, 18).

Interviewer: Does it bother you if a model is very skinny?

Abby (16): You know it's a model, so it's actually okay.

Interviewer: Would you prefer models that were not as skinny?

Abby (16): Well, if they used chubby models it just won't be pretty.

## **5.4 Interpretive repertoires**

Having elicited information regarding girls' perception of the textual ideal, it was relatively easy to get the discussion flowing. The girls' responses displayed a number of interpretive repertoires as they were talking about their specific reading experiences.

### **5.4.1 Repertoire of practical knowledge**

The repertoire of practical knowledge "stresses the practical use of magazines" (Hermes, 1995, p. 37) and can be seen as "a rational explanation of why someone would read women's magazines" (Hermes, 1995, p. 40). It appeals to the reader's pragmatic and solution-orientated self who is able to come up with solutions for virtually anything (Hermes, 1995, p. 45). In other words, this repertoire relates to practical tips that girls might garner from magazines to either employ at a later stage or merely take note of for interest's sake. In the event a fantasy self is constructed who is knowledgeable and in the know regarding womanhood.

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What became apparent during the focus groups was that the girls' construction of this particular fantasy self revolved around two things – one's physical appearance and how one should relate to boys. As was indicated in chapter 4, these two particular aspects also became salient from the quantitative content analysis of *Seventeen*.

According to Banner (1983, p. 3), the pursuit of beauty and fashion constitutes a key element in women's experience of femininity and manages to bind them together across ethnic, linguistic and regional boundaries. Macdonald (1995, p. 214) remarks how "young women's readings of the fashion magazine may take the form of 'bricolage' rather than imitation". The girls particularly liked the features that focused on their particular facial/physical structure and how to adapt one's appearance accordingly:

I like the articles that show you different things you can do with your appearance, like the ones showing you what you can do to look good. I follow the tips - (Laura, 13).

When I page through *Seventeen* I search for looks that I like, for example, the hairstyles and then I will try it out myself. It inspires me to put more effort into my appearance - (Erica, 14).

Some of my friends change their hairstyle and immediately their face will look thinner, or you see someone with the wrong hairstyle and you just know they can be beautiful - (Chelsey, 15).

The above comments make it apparent that the beautification ritual in these instances becomes a project of imitation. At the end of the day it boils down to religiously copying a particular look found in the magazine (while under the illusion that it was specifically geared towards your own personal look or style).

Girls taking up the subject position of "practical knowledge" point to their identification with an adolescent woman who is able to beautify herself/alter her appearance, which can then in turn be linked to Talbot's observation (1998, p. 171) that femininity or a "gendered appearance" requires a great deal of "beauty work". Women



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are, so to speak, *actively* involved in the process of feminising themselves (*ibid*). Girls' relation with the several beautification rituals in the magazine therefore suggest that practical knowledge to them constitutes any advice regarding their physical appearance.

As was mentioned previously, this specific repertoire is also employed in girls' quest for understanding the enigmatic world of boys. The girls taking part in the focus group interviews displayed particular interest in articles dealing explicitly with boys and the way they think. According to Kaplan and Cole (2003, p. 147), this emphasis on boys is not surprising, as "learning to relate to the opposite sex is part of the maturation process". Teen magazines are uniquely positioned to influence the way girls relate to and understand boys (Duke & Kreshel, 1998, p. 57). As girls have little life experience as far as the opposite sex is concerned, any text on boys in magazines are tailored to girls' concerns and uncertainties in this regard (*ibid*). Boys' behaviour is seemingly shrouded in mystery, and girls appear to appreciate inside information on the way boys think. This links with findings in chapter 4 that the male voice is constructed as authoritative. Approval from the male figure is sought and valued:

I read the articles with tips from boys, because I don't really know these things myself. It's something you usually have to and try and figure out, because guys don't really talk about their feelings. So it's something that's actually quite interesting, the process of finding out whether it is true - (Drew, 16).

From the transcripts it became apparent that girls relate to boys in a "love" relationship context. Tips relating to boys, for example, are liked for the guidelines they present for either getting a boy's attention or for entering a relationship.

Girls can never get enough about guys. I read everything about guys. There's always something in [*Seventeen*] about guys. A friend will come to me and say help me with this or help me with that and they often turn to the magazine to see what they say. And there are always articles on things guys *actually* say and then they give you information on what guys really want. Girls really like it if they can find out what guys think - (Berry, 16).

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I think it's pretty normal [to have a guy featured on the cover], because our whole world revolves around guys - (Chelsea, 15).

I particularly like the articles where they give tips on how to flirt with guys. I have tried some of the tips before, and they actually work. For example I will look at a guy until he looks at me and then I will look away. But I won't really try it out too seriously - (Charlene, 15)

Judging from the way *Seventeen* writes about boys and how to relate to them, it becomes apparent that every girl apparently either wants a boyfriend or to at least attract a boy's interest. The sexuality propagated in *Seventeen*, in other words, is of a heterosexual nature. Acquiring romance seems to be of particular interest to girls. What transpired from focus groups was that girls longed to think of themselves as informed with regard to the way boys think. As was noted by *Seventeen* editor Magwaza (2008), "most girls just want to...have guys like them".

Girls can evidently be seen negotiating with text on boys in order to grow a more confident feminine self as far as interaction with the opposite sex is concerned. The result of the negotiation, in other words, is that girls understand femininity to be intrinsically linked to one's skills (or lack thereof) when it comes to the opposite sex. The dominant-hegemonic encoding seems to be that boys' approval and attraction should be obtained. During the focus groups it became apparent that girls adopt the negotiated code with regard to this reading. They accept the reading that boys are to be attracted, but the how-to tips are implemented and used as they see fit. The discourse in *Seventeen* depicts love relationships and the quest of winning the attention of boys as integral to the feminine experience. Success as a woman is equated to one's skills when it comes to attracting the attention of the *opposite sex*.

#### **5.4.2 Repertoires of connected knowing and emotional learning**

Another repertoire (also identified by Hermes, 1995) that allows readers to construct yet

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another fantasy self is the repertoire of connected knowing and emotional learning. These repertoires are about learning and “recognising yourself in stories and articles” (Hermes, 1995, p. 36). The focal points of this repertoire are human emotions and how to deal with them (Hermes, 1995, p. 41). According to *Seventeen* editor Magwaza (2008), “real life issues” are among the elements universal to the teenage girl experience. A large part of *Seventeen*’s appeal seems to centre on the fact that it deals with issues that are “real” and applicable to “real life”. In her study on how teenage girls relate to advertisements, Currie (1997, p. 464, 470) found that girls’ reading of magazine texts is mostly motivated by “a desire to know about themselves, their everyday problems, and their social world”. Currie’s point was confirmed in this study by statements such as:

This article stuck with me [points to article on exercise bulimia], because I had a friend who was doing this and we did not know what was going on with her and then I read this. So I made her read the article and then she saw what she was doing. She didn’t realise it herself - (Kelly, 16).

I really like [the true-life articles]. It gets us talking about things and that’s important. And sometimes I will also tell my mom when there’s a good article. For instance, last month there was an article on girls who cut themselves and then I told my mom to read it. It helps [parents] understand a bit more. And then you can also talk to your mom about it and understand what other people are going through a bit better - (Edna, 16).

Reading about other readers’ real-life stories sets up yet another constellation of a subject position for the reader (Talbot 1998, p. 177-178), a self that is connected to the experience of others. Field Belenky, M., Rule Goldberger, N., Tarule Mattuck, J. & Mcvicker Clinchy, B. (1986, p. 113) refer to “connected knowers”, whom they define as follows:

[connected knowers] develop procedures for gaining access to other people’s knowledge. At the heart of these procedures is the capacity for empathy. Since [these

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knowers are of the opinion that] knowledge comes from experience, the only way they can hope to understand another person's ideas is to try to share the experience that has led the person to form the idea.

Teen girls in this study seem to rely on this in order to make sense of their everyday experiences:

There should be an agony aunt in every issue. It's good to learn from other people's experiences - (Penny, 18).

[The real life articles] help you see that maybe when you are in a situation like that how to deal with it better, and you know there are girls out there who are maybe going through the same thing as you or like you can know how to be more cautious - (Lana, 15).

[This article on teen pregnancy] is obviously very applicable because it is happening more and more often. People have left my school for example. I've heard of many girls my age getting pregnant. It's scary - (Penny, 18).

Ballaster, *et al.* (1991, p. 136) remark that using the voice of "real people" is a "familiar magazine ploy". These come in the shape of letters, true experiences, the makeover (to name but a few) and serve to "break the dominance of the editorial or authorial voice" (*ibid*). However, this authority is broken only to be confirmed by the reader's voice. As can be seen from Kelly's narration about her friend who had exercise bulimia, the true story on the subject conveyed to the reader served to enlighten her on the condition (in the event acting then as the authoritative voice).

Readers choose to align themselves with experiences that are real and true to their everyday experience, which allows them to assume a subject position that is connected to the greater universal problematic world of growing into femininity.

If one were, however, to refer to what the bulk of *Seventeen* content comprises, the "real issues" being addressed turn out to be fashion, make-up and love relationships

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rather than socio-cultural issues of the day within a South African context (such as HIV/Aids, poverty and crime). Yes, the girls do connect to real-life stories such as eating disorders (which do not fall under the thematic categories of fashion or love relationships), but the irony is that such diseases can arguably be attributed to what makes up the bulk of *Seventeen's* content – fashion designs for the slimmer figure, boys preferring girls with “great bodies”, etc.

### 5.4.3 Morality repertoire

During the focus groups it became apparent that girls would rather look to the media than their parents for advice. This relates to Margaret Mead's observation (2005, p. 88-89) that young people are no longer brought up by their parents, but rather by the mass media products that they choose to consume (referred to in chapter 1). Laura (13), for example, observes that her mom “gives [her] weird advice sometimes...the magazine sometimes makes more sense than [my mom] does”. In such cases, the media seemingly step in to fulfil a kind of parental role:

I think the reason many girls read *Seventeen* is because some of them grow up in homes where they don't actually have parents or a lot of support, so they look to the media for advice on life - (Lana, 15).

Tina (13) noted that the magazine sometimes “gives advice different to [her] mom's”. Interestingly though, one of the girls likened the magazine's advice against unhealthy behaviour to the authoritative voice of a parent:

Interviewer: Would reading this article on why smoking is bad for you make you want to quit?

Berry (16): We get stuff like that a *lot* [from authority figures]. Everyone's always going don't do this and don't do that. It's like it actually goes in and out now...reading it in a magazine just gives you the idea that there are girls like that. But it is interesting and good to know. It can maybe help you to warn your friends

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before they start.

Chelsey (15): And it doesn't say "no, don't do it". It just says what happens *if* you do it – so it treats them as adults (which they are not...)

Berry (16): It's like if your parents say don't press the red button then you will go ahead and do it.

In effect, Berry's observation alludes to the fact that the reprimands in the magazine merely serve to make them aware of the fact that other girls are also smoking. It will not necessarily inspire them to quit.

However, as far as sexual behaviour is concerned, the girls seemed to approve the fact that the magazine's stance is in line with their parents'. Girls also displayed a general aversion towards explicit sexual material - as demonstrated by Penny (18):

Cosmo[politan] is full of sex and that bothers me, because once you're through all the sex articles, there's nothing left. And it's also a temptation to read those articles.

Penny is obviously experiencing guilt-related feelings with regard to sex, preferring media content that supports her disposition to other content that encourages girls to be sexually active. One girl even pointed out that sex is "wrong" and commended the magazine for not presenting having sex as normal teen behaviour.

There was once this article on sex and they were warning girls about sex before marriage, or if you do it how to protect yourself. My mom saw it and said she was glad somebody actually care so much about informing kids because no one else seems to be doing anything about it - (Berry, 16).

I love the fact that *Seventeen* doesn't make sex okay, that there are no articles on how to seduce a guy. That's not right. They had an article on how a girl lost her virginity and then you see that it is actually a sad thing. I think it's very good to have articles like that rather than ones where they tell you how to use a condom and so on

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- (Anna, 17).

I think they're trying to keep you safe and with the person that is right for you. They want you to be safe rather than having fun. They're trying to send the right message that girls doing wrong things should know it's bad for them and that they could get infected with all kinds of diseases - (Laura, 13).

Regarding Anna's comment, it would seem that girls believe that *Seventeen* is taking the moral high ground with regard to sex, but (as shown in chapter 4) the magazine does not shy away from including tips on flirting (which is linked to seduction).

These girls seem to relate better to what they read in the media than they do to advice given or opinions expressed by their parents. From this one could perhaps speculate that contemporary teenage girls are (to a certain extent) "brought up" by the media. Interaction with the text allows girls to assume a moral stance on certain issues (pertaining to relationships for example). Interestingly, parents' position on certain issues was seemingly confirmed if similar subject positions were offered by the magazine. However, in cases where magazine content differed from parents' point of view, the magazine's was preferred (the case of sexual behaviour being the exception to the rule).

#### **5.4.4 Repertoire of patriotism**

This is one of the repertoires generated by this study and does not form part of Hermes' list of repertoires. Worth mentioning are comments related to *Seventeen*'s positioning in a post-apartheid South Africa, as was demonstrated by Berry's comment (16):

It's definitely a new South African magazine. It gives us a break from the history that we have, from the teachings about what happened in our past.

This does *not* necessarily imply that the magazine is essentially "new" South African. Given the fact that the bulk of the magazine does not address issues such as racism, crime

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and HIV/Aids, but rather focuses on fashion and boys, it leaves one to wonder what exactly these girls mean by “new” South African. If, perhaps, it refers to the fact that the magazine uses a mix of white and black models, it is slightly worrying. Especially if one takes into consideration the problems with regard to racism that are frequently reported in the media.

According to Donnelly (2008), white South African girls may feel “a sense of isolation” and identify more readily with a global or European sensibility. However, according to *Seventeen* editor Magwaza (2008), the magazine’s readers prefer not to think of themselves in terms of race but rather as “South African”. The girls who took part in the focus groups displayed a keen interest in reading about local celebrities and also to have them featured on the cover:

I think it’s very important to have a local girl on the cover, because if you see a local girl on the cover, you can actually aspire to one day be in *Seventeen* magazine. It can be like an aspiration to you, telling you that there is an opportunity for you in this country to make it better - (Lana, 15).

I just feel that local celebrities are people that you could actually meet one day. They’re in your country and it is closer to you, so maybe you know the person and then it’s interesting to see how local people experience things. They’re very close to you. The celebrity world feels so far away, it’s less personal. But I don’t think they should cut celebrities out completely - (Anna, 17).

Lana’s comment that a local girl on the cover allows her to aspire to also says something about the effect of the encoded discourse on readers’ interpretation of the meaning of success. Bearing in mind that practically all the cover models are either singers or actresses, Lana is in effect equating success to stardom. She likens appearing on the cover as an “opportunity for [her] in this country to make things better”.

When asked whether they think the South African version of *Seventeen* is a faithful local interpretation of the magazine, girls related locality to the social, cultural, political and economic issues of violent crime, substance abuse and HIV/Aids:



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I do think the magazine has a South African flavour. Like this one time they had this little booklet on how you should keep pepper spray with you at all times, and about crime and what you should do if anything happens to you. And it does happen a lot in South Africa. People are hijacked, girls are raped. So we should know how to protect ourselves so it doesn't happen to us - (Trudy, 13)

Here it can be observed how being feminine is being equated in the text's discourse to being a victim. Trudy's comments intersects with the discourse on crime, but her socio-economic status as a more affluent victim allows her to be in possession of the means (pepper spray in this case) to protect herself.

I think one can see that this is a [South African version of *Seventeen*]. They talk about issues that are in our country, like about losing your virginity and stuff like that. And also tik. But we don't want to hear any more about AIDS, we get enough of that - (Drew, 17).

Drew is removing herself from the harsh realities within the South African context. Her discourse is typical of an affluent woman.

When asked whether they think the girls featured in the magazine were racially representative of the greater South African population, responses were in sync with Magwaza's (2008) observation that readers classify themselves as South African rather than as belonging to any particular racial group:

Honestly, when I read a magazine I don't pick up the colour of the people anymore, because to me everyone is the same. I get so irritated when people go through a magazine and say things like "look how white that woman is". That's who she is, leave it! - (Kelly, 16).

I don't really pay attention to whether the models are black or white. There are stunning black models out there as well as white models - (Penny, 18).

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Judging by the choice of cover models, however, the magazine seems to be reflecting its target market (which in essence boils down to the white urban adolescent female). The magazine probably wants to enlarge its readership amongst black readers, but superficial responses with regard to real socio-cultural issues (such as poverty, HIV/Aids and tik/street drugs) indicate an unwillingness by readers to engage with these very important and real issues.

#### **5.4.5 Repertoire of consumer know-how**

This is another repertoire that does not form part of Hermes' list. Women's magazines make the connection between femininity and the consumption of specific products (Donnelly, 2008), in effect then linking the consumption of certain products with femininity via the avenue of advertising (Beetham, 1996: 148). As was noted in 2.4.3, women's magazines construct girls as consumers (Smith, 1988, p.,55), which makes readers negotiate with advertising texts of particular relevance.

During the focus groups, it became apparent that girls used "lived experience" as a basis for making sense of advertising texts – a process that was also described by Currie (1997, p. 466). It also became apparent that ads that were not applicable to their everyday experiences were quickly shunned:

I would read an ad if the product is relevant. There's one, for example, on insurance. Like this one [points to article]. No one my age is going to buy a new car. I think at this age all of us know what kind of products we use and I think we're loyal to those products. I know, for example, which skin care products I use now so I'll stick to them. I must say I'm not very influenced by ads - (Penny, 18).

I don't really like this banking advertisement. If you open a bank account at our age, your parents mostly arrange it. So it's not really applicable to us - (Drew, 17).

The girls also seem to be well informed when it comes to ads. If asked about a particular advertisement's target market, they were quick to point out who a particular product was

aimed at:

This ad is for the same product, but it's completely different to this one. This one is for a different market, and this one here is for hip and funky people. And I would say this one is for people who are more down to earth and just relaxed - (Kelly, 16).

The fact that Kelly can discern who certain ads are aimed at, is indicative of the effective strategy behind the ad campaigns. During the focus groups it became apparent that the girls were divided when it came to the physical *reading* of advertising text (as opposed to merely flipping past it). Some girls, like Kelly (16), regarded the advertisements as being "really cool", while Berry (16) claimed that ads are "very important" and she "reads all the ads". The girls in the 17-18 year old group, however, were much more critical of the advertisements, claiming to flip right past the advertisements as they had a sense of brand loyalty, saying they would not be easily swayed to use other products. This "savvyness", however, is also an indication of an initial ad campaign that inspired them (or some of their "informants") to use their current favourite product.

On the basis of the discussion on advertisements one could therefore speculate that advertisements do not consciously play a big role in the lives of these teenagers when it comes to defining femininity. These girls frequently reject (and even criticise) advertisements for not being "real" and will therefore be more likely to identify with subject positions that they can relate to their own lives. It became apparent that while addressing advertisements, girls adopted a negotiated (and in some cases even an oppositional) code during their engagement with these texts. The irony is that their rejection of one ad is merely based on the acceptance of another. The girls have seemingly already bought into the consumer culture.

## **5.5 Concluding remarks**

This chapter looked specifically at how readers derived sense and made meaning of their reading experience with *Seventeen*. Specific reference was made to Hermes' interpretive repertoires, as well as to the two newly invented repertoires. It was found that the girls

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predominantly took up a position of negotiated reading – they were able to discern the dominating message, but selected what they chose to use.

Furthermore, it was found that these girls (coming from an affluent background) at times displayed the discourse on affluence in their negotiation with the text. Articles on HIV/Aids and tik, for example, were disregarded as they girls felt they “[got] enough of that”.

It was found that girls preferred articles dealing with boys and also tips on attracting the opposite sex. The girls seemed to link their feminine success to the degree of attention they would (or could potentially) receive from the opposite sex. All of the girls, however, displayed an aversion towards material that was sexually “too explicit”.

As far as advertising was concerned, the girls claimed to be resistant to advertising messages, yet they also displayed a degree of loyalty towards certain brands (indicative of the fact that advertising strategies work regardless).

## CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Introduction

As a conclusion to this study, this chapter summarises the main research findings in order to answer the research questions posed in chapter 1. Research regarding the discourse on femininity and how audiences engage with it, consisted of four phases:

**Phase 1:** This phase consisted of a content analysis and contained both quantitative and qualitative elements. Twelve copies of *Seventeen* were analysed to investigate the femininity encoded in the text. Research departed from a cultural studies perspective and listed other sub-divisions – such as feminist as well as discourse studies – that added to a more in-depth approach to the subject area. This was discussed in chapter 2.

**Phase 2:** In order to account for the encoding (see chapter 3), a semi-structured interview was conducted with the editor of *Seventeen*, Khwezi Magwaza, details of which are also discussed in chapter 4.

**Phase 3:** The third phase focused on audience research and involved 19 girls in focus group interviews regarding their reading habits, perceptions of the text and their interpretation thereof. This phase involved the decoding process referred to by Hall (1991, p. 136-138). The findings were discussed in chapter 5.

**Phase 4:** The fourth phase consisted of the analysis of the transcripts of focus group interviews and were discussed in chapter 5. Methods were drawn from the field of discourse analysis. Repertoire analysis accounted for how readers derived meaning and made sense of their reading experience, while Stuart Hall's preferred reading positions were applied to account for their resistance to the text (or lack thereof).

## 6.2 Results

The three specific research questions will now be answered with reference to the findings presented in the five preceding chapters.

The first specific research question to be answered in this study was the following:

- **Which dominant themes relating to femininity can be identified in *Seventeen*?**

A quantitative content analysis of the text revealed the following thematic categories to be most prevalent: advertisements and advertorials, fashion and make-up, relationships (love), celebrity interviews, socio-cultural issues, music and films, nutrition and exercise.

Content analysis revealed 38 per cent of the pages to be either full page advertisements or editorials. The *Seventeen* audiences are described by publisher 8Ink Media to be “one of South Africa’s most active consumer segments” (which is then reflected in the high percentage of pages dedicated to advertising). Following this, one can deduce that the typical *Seventeen* reader belongs to a lucrative market, has a lot of spending power and is brand conscious. Advertising encourages her to re-create herself, to coordinate her life with consumerism.

Tying in with the discussion on advertising is the 30 per cent of pages that are dedicated to fashion and make-up features. A regular feature in *Seventeen* is the so-called “trend to try” feature – instructing readers on how they can modify the latest trends and fashions to suit their body shape and/or personality. Active construction is encouraged, but the only option or trend to try that is left to the *Seventeen* reader is the one that is being promoted by the fashion spreads.

Features related to love relationships make up 9 per cent of the content. Each and every one of the twelve issues (without exception) has a section dedicated exclusively to guys, consisting of anything from three to six pages. By producing an artificial dialogue with guys regarding their opinion on girls and relationships, the male voice is constructed as authoritative. The *Seventeen* reader is interested in boys, curious to know how to be more attractive to the opposite sex and very much aware of her sexuality (judging by

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articles on irresponsible sexual behaviour, flirting tips and advice as well as articles dealing with teenage pregnancy). From the discourse in the text it can be deduced that the femininity constructed in *Seventeen* is essentially heterosexual.

A close runner-up to content dealing with love relationships is celebrity interviews. Most of the interviews featured white American celebrities and cover models were all, without exception, American. One can interpret this tendency in two ways – the typical *Seventeen* reader is either connected to a global culture preferring to be informed regarding international trends and events, or she seems to possess a total disregard for local talent and no sense of loyalty towards fellow South Africans.

A category focusing more on the South African context is the one pertaining to socio-cultural issues. Socio-cultural issues (such as substance abuse, HIV/Aids) are addressed from a “real life” point of view. Other issues include psychological as well as eating disorders. The *Seventeen* reader living in a South African context is seemingly confronted with circumstances unique to her environment (such as a very high crime rate). She likes to be informed, as knowledge empowers her. She is, however, also addressed as a victim (if one were to look specifically at the articles relating to crime).

Four per cent of content is dedicated to music and films. Of the 43 films featured over a 12-month period, none was a locally produced feature, while only five of the 35 albums featured were by local artists.

*Seventeen*'s exercise and nutrition pages make up 3 per cent of the total number of pages. The features encourage exercise as well as low-fat nutritious eating. The problem is, however, that the rest of the content of the magazine (the advertising models, for example) do not necessarily encourage a healthy body image.

The second specific research question that had to be answered in this study was the following:

- **How is the discourse on femininity constructed in *Seventeen*?**

The research goal of the second question was to explore the editorial role and insight regarding the construction of content (which would inform the research regarding

the production phase of the encoding process).

Editor Khwezi Magwaza's comments were integrated in the discussion on the content in chapter 4. The discussion surrounding advertising yielded the most interesting comments. Magwaza claimed the editorial staff would object to the use of women in lingerie in advertisements, yet the March 2008 issue featured an advertisement for Playtex, the model posing in nothing but her underwear. The fact that the editor exhibited limited control as to which advertisements were published could indicate that advertising (and not) sales is the main form of income for the magazine, and that monetary decisions sometimes override the personal objections (if any) coming from the editor.

The fashion and make-up discussion turned out to be yet another contentious point. Magwaza claimed that *Seventeen* was "about tips and instruction". *Seventeen* offers the reader different options relating to fashion to experiment with, but the reader is left to adapt the look to her own personal style. With regard to their choice of models, Magwaza said that "clothes look better on a certain type of body and [*Seventeen*] is totally aware of that". She indicated that *Seventeen* would send "unhealthy-looking" girls home who came to model castings. There does therefore seem to be some control over what kind of body type is being projected through the pages. The problem is, however, that it becomes relative. Where does one draw the line? Magwaza said that *Seventeen* was "about helping, about being the big sister". She also claimed that the process of loving yourself was about deciding who you are, and that was about choosing which clothes work for you. Editorially, self-love is therefore connected to consumerism, to choosing the right products.

Magwaza linked the content on boys to the fact that "girls just want to be universal...most girls just want to fit in, to have friends and to have guys like them". Also discussed with Magwaza in connection with love relationships, was the editorial stance on sex. Magwaza said that *Seventeen* did not assume that "every teenage girl is having sex" but they wanted the content to tell readers "how to go about" it should they go into a sexual relationship, and also "what you need to know to be safe". It is interesting that on the issue of sex – unlike that of a healthy body image - the editor and readers (and seemingly also their parents) were more or less in agreement. Could this be because the magazine is able to limit its "mixed messages" on sex more than those it is sending out



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on body image – judging from the often contradictory positions found in the analysed editions?

The third specific research question to be answered in this study was the following:

- **Which interpretive repertoires do readers refer to and which reading positions do they take up in order to make sense of their reading experience and the discourse on femininity constructed in *Seventeen*?**

The focus group discussions raised very interesting points. Of particular interest regarding this discussion in the focus groups was the fact that the girls related the feminine ideal to the feminine physique. In some cases, the girls adopted the dominant/hegemonic code without question. Tina (13), for example, noted how the girls with the “perfect bodies” made her wonder why “[she] doesn’t have the perfect body”. Yet she also mentioned that she could “see that the computer has worked on [the models]”. More examples of readers adopting the dominant/hegemonic code was Laura (13), who said that she thought “it’s better if models are skinny” and Paula (18), who said the models were not portrayed attractively enough. Abby (16), for example, said that she preferred skinny models to chubby models, as chubby models “just won’t be pretty”.

Using repertoire analysis to analyse interview transcripts, the following interpretive repertoires were identified:

*Repertoire of practical knowledge:* This repertoire appeals to girls’ “pragmatic and solution orientated self” (Hermes, 1995, p. 45) and girls frequently referred to this repertoire to account for the beautification rituals that appealed to them in the magazine, as well as their relationship with boys.

*Repertoire of connected knowing and emotional learning:* This repertoire allows girls to connect with the experiences of others and to inform them with regard to their own social world as teenagers. As was mentioned by Talbot (1988, p. 177-178), reading about other readers’ real-life stories sets up yet another constellation of a subject position.

*Morality repertoire:* This repertoire pertains to girls’ aloofness with regard to

issues they regard as morally significant (such as the choice of abstaining from sexual relationships or not). Mead's (2005, p. 88-89) and Kilbourne's (2002, p. 285) observation that the media are assuming a parental role in a society where peer pressure as well as dominant media messages are challenging (and shaping) teens' values (see 1.1) was observed during the focus groups. Observations such as Laura's "[*Seventeen*] sometimes makes more sense than my mom does" were indicative of this phenomenon. When it came to sex, however, girls chose to align with their parents' more conservative stance on the subject (which alluded to abstinence).

*Repertoire of patriotism:* Contrary to Magwaza's observation that girls wanted to feel connected to a global universal culture, girls in the focus groups demonstrated a strong preference (and requests) for more articles and covers featuring *local* celebrities (as opposed to American superstars). This serves to affirm that cover models are being held up as role models to aspire to. Local celebrities listed by girls included the model and TV presenter Minki van der Westhuizen and the surfer and model Roxy Louw.

*Repertoire of consumer know-how:* Girls claimed to be not easily influenced or swayed by ads, although they would read ads if they were applicable to their lives as teenagers. The girls could therefore be said to take up a negotiated reading, where they choose to subscribe to prescriptions or suggestions found in ads only if they find it applicable. Yet, most of them were found to subscribe to values, styles and fashion propagated by the ads.

### 6.3 Conclusion

In this study the discourse on femininity in *Seventeen*, as well as readers' negotiation with this discourse, was investigated. The preceding section indicated that the three specific research questions have been answered. The research goals set out in chapter 1 have in other words been achieved.

In conclusion, the general research question therefore has to be answered:

- **How do teenage girls negotiate with the discourse on femininity in *Seventeen* to**

### **inform their own understanding of femininity?**

As a text aimed specifically at adolescent women, *Seventeen* was approached as a site where the discourse on femininity could be analysed. Content analysis revealed a number of thematic categories— advertising and advertorials, fashion and make-up and relationships (love) were the most featured categories. It was found that *Seventeen* constructed a femininity that centres around fashion, boys and the beautification of the self. Judging by the “race” of the cover models, the femininity portrayed by *Seventeen* was essentially white, while the advertised brands indicated a market that had a lot of spending power. The male voice was given a lot of authority. Every issue featured an article on boys’ opinions regarding relationship-related matters. In essence, the goal of most of the tips and articles in *Seventeen* was to attract attention from boys.

The girls who took part in the focus groups were all avid readers of the magazine. It was found that they could discern the textual ideal (which is essentially white, tall and skinny) as being unrealistic for most girls to achieve. They had no trouble relating to the dominant reading of the text. Judging by their responses, it became apparent that they possessed the necessary “cultural capital” to resist the dominant reading. Yet, instead of being critical of the unrealistic presentation of the feminine ideal in the text, they would rather criticise themselves than the text, always comparing their own physique to what was being presented in the magazine.

The girls’ reading experience appeared to be a journey of discovery, a quest for understanding womanhood. The motivation behind this quest for understanding was mostly based on learning about boys and relationships, physical appearance and beautification.

In contrast to Magwaza’s comment that girls want to feel “universally connected”, readers who took part in the focus groups actually demonstrated a degree of loyalty and patriotism – they wanted to find out more about local celebrities as opposed to American superstars. Interestingly though, they still bought *Seventeen* even though they were criticising the magazine for not featuring enough local talent.

Furthermore, girls appeared to be critical of the textual ideal by criticising models for perhaps being too skinny (although they also admitted that this was perhaps what

models should look like). They could recognise this as being unhealthy, yet they still seemed to understand that the textual ideal could not and would not be altered to be more “real”. The readers appeared to be ad-savvy consumers who essentially were concerned with their own personal beautification and how to relate to the opposite sex.

However, in essence the girls appeared mostly uncritical of the text. When probed for their opinion, they expressed certain concerns regarding the way femininity was constructed in the magazine. For the most part, however, they subscribed to the consumer culture propagated by the magazine. They enjoyed fashion and beauty features as well as any tips on how to attract the opposite sex.

One can in effect detect how these texts as socialising agents guide girls through a passage into adult womanhood (and adult women media). For the moment, *Seventeen* will be teaching girls how to flirt, kiss and cuddle. In a few years’ time they will be reading how-to sex articles in *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour* or *Marie Claire*. And as for the fashion and make-up, those exact same rituals can be carried through to adulthood.

It is worrying that a magazine claiming to be specifically aimed at South African teens still displays such a degree of Americanisation in its content. What is even more worrying is that the readers of the magazine buy into the American culture that is being promoted, yet they refer to the magazine as “having a local South African flavour”. In the same vein, girls will reject endemic South African socio-cultural issues, writing these off as “overdone”. These girls belong to a higher LSM group, and they chose not to expose themselves to certain issues that are essentially South African. Eating disorders, however, generally associated with higher LSM groups, did interest them.

In conclusion, it can be said that these readers of *Seventeen* were generally uncritical of the magazine and its content. They possessed the “cultural capital” to take up a negotiated or resistant reading of the text, yet they allowed the dominated reading to influence how they talked about their bodies or about their interaction with boys. In their reading of the text they were left largely disconnected from the greater South African socio-cultural context and were mainly concerned with their physique and obsessed with boys and attracting their attention.

Granted, as was noted by Magwaza, the *Seventeen* girl is a “light girl” who likes to have fun, but it leaves me wondering at what stage she would have had enough fun to

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take life (and issues that are very real and occurring around her every day) seriously.

#### **6.4 Recommendations for further research**

- Research regarding specifically the black South African teenage female's interaction and negotiation with the so-called Western feminine ideals present in *Seventeen*.
- A longitudinal study of South African women's reading experience from ages 15 to 24 and their consumption of women's magazine titles.
- What a South African feminist magazine for girls would look like.

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## APPENDICE

### Reader profiles

Ivy (15) has been a reader of *Seventeen* for a year and buys the magazine every month. She also reads *You* and *People*. She lives with her mother who is a housekeeper and her father who is a civil engineer.

Berry (16) started reading *Seventeen* two years ago. She also reads *Saltwater Girl* and *Glamour*. Berry lives with her mother who is a teacher.

Chelsey (15) has been reading *Seventeen* since she was 12 and buys the magazine every month. Other magazines of choice include *Saltwater Girl*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*. She has been reading *Seventeen* for two years. Both of her parents are medical specialists. She lives with them.

Kelly (16) has been reading *Seventeen* for three years. She also likes *Sport Illustrated* and *Zig Zag*. She lives with her parents. Her mother is a secretary and her father is a project manager.

Meryl (14) started reading *Seventeen* two years ago. She lives with her parents who are both in the educational field. She also buys *Heat* magazine.

Shadé (13) lives with her parents who co-own a jewellery store. She buys *Seventeen* every month and is also a reader of *Saltwater Girl*, *Teen* and *People*. She has been reading *Seventeen* for a year.

Penny (18) has been reading *Seventeen* for three years. She also reads *Glamour*. Penny lives with her parents. Her mother is a teacher and her father is a construction manager.

Edna (16) lives with her parents who are both teachers. She has been reading *Seventeen*

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for two years and also reads *Glamour* magazine occasionally. Edna lives with her parents.

Latoya (17) lives with her parents. Her father is a lawyer and her mother is an occupational therapist. She has been reading *Seventeen* for three years and also buys *Glamour* occasionally.

Anna (17) has been reading *Seventeen* for three years. Other publications of choice include *Truth* and *Huisgenoot*. Anna lives with her parents. Her mother is a teacher and her father a civil engineer.

Tina (13) only started reading *Seventeen* 3 months ago. She also reads *Heat* occasionally. She lives with her parents who own and manage two businesses.

Nolene (16) lives with her mother who is a medical technologist and her father who is a project manager. She started reading *Seventeen* three years ago and buys it every month. She also reads *Huisgenoot*.

Drew (17) reads *Seventeen* every third month and also occasionally reads *Huisgenoot* and *Cosmopolitan*. She lives with her parents who are both working as financial advisors.

Laura (13) lives with her parents. Her mother is a housekeeper and her father runs his own business. Laura has been reading *Seventeen* for a few months. She also reads *Heat* magazine.

Charlene (16) has been reading *Seventeen* for two years and also reads *Elle* magazine. She lives with her parents. Her father is an engineer and her mother a housekeeper.

Abby (16) lives with her parents. Her father is an engineer. She reads *Seventeen* occasionally and has been doing so for three years. She also enjoys *Elle*.

Erica (14) has been reading *Seventeen* for a year. She also buys *Teenzone*, *People* and

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*Heat*. She lives with her parents. Her mother is a housekeeper and her father a financial director.

Lana (15) has been reading *Seventeen* for two years. She lives with her parents. Her mother is a home executive and her father a pharmacist. She also reads *Glamour*, *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan*.

Mandy (16) started reading *Seventeen* three years ago. She also buys and reads *Heat* magazine. Her mother is a housekeeper and her father is an engineer. She lives with them