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doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/31886068>

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“The Accidental Virgin”:  
An Analysis of Sex, Sexuality, and Reproductive Health in *Seventeen* Magazine

by

Leah Berger-Singer

Under the Direction of Stephanie Y. Evans, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2022

## ABSTRACT

Public debates on youth sexuality, sex education, and reproductive rights are forever changing. Social media outlets are important knowledge spaces for teens to learn, share, and seek information regarding these topics. Using feminist content analysis, I explore how eight issues of *Seventeen* magazine construct and uphold conservative fears of teen sexuality. With the application of Michelle Fine's four discourses of female sexuality, found in public-school sex education, (sexuality as individual morality, sexuality as victimization, sexuality as violence, and the missing discourse of desire) I seek to address how *Seventeen* constructs its target audience as a cis-gendered, heterosexual, teen girl who lives without sexual desire or the need for medically accurate sex education or reproductive health services. With the recent overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, this study seeks to acknowledge how public discourses of sex, sexuality, and reproductive health directly impact how youth view their individual bodily autonomy or lack thereof.

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2022

“The Accidental Virgin”:

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by

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December 202

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my three beautiful nieces, Madelyn Pearl, Mila June, and Isla Mae. I hope that I can be a trusted adult that you confide in when you need advice, support, and comfort. I love you more than you'll ever know. <3

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I want to start by thanking my family, my momma, my pops, and my sis. I would not have been able to attend or finish grad school without you. Thank you for always being kind, supportive, encouraging, and gentle with me. I also want to thank my thesis committee for their continued guidance, patience, knowledge, and support as I wrote this never-ending thesis. Thank you, Dr. Evans, for encouraging me to apply to this program and for supporting me as my thesis advisor. Thank you, Dr. Burnet, for sweeping in at the tail-end of my thesis journey to help me see it through, and thank you, Dr. Simonds for sharing your wisdom. I also want to thank Kayla Edgett, my amazing friend, who listened to me complain almost daily, who hugged me when I cried, who helped me to understand what writing a thesis meant, and who encouraged me not to give up. Thank you, my lovely new friend, Monisha Jackson, who co-worked with me, edited my thesis, and helped me with confidence in my work. And last, but certainly not least, I want to thank my cohort, Pashence Bailey, Jordan Keesler, Dennis Asan Hardy, and Deena Bregheith, for their support, input, and advice during our graduate school program and in my thesis writing process.

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# **1 INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORY OF SEX EDUCATION AND TEEN MAGAZINES**

## **1.1 Coming of Age**

The early 2000s were the coming-of-age years for me and my peers. Living in Atlanta, Georgia, we spent our sweltering hot summers at the pool, listening to music on our portable CD players or iPod shuffles, and quizzing each other on how to get the guy of our dreams from teen magazines. As our hormones and our bodies changed, the information we received about sexual health and sexuality felt somewhat out of reach. However, sex was, and still is, everywhere. It was in the music we listened to, on the tv shows and movies we watched, on billboards, in the magazines, and in pop-up porn ads on our family computers. We couldn't escape it. And while our culture is subtly, or not so subtly, pushing images of sex into our minds, society, our parents, social media, and schools are simultaneously telling us that this topic is taboo.

An average of forty-three percent of teenagers ages fifteen through nineteen have had sexual intercourse at least once (Abma and Martinez, p. 1). However, "Half (50 percent) of all teens feel uncomfortable talking with their parents about sex" ("Half of all Teens..."). Since many young people are having sex but are not talking with their parents about it, sex education should be readily available in schools. Public debates over what should and should not be included in the curricula by conservative parents and policymakers, have been used to control what knowledges are shared and what knowledges are kept secret in sex education classrooms. For example, George W. Bush, a conservative religious president, allocated millions of dollars to fund abstinence-only sex education programs in the years 2005 and 2006 (Rose, p. 1208). Abstinence-only education programs are harmful to youth because they ignore factual information about sex and youth sexuality such as "research, public opinion, and the experience

of other countries about what actually works to prevent teenage pregnancy and STIs” (Rose, 1208). Enforcing religious beliefs about sexuality, such as abstinence until marriage, further exacerbates barriers to condom use for teens that do choose to have sex (Rose, p. 1208).

In the essay, “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire,” Michelle Fine argues that sex education in schools both upholds and reinforces fears about youth sexuality, creating a barrier for youth to access important information. Fine writes, “Public schools have historically been the site for identifying, civilizing, and constraining that which is considered uncontrollable” (Fine, p. 31). In this piece, Fine examines the four “discourses of sexuality” that “characterize the national debates over sex education” (Fine, p. 32). These four discourses are “sexuality as violence,” “sexuality as victimization,” “sexuality as individual morality,” and “a [missing] discourse of desire” (Fine, p. 31-33). In this study, I use these four discourses to analyze knowledge, power, and reproductive injustice in *Seventeen* magazine.

Michel Foucault explores how sexuality, knowledge, and power work together. Foucault fuses knowledge and power together saying that power creates knowledge and knowledge “induces” power. Foucault writes, “it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (Foucault and Gordon, p. 52). Additionally, Foucault says that power relations exist in various dichotomies, including but not limited to, between men and women, between teachers and students, and between administrations and populations. Foucault writes, “Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality” (Foucault, p. 103). Knowledge and power work together to uphold, create, and promote social constructions of sexuality via social media, sex education, government policies, and laws.

Sex education can be a useful tool to enforce positive attitudes and beliefs about sex, sexuality, and reproductive health. However, because of conservative beliefs and policies, sex education programs often lack important information regarding sex and sexuality and exclude youth who don't fit into the heterosexual mold (Sanchez, sec. 2 para. 1). Since many students aren't getting the information they need at home or school, social media spaces have been used as an outlet to gather, share, and learn information. According to Loretta Ross, policies that "distort sex education" and "restrict abortion access" work together to limit the reproductive autonomy of women (Ross, 2006, p. 55). To combat these policies and restrictions, women of color activists created the reproductive justice framework, combining reproductive rights and social justice, to advocate for women's human rights, bodily autonomy, and access to reproductive services.

In this research, I explore how *Seventeen* magazine frames its target audience as a heterosexual, virgin, cisgender teen girl who lives without sexual desire or the need for reproductive health services. Youth sexuality is defined by *Seventeen* as a gendered power dynamic in which teen girls seek sexual attention from teen boys but lack their own desire for sex. Furthermore, youth sexuality is constructed as something to fear, creating and upholding the narrative that sex only ends in pregnancy or STIs. Reproductive justice, on the other hand, supports teen girls and women in their bodily autonomy, normalizing sex and sexuality. If *Seventeen* were to reframe youth sexuality with a reproductive justice lens, its readers would be provided with medically accurate sexual health information to make autonomous decisions about their sexual and reproductive health.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how sex, sexuality, and reproductive health services are shaped and explored in *Seventeen* magazine over the course of two decades.

Investigating *Seventeen* can help scholars to understand how social media, specifically magazines, might influence how teen girls create and understand their own ideas of gender, sexuality, sexual health, and sexual autonomy. With the overturning of *Roe v Wade* by the Supreme Court and the implementation of the “Don’t Say Gay Bill,” both of which occurred in 2022, young people need media outlets to explicitly show support for their sexuality and bodily autonomy. I look at *Seventeen* magazine to ask the broad question: How does *Seventeen* magazine present discourses of sex, sexuality, and reproductive rights to its readers? Through a content analysis of the writing in *Seventeen* magazine, I explore how the published text creates, maintains, and upholds Michelle Fine’s four discourses of sexuality.

## **1.2 Literature Review**

In this literature review, I investigate how the history of sex education has influenced sex education today. I explore how laws, policies, and social movements have influenced trends and main themes of sex education within the past 100 years. I also review the history of reproductive rights for women, especially women of color and poor white women, and how that has shaped and created reproductive justice. Lastly, I look at how social media, specifically magazines, play a significant role in how and where teen girls learn, share, and disseminate sex education information.

### ***1.2.1 The Start of Sex Education: The “Social Hygiene Movement”***

Valerie J. Huber and Michael W. Firmin stated that prior to the 19th century, children’s education took place in the home, and Christian theology was integrated into the subject content (Huber and Firmin, p. 26). Sex was not typically discussed, but if it was, it was solely based on

the idea of sex after marriage; and children could learn about reproduction by watching animals on the farm. Starting in the 19th century, schoolhouses became a common space for learning, and like today, the type of education you received depended on where you lived and the wealth of that population. However, people of color were provided with limited access to spaces and information. According to Manduley et al., “This allowed communities of color to pass on essential information relevant to their sexual health, but also limited what people learned to what was accessible and socially acceptable in their communities” (Manduley, et al., p. 155).

In 1905, Prince A. Morrow founded the “social hygiene movement” which promoted the idea of “sexual hygiene” for both youth and adults. According to Huber and Firmin, this movement included discussing the importance of avoiding venereal diseases, also known as Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), or Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), as well as “physical, social, ‘aesthetic,’ and ethical aspects of sex to improve overall sexual attitudes and to gain important knowledge” (Huber and Firmin, p. 27). With the rise of syphilis and gonorrhea during WWI, 1914-1918, the government first began to get involved in sex education. They took it upon themselves to warn soldiers about the “dangers of sex” by campaigning against STIs.

Livingston writes that the purpose of the social hygiene movement was to promote “the development of the human race, and for combating venereal disease” (Livingston, p. 1155). The goal of promoting sex “hygiene” for soldiers, who were predominantly white men, was also used as a tool for eugenics. In 1910, Lewellys F Barker, who identified as a eugenicist, stated, “In becoming thorough eugenists, we shall act in accordance with the highest aims and purposes of all persons interested in true social hygiene... these studies also teach us how mankind can control its destiny” (Barker, p. 2021-2022). Barker and other white male scientists who identified as eugenicists, supported the use of birth control as a form of population control to promote and



increase in the white population while seeking to decrease populations of color. To promote “sexual hygiene,” public high schools began to implement sex education into their curriculum. By 1920, 40% of schools implemented these programs, and by 1950, “family life education” became a typical part of public-school education (Huber and Firmin, p. 32 and 35).

### ***1.2.2 Comprehensive Sex Education and Pregnancy Prevention***

According to Huber and Firmin, the biologist and zoologist, Alfred Kinsey, believed that “abstinence before marriage could lead to psychological or emotional harm” (Huber and Firmin, p. 35). Kinsey’s research on sexual behavior in the 1940s and 1950s paved the way for sex education, gay rights, sexual rights, and women’s rights. By the 1960s, the sexual revolution began and pro-sex organizations like Planned Parenthood popularized “comprehensive” sex education. 1964, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) was formed by Mary Calderone, the former medical director of Planned Parenthood (Huber and Firmin, p. 37). SIECUS is an organization that “encourage[s] students to decide for themselves when to engage in sex, whether to seek an abortion, and how to obtain easy access to contraception” (Huber and Firmin, p. 37). By 1969, SIECUS resources were being used in schools to develop sex education in the classroom (Huber and Firmin, p. 37).

In 1971, President Nixon required that all public schools implement sex education into their curriculum; and by 1973, *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortions (Huber and Firmin). During this same time, contraception became more widely available, and the notion of “choice” became popular. The second-wave feminist movement began, but white women and women of color were fighting for different rights. According to Loretta Ross and Ricki Solinger, women of color felt that the “Concept of choice masks the different economic, political, and environmental

contexts in which women live their reproductive lives” (Ross and Solinger, p. 48). White women focused their fight on the right to *prevent* conception and unwanted birth while women of color focused their fight on the right to be a mother. For white women, sterilization was a part of “reproductive rights,” while for women of color, the right to refuse sterilization was salient (Ross and Solinger, p. 52).

Laws, policies, and government officials have used eugenics to justify white supremacy, permitting non-consensual sterilization of Black women as well as not providing equal access to contraception or abortion (Manduley, et al., Ross and Solinger). However, by 1978, President Carter mandated that parts of education provide community-based sex education, focusing on pregnancy prevention and risk reduction (Huber and Firmin, p. 39). Three years later, when Ronald Reagan became president at the start of the AIDs epidemic, sex education took a major turn.

### ***1.2.3 The Ronald Reagan Era and the AIDs Epidemic***

On January 20, 1981, Ronald Reagan took oath as president of the United States, after years of spouting racist and anti-poor rhetoric to the country. In his inauguration speech, Reagan promised to rid the country of public programs, tighten welfare benefits, and continue to push the false narrative of the “welfare queen.” Bryce Covert writes, “the welfare queen stood in for the idea that black people were too lazy to work, instead relying on public benefits to get by, paid for by the rest of us upstanding citizens” (Covert). Reagan depicted young Black women as hypersexual, promiscuous, and having multiple children just to benefit from government funding (Covert). His policies and beliefs were based on sexist, racist, and conservative religious ideologies. In 1981, the Reagan administration passed the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA),

which “promote[d] chastity and self-discipline as a moral method to prevent teen pregnancy” (Gonzalez et al., p. 222). The AFLA not only pushed a religious agenda but also pushed a heterosexist agenda. Hill Collins states,

The term *sexuality* itself is used so synonymously with *heterosexuality* that schools, churches, and other social institutions treat heterosexuality as natural, normal, and inevitable.... [and] sex outside of marriage, adolescent sexuality, homosexuality... [and] anal and oral sex, become situated within a social problems framework. (Hill Collins, p. 37)

When the AIDS epidemic arose in the 1980s, the major topics of conversation in sex education shifted drastically. According to Debra W. Haffner, the AIDS crisis called for an increase in sex education in schools, community organizations, and national agencies (Haffner, p. 1). The Center for Disease Control (CDC) increased its funding for HIV prevention in 1988, providing sex education with a focus on AIDS prevention in middle schools, high schools, and some colleges. Kenny et al. wrote that in 1989, 85% of schools approved of sex education instruction, increasing from 69 percent in 1965 and 76 percent in 1975 (Kenney, et al., p. 56). However, as sex education included AIDS prevention, programs began to instill fear of sickness and death, while still pushing the agenda for students to abstain from having sex. These fears, instilled by homophobic rhetoric, caused sex education curricula and programs to focus their content on the “biomedical aspects” of AIDs rather than on behavior change (Haffner, p. 1). In addition to AIDS prevention, sex education in the late '80s also included topics such as “birth control,” “homosexuality,” and “abortions” (Kenney, et al., p. 56). By the early 1990s, the focus of sex education shifted once again, with a major debate between proponents of “abstinence-only” and “comprehensive” sex education.

### ***1.2.4 Abstinence-Only vs Comprehensive Sex Education***

Pro-sex organizations like SIECUS and Planned Parenthood advocate for “comprehensive sex education,” promoting sex education in four main ways, including: (1) by providing medically accurate sex education information, (2) by developing positive attitudes and values towards sex and sexuality, (3) by helping young people to develop communication skills, and (4) and by encouraging youth to make autonomous decisions about sex (“History of Sex Education”, p. 2). Abstinence-only education, on the other hand, includes religious ideologies of sex and sexuality in their curriculum, such as the beliefs that: everyone must maintain abstinence from any sexual activity until marriage; monogamy is needed to maintain sexual health; and that anything outside of sex with your heterosexual spouse can cause psychological and physical harm. According to Janice M. Irvine, the Christian Right opposes comprehensive sex education because they believe it “makes kids go out and have sex... and that speaking about sex *is* sex” (Irvine, p. 59). The Christian Right also believes that talking about sexuality, including homosexuality, in sex education is both “encouraging” and “supporting” children to have these “alternative” lifestyles (Irvine, p. 61).

In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Welfare Reform Act (Title V), restricting public benefits and welfare, as well as funding abstinence-only education, which was both believed to decrease childhood poverty (“History of Sex Education” and Gonzalez et al.). Title V worked alongside abstinence-only education to promote moral panics around the “welfare queen,” providing the false narrative that Black women were having too many children at too young of age so that they could benefit from public assistance programs, getting money from the state. By 2001, President George W. Bush supported the funding of three abstinence-only programs that had been created, and, according to Gonzalez et al., “two thirds of the abstinence-

only programs in public schools contained incorrect scientific information... including, but not limited to, condom failures, STIs, abortions, and genetics” (Gonzalez et al., p. 222). Abstinence-only programs were not allowed to promote safe sex (i.e., condom use and contraception), as they promoted sex only after marriage as a part of their curricula.

However, positive changes in sex education were on their way with the help of the Obama administration. In 2009, he proposed to eliminate all funds for abstinence-only education, working toward a new plan for “pregnancy prevention programs” which center medically accurate sex education (Gonzalez, p. 223). By 2010, the first federally funded comprehensive sex education program, the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative (TPPI), was proposed, along with the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP). According to Gonzalez, et al., PREP addresses “unintended pregnancies, STIs, HIV/AIDS, characteristics of healthy relationships, life skills, and finances” (Gonzalez, et al., p. 223). By 2017, Obama proposed once again to cut all federal funding for abstinence-only programs, increasing funding for comprehensive sex education (Cristobal). Jessica Boyer, Interim President and CEO of SIECUS stated, “The President’s proposed budget increases support for programs and efforts that seek to equip young people with the skills they need to ensure their lifelong sexual health and well-being” (Cristobal). While the Obama administration worked to create youth sex education programs that were both factual and informative, these programs were still lacking important information and focused on the “personal responsibility” of the individual rather than on the responsibility of the government.

Having programs that focus on individual responsibility rather than on systematic responsibility upholds the narrative that individuals and communities are accountable for their own oppressions. The belief in individual responsibility denies how government systems play a

major role in the ability of individuals and communities to access resources. Ross and Solinger write, “The neoliberal attitude asks us to excuse the government from responsibility for the well-being of its population and to discount or simply ignore the role of social inequalities in producing disparate reproductive outcomes, including unintended pregnancy.” (Ross and Solinger, p. 151).

### ***1.2.5 Sex Education Today...***

As of 2020, only twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia mandate sex education in schools. Out of those twenty-nine states, only fifteen require that sex education be “medically accurate, culturally responsive, or evidence-based/ evidence-informed” (“SIECUS State...”, p. 3). Providing students with sex education that is not medically correct leaves students ill-prepared, entering into adulthood without accurate information on their sexual rights, or lack thereof, and sexual health. Having access to reproductive resources and information that normalizes sexuality is a human right. Unfortunately, not all sex education standards and curricula agree.

The National Sex Education Standards (NSES) for K-12 discussed the following topics: Consent and Healthy Relationships, Anatomy and Physiology, Puberty and Adolescent Sexual Development, Gender Identity and Expression, Sexual Orientation and Identity, Sexual Health, and Interpersonal Violence. However, while the NSES incorporate medically accurate sexual health information into their curricula, each state has different laws and policies that determine what schools can and cannot include in their sex education curricula. According to the “Georgia State Profile” of sex education policies and requirements, created by SIECUS, “Georgia schools are required to provide sex education and AIDS prevention education” (“Georgia State Profile”).

However, the curriculum is not required to “be comprehensive,” “include instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity,” or “include instruction on consent.” Additionally, “instruction must emphasize abstinence” and “parents may remove their children from all or part of sex education instruction with a written notification” (“Georgia State Profile”). Some Georgia high schools use the FLASH (Family Life and Sexual Health) curriculum, which provides fifteen lesson plans for students in grades nine through twelve. These lesson plans focus mostly on reproductive biology, STI/HIV prevention, and pregnancy prevention. With a heavy focus on prevention, students leave their sex education classes without a knowledge base or understanding of very important information about sex and sexuality.

### ***1.2.6 The Missing Discourse of Desire and Pleasure***

Sex education in the United States focuses most of its content on risk, danger, and behavior-change (such as avoiding STIs and unwanted pregnancy) rather than on more positive aspects of sexuality such as learning and practicing positive communication skills, forging healthy relationships, and exploring desire and pleasure. However, both the U.S. *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, K-12* and the *National Sexuality Education Standards* fail to include desire and pleasure in their curriculum requirements. The missing discourse of desire and pleasure has been a major problem with sex education curricula for decades. In Michelle Fine’s piece, “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire,” written in 1988, Fine describes four discourses of sex education that she says, “characterize the national debates over sex education” (Fine, p. 31). Fine’s four discourses of sexuality portray sex as something threatening and shameful, creating misinformation about sexual health, including increased pregnancy and increased rates of STIs. Fine argues that adults are afraid that adding

the *discourse of desire* to the curriculum will persuade youth to have sex and make unhealthy decisions. However, according to Kantor and Lindberg, “Ignoring pleasure not only leaves out a salient component of sexual health but may also put young people at risk for reduced use of contraception and condoms” (Kantor and Lindberg, p. 146).

Providing a curriculum that explores desire and pleasure can guide youth in creating life-long skills on knowing their worth, setting and creating healthy boundaries, and learning healthy communication skills. Studies have found that teens want to learn more about pleasure and desire, and when asked about sex education, they “mentioned the lack of discussion about pleasure as a reason they were frustrated with sex education.” (Kantor and Lindberg, p. 147). While some programs may ignore conversations around sexual pleasure to “protect” teens, ignoring this topic creates barriers to sexual health. Jessie V. Ford et. al. states that sexual pleasure is “fundamental to individual health and wellbeing” (Ford, et al., p. 2). Including pleasure-centered sexual health education “produce[s] improved attitudes and knowledge about sexual health, partner communication, condom use, and safer sex behaviors” (Ford, et al., p. 3). Failing to include information on pleasure and desire in sex education promotes and emphasizes power dynamics in teen relationships up into adulthood.

### ***1.2.7 Race and Sex Education***

Racism is a sexual health issue directly affecting the health of individuals and communities of color. Systematic forms of oppression, such as white-centered media, the medical field, and government-funded programs, create the hypersexualization of Black women, taking away their ability to fully experience sexual freedom and pleasure the way that white women do. According to Penda N’diaye, “white women possess an intrinsic confidence that



allows them to navigate sexual and romantic relationships with whimsy. Black women have not had the same privilege...because of how, historically, Black women have been overtly fetishized and robbed of their sexual agency” (N’diaye). Racism is a sexual health issue directly affecting the health of individuals and communities.

Including conversations around racism in health is an important step in dismantling barriers to accessing sexual health information. But first, we must start by addressing the social determinants of health and the social determinants of equity. Camara Jones et al. describe the social determinants of health as “the determinants of health which are outside of the individual. They are beyond individual behaviors and beyond individual genetic endowment” (Jones et al., p. 2). Examples of social determinants of health include the environments in which we work, live, and play, and the resources which are provided (or not provided) to us such as our education, our neighborhood, our jobs, food access, transportation, and more. Social determinants of equity, on the other hand, are the “systems of power that determine the range of social contexts and the distribution of populations into those social contexts” (Jones, et al., p. 8). These social determinants of equity include our economic system, environmental toxins, racism, classism, homophobia, sexism, and all other forms of systematic oppression that marginalized groups face.

Sex educators, school systems, and other educational programs racially stereotype teen girls of color, utilizing harmful rhetoric to make race-based assumptions about what should be included in sex education. Authors Lorena Garcia, Wanda S. Pillow, and Chris Barcelos have all found that sex educators often stereotype youth of color who are sexually active as “at-risk” “bad girls,” (Garcia, p. 536). On the other hand, these same sex educators deem white, middle-class girls who are sexually active as “good” and “normally abnormal” (Garcia, p. 52). Along these

lines, "racialized constructions of the teen mom" create a "good mother versus bad mother" dichotomy, labeling white mothers as "good girls who made a mistake" and girls of color as "Welfare Queens" (Pillow, p. 3, 9). These harmful narratives about girls of color cause sex educators to focus more time on pregnancy avoidance and contraception and less time on exploring sexuality, desire, and pleasure.

According to Nakisha Floyd, a North Carolina-based sex educator and a member of the Women of Color Sexual Health Network (WOCOSHIN), "Problem-centered language is constantly creating this narrative that black and brown kids are broken; they are problems that need to be fixed" (cited in Eisenstein). In addition, higher teen pregnancy rates and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among youth of color are attributed solely to their race rather than to systematic racism. As Floyd says, "History informs the present and the future" (cited in Eisenstein). Additionally, these racialized discourses create inequities in policies, programs, and treatment of pregnant and parenting youth of color in schools. In 1972, Title IX was passed stating that pregnant and parenting teens should have equal rights in public schools. However, in the book chapter, "Unfit Subjects," Wanda S. Pillow explains that, even with this law, many students are still being mistreated and not given access to fair learning environments. Some examples of inequitable treatment include not having big enough desks for pregnant students to fit into, not giving adequate bathroom breaks for pregnant students, and not providing childcare or transportation. According to Pillow, the way teen mothers are treated in school is an "educational policy issue" that must be addressed to better serve teen mothers "prior to, during, and after pregnancy" (Pillow, p. 11). While some states and cities are working toward creating programs and policies to better meet the needs of pregnant and parenting teens, youth sexual discourse often further marginalizes these teens.

In Chris Barcelos' book, *Distributing Condoms and Hope: The Racialized Politics of Youth and Sexual Health*, she finds that youth sexual health educators and professionals see teen pregnancy as a "problem" that needs to be solved. Barcelos finds that youth sexual education "mobilizes discourses of race, reproduction, and science to justify intervention in the sexual and reproductive lives of marginalized young people" (Barcelos, p. 6). The author brings to light the politics of youth sexuality and its relationships to race, class, and gender, and makes visible how privileged, white professionals play a role in health promotion and use harmful thinking in the "need to" prevent pregnancy among marginalized youth, rather than provide sexual health education. Working to "correct" these harmful narratives reveal new ways of thinking, doing, and knowing to better support pregnant and parenting youth. For example, choosing to focus programs and policies on pregnancy prevention invokes the need for the "individual responsibility" of youth. According to Barcelos, "Whether intentional or not, invoking responsibility also reifies a well-worn trope in American politics: the irresponsible, nonwhite, promiscuous woman who keeps having babies in order to increase the value of her welfare check" (Barcelos, p. 8). Instead, the responsibility should be put on the state, school systems, and educators to improve teen sexual health promotion. However, when providing sexual health education programs for youth, we must ensure that our programs are anti-racist.

Amanda Whitten and Christabelle Sethna argue that Canada's sex education ignores both the history and current politics on race and racism and that it should use "anti-racist" theory to better educate and prepare its students. According to Whitten and Sethna, "Anti-racism addresses effects of racism and interlocking social oppressions in institutions" (Whitten and Sethna, p. 424). Whitten and Sethna discuss the importance of using anti-racist sex education to better improve sexual health outcomes for all youth in Canada. In Canadian culture and education,

“multicultural diversity,” is a term that is used often to acknowledge and celebrate different aspects of culture(s) such as dress, dance, and food; however, it ignores important discussions of racism and colonialism negatively impacting communities of color (Whitten and Sethna, p. 419).

Whitten and Sethna suggest that instead of using the “multicultural” approach to education, Canadian teachers should use anti-racist theory instead. Anti-racist theory “challenge[s] the education institution to see students as more than neutral, context-free youth and to expose the ways education shaped and continues to shape race, class, and gender on all students” (Whitten and Sethna, p. 415). To utilize anti-racist theory in the classroom, it’s important to discuss how whiteness plays a role in anti-racism work, acknowledging the power and privilege that comes along with whiteness which opposes the “racialized ‘other’” (Whitten and Sethna, p. 418). Incorporating anti-racism theory into the classroom can create a space in which sex education can be used as a vehicle for racial justice.

One example of using sex education as a vehicle for racial justice is including images of Black and brown people in the media, in textbooks, and in anatomical diagrams and photographs. Something as simple as having representation of students of color plays a huge role in the connection students might make with the material they are learning. Floyd states: “We show up in spaces with whatever diagrams or pictures we have and tell a room full of youth of color that ‘These parts look like your parts,’ just to hear them say ‘No, those parts don’t look like mine,’ because the flesh tone is not the same” (Eisenstein). In addition, it’s important to acknowledge that youth of color are not a monolith and that every student has their own experience, identity, sexuality, and abilities.

We must create a safe space in which youth of color can feel heard and validated, acknowledging how racism and white supremacy may show up in the classroom. One way that we can do that is by changing who the decision-makers and voices are in sex education. We can also promote and utilize programs and resources that center on a “queer decolonial approach to gender and reproductive justice, [also known as] ‘erotics of sovereignty’,” such as the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN) (Weems, p. 132). NYSHN is an organization that works with Indigenous youth to create and facilitate culturally comprehensive sex education and reproductive justice initiatives in their communities (Weems, p. 133). In changing our practices both inside and outside of the classroom, in policies, and curriculum, we can take steps to create an anti-racist classroom. Having a sex education curriculum that centers on how race and sexual health are defined and intertwined is a powerful step toward reproductive justice.

### ***1.2.8 Reproductive Justice***

Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger’s book, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*, explores how reproductive justice is a direct result of the “reproductive role of colonialism and white supremacy” determining the reproductive rights and autonomy of women of color (Ross and Solinger, p. 2). Understanding the history of our country and reproductive justice is extremely important in understanding our present and forming our future. Reproductive justice is a combination of both reproductive rights and social justice, created by and for women of color to dismantle systems of oppression that have existed for centuries. The reproductive justice framework seeks to create sexual and bodily autonomy for women of color in laws, policies, and everyday circumstances. Ross and Solinger name three primary principles of reproductive justice, including: “(1) the right *not* to have a child; (2) the right to *have* a child; (3) [and] the

right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments” (Ross and Solinger, p. 9).

Implementing a reproductive justice framework into laws, policies, and programs creates a space for women of color to be heard, enabling them to exercise their rights without state punishment, interference, and violence.

The first primary principle of reproductive justice, “the right *not* to have a child,” is a direct link to power and pleasure. Having the freedom to have sex with whomever you consensually choose, and without the intention of procreation, is a human right. For example, in 1980 President Reagan worked with the Christian Right to “advance a fundamentalist values discourse,” which worked to promote sex as a heterosexual act solely for procreation (Hill Collins, p. 37). Abstinence-only sex education and the lack of providing access to contraception and sexual health information are direct forms of power over pleasure. Pharmacist Olivia Nathan says that Black women are fourteen times more likely to be diagnosed with HIV, making up 57% of new HIV infections. However, fewer than 1% of PrEP prescriptions, the medication used to prevent HIV, go to Black women. Nathan states, “so not only are Black women disproportionately contracting HIV, we are not utilizing the one drug that can be used to prevent HIV through sexual transmission” (Nathan, 5:40-5:56). Black women aren’t accessing health care at the same rate as white women, and when they are, health care providers are withholding information about preventative sexual health medications. The lack of access to sexual health information and resources is a direct form of power over pleasure. How are Black women supposed to enjoy pleasurable sex when they aren’t given the freedom to prevent deadly diseases?

According to Ross and Solinger, “colonizers, enslavers, employers, and the state, among other entities, have *used* reproductive capacity to pursue goals associated with power, wealth,

status, and property” (Ross and Solinger, p. 12-13). When colonizers arrived in the Americas, their goal was to do anything they could to ensure production and accumulate wealth. This objective meant that they needed to use “population control” to “discourage” population growth among Native Americans, while simultaneously “encouraging” population growth of enslaved Africans, whose labor they needed (Ross and Solinger, p. 18). The bodies of pregnant enslaved African women were legally possessed by their owners, meaning that white men had control over the bodies and babies of African American women.

Additionally, the bodies of enslaved African women were used to further the field of gynecology. Dr. Deirdre Cooper-Owens states “One of the more important functions of the ‘black’ objectified medical super body for white doctors was that black women were used not solely for healing and research but largely for the benefit of white women’s reproductive health” (Cooper-Owens, p. 7). James Marion Simms, also known as the “father of gynecology,” used the bodies of enslaved African women to practice extremely invasive surgeries as he set the foundation of gynecology. The belief that Black women do not feel pain to the same extent as white women has continued to be implemented into medical practices today. Additionally, many enslaved women were raped by their masters, using their bodies for procreation so that white families could benefit from the labor of their children. Owners often forced pregnant women to work long hours throughout their pregnancy, causing miscarriages and preterm birth. This inequity continues to affect Black women in the medical system today. Cooper Owens explains “Black women are 3-4 times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than white women are” (Owens, 52:05). This statistic shows how racism in medical services greatly affects the maternal health of Black women.

Reproductive justice goes deeper than reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. Loretta Ross writes “women of color activists demand ‘reproductive justice,’ which requires the protection of women's human rights to achieve the physical, mental, spiritual, political, economic and social well-being of women and girls” (Ross, p. 53). However, sex educators aren’t talking about reproductive justice. They aren’t talking about the many ways the bodies of Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) have been used for the benefit of white bodies. Dorothy Roberts states “the mainstream reproductive rights agenda has neglected Black women's concerns... [yet] regulating Black women’s reproductive decisions has been a central aspect of racial oppression in America” (Roberts, p. 5-6). So how do youth of color obtain the information they need if they aren’t getting it at school or at home? Many young folks are using social media as a tool for obtaining knowledge and resources about sexual health information.

### ***1.2.9 Why Magazines: How Media Impacts Sex Education Information***

For decades, magazines have played a large influence on how teen girls gather, learn, and share information. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation writes “Studies of teen magazine readers indicate that they turn to these magazines as a valued source of advice about their personal lives” (“Key Facts...”, p. 2). Teens use magazines to exchange information with each other, utilizing this safe, often anonymous, space to ask questions they may not feel comfortable asking friends, parents, or other adults. Magazines are available as a tool for teens to read and learn about a variety of topics such as “teen pregnancy,” “sexual assault,” “sexually-transmitted diseases,” “contraception,” and “advice about friends, family, boys, school, [and] self-esteem,” (“Key Facts...”, p. 1-2). In 2004, when the internet wasn’t readily available at every moment, it was a fun, easy, and accessible way to pass the time both alone and with friends. In 2017, on the



other hand, teens had the internet at their fingertips and could find the answers to their questions on a variety of social media apps such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and more.

Since sex education has become a space that is controlled and maintained through policymakers, teens “have been filling knowledge gaps and addressing the damage that school-based sex education has created” (Manduley et al., p. 157). Youth have taken it upon themselves to obtain and disseminate sex education-related information through different forms of social media such as blogs, Instagram, Twitter, websites, and popular magazines. Social media is also used as “modern cultural storytellers,” which, according to Kelley Massoni,

join other influential social institutions, such as the family, the educational system, and organized religion, in teaching us about the world in which we live. And ... tales they do tell - [are] tales infused with lessons on gender, race, sexuality, and social class. Tales that reveal (and revel in) the ideals and values of western society. (Massoni, p. 1)

Social media provide teens with representations of who and how they want to be as young adults and provide opportunities for them to explore new ideas, knowledges, and experiences. Different social media outlets might provide a distinct set of information based on their intended audiences’ age, gender, race, social class, and sexuality. Young women, for example, might seek information on fashion, beauty, and sexuality from a different media type than young men.

In 2009, Amy Bleakley et al. did a study to identify which media sources youth use to gain information on sexual health and behavior. They surveyed 495 youth, mostly Black and white young women ages fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen, and found that they learned “about sex” mostly from “television, movies, internet, magazines, videogames, and music” (Bleakley, et al., p. 4). The surveys indicated that youth use media to learn information about sex that they might not feel comfortable learning from adult family members, teachers, or other adults in their communities. According to the surveys, media outlets are often used as a way for teens to learn

about sex education topics such as “teen pregnancy and contraceptive use,” and how to “overcome barriers to have sex” (Bleakley, et al., p. 2 and 8).

Magazines are also used as a space for teens to ask and receive advice and to “confess” secret or embarrassing stories. According to Wendy Simonds, the magazine *True Story*, published in 1919, was “the first American confession magazine... Marketed expressly for working-class women... [offering] advice and solace” (Simonds, p. 150). Since magazines have been commonly used as an outlet for women and teen girls to learn and share information, I felt that this data source was the perfect publication type for my research. Charyl Fuller writes, “according to a 1999 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation... 15- to 18-year-olds spend an average of 13 minutes a day reading magazines” (Fuller, p. 3). Magazines often provide teens with interesting, entertaining, and educational content ranging from topics such as fashion and beauty to sex and college life.

Content in women’s and teen’s magazines frequently offer advice and tips relating to sexuality, specifically dynamics in heterosexual relationships. According to Laura Ann Morrison, women’s magazines provide gendered knowledge and information to its readers. Morrison states, these magazines offer advice such as “tips on how to look good, answers to bizarre sexual and medical questions, and of course, information on how to catch and keep a man” (Morrison, p. 5). Women’s magazines create and maintain a certain image, deeming the “acceptable woman” as “thin, beautiful, and seeking sexual gratification from men” (Morrison, p. 5). On the other hand, men are constructed as masculine, aggressive, “in control,” and “without feelings” (Morrison, p. 8). Teen magazines maintain these gendered stereotypes and further uphold beliefs and norms about teen sexuality.

Teen girls often used magazines to relate to their peers and to normalize their experiences and sexuality. However, teen magazines construct sexuality through a heteronormative lens by upholding virginity and virginity loss as a societal norm. Stephanie R. Medley-Rath explores how *Seventeen* magazine is used as a significant source of gathering information about sex and sexuality for teen girls. According to Medley-Rath, *Seventeen* is an important source of analysis for understanding the social construct of virginity (Medley-Rath, p. 25). Moreover, *Seventeen* magazine reinforces heteronormativity and virginity, Medley-Rath writes, strengthening the double standard that “the responsibility of maintaining virginity of both men and women falls on women” (Medley-Rath, p. 28). Understanding how magazines construct sex, sexuality, and virginity can help sex educators understand how these social constructions may impact public policy on sexual health.

### 1.3 Research Questions

This study’s research questions aim to address how articles in *Seventeen* magazine published in two different eras, 2004 and 2017, frame youth sexuality. This research is motivated by one broad question: How does *Seventeen* magazine present discourses of sex, sexuality, and reproductive health to its readers?

Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- Whose voices does *Seventeen* magazine exclude and center in discussions of sex and sexuality?
  - How do these magazines normalize or “other” certain types of relationships, genders, and sexualities?
- What are *Seventeen* magazine writers saying about reproductive justice?

- How are these writers framing the conversation around sex education and access to contraception, birth control, and abortions?
- Who do they present as having a legitimate claim to reproductive rights and who does not? Why?
- How does *Seventeen* magazine present sexual pleasure and desire?
  - Who do the magazines suggest has the power to give and receive pleasure and desire?

#### 1.4 Research Methods

For this thesis, I use feminist content analysis to analyze articles written in *Seventeen* magazine over the course of two decades, the years 2004 and 2017. I chose to focus on teen magazines because of the major influence it has on teen girlhood and teen girl sexuality. According to Cheryl Fuller, teen girls use magazines to construct concepts of femininity and how to gain attention from boys (Fuller, p. 7). In addition, teen girls use magazines as a trusted source for gathering information on boys and sex. However, teen magazines often send ambiguous messages about sex, providing teens with instruction on how to get dates while leaving information on sexual health out of its content (Gibbons, sec. 3).

Originally, I planned to analyze *Teen Vogue* magazine during the years 2005 and 2017 but this source did not have enough data related to the research questions. Most of *Teen Vogue*'s content focused on fashion, beauty, and cosmetics, rather than sex, sexuality, and reproductive health. Then, I examined *Seventeen* magazine during the years 2004 and 2017. *Seventeen* magazine is an important source of analysis for teen girl sexuality because it was the first teen magazine in 1944, and upon its release, it was the top-selling teen fashion magazine (Fuller, p.

2). Additionally, since its debut, *Seventeen* magazine has been used as a source for teen girls to seek advice, learn tips about dating and fashion, and discover what other teens their age are doing. The April 2004 issue of *Seventeen* magazine, had eleven articles relating to sex, sexuality, and reproductive health. Upon discovering the vast amount of content in just one issue of *Seventeen*, I changed my data set to analyze *Seventeen* magazine during the years 2004 and 2017 looking at four issues per year, one issue per quarter (February, April, August, and November).

In this analysis, I explore what messages *Seventeen* magazine sends to young girls and women about who they “should be” regarding their sexuality and sexual health. I chose to analyze the years 2004 and 2017 because they are the coming-of-age periods for two different generations, Millennials and Gen Z. In 2003, *Seventeen* had 1,950,000 paid subscribers between the ages of twelve and twenty-four years old (Medley-Rath, p. 28). While reader demographics from 2017 were unavailable *Seventeen* was still publishing new content monthly. Additionally, the years 2004 and 2017 were years in which both generations experienced political shifts with changes in laws and policies and that directly affected their sexual health and well-being.

I chose to analyze *Seventeen* magazine during the year 2004 because this was an important political year for Millennials, like myself, who were teenagers at this time. In 2004, George W. Bush, a conservative republican, was re-elected president. During his presidency, Bush pushed abstinence-only sex education in schools and supported pro-life laws. One year prior, in 2003, the *Lawrence v. Texas* court case overturned sodomy laws, meaning that gay adults were now legally able to “engage in consensual sex” (“O'Connor Retirement”). During this same time, another important law regarding reproductive rights was under question. *Planned Parenthood of Northern New England v. Ayotte*, “raises the question of whether a New

Hampshire law requiring a minor to have parental consent for abortion must include an exception to protect a young woman's health" ("O'Connor Retirement").

Next, I analyzed *Seventeen* magazine during the year 2017 because of the major political shift that Gen-Z was experiencing at this time. Barack Obama had previously served eight years in the white house, 2008 to 2016. The Obama administration had fairly progressive policies that supported gay-marriage and LGBTQ+ liberation. Gay marriage was made legal in the United States in 2015 and in 2017 the Obama administration made the decision to cut all abstinence-only education from the federal budget" (Papisova). While many states were still heavily restricting abortion rights, "2017 may be most notable for a dramatic upsurge in proactive efforts to expand access to abortion, contraception, other reproductive health services and comprehensive sex education or to protect reproductive rights" (Nash et al.). However, once Donald Trump was inaugurated into presidency in January 2017, sex education, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ+ rights were slowly getting stripped away again. Looking at how laws, policies, and programming relating to sexuality, reproductive health, and sex education have changed between the early 2000s and the 2010s helps us to better understand what *Seventeen* magazine says about power, pleasure, and reproductive justice during 2004 and 2017.

In my analysis of these two different decades, I used content analysis to interpret how these articles portray youth sex, sexuality, and reproductive justice. Content analysis allows researchers to look at bodies of text, such as newspapers, books, speeches, and magazines, to identify what is being cultivated and created through the text. According to Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, content analysis is "a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases" (Leedy and Ormrod, p. 235). In this research, I specifically used Feminist content analysis, which

according to Debora Kay Nelli, examines the language found in media through a feminist lens, seeking to understand their meanings through cultural and social production and reproduction. Nelli states “Feminist content analysis infuses the method of content analysis with a feminist analytical lens.... [which] examines and illuminates gendered policies and practices that can impact individual and collective advancement and development” (Nelli, p. 40). As a feminist researcher, I examined how the content in *Seventeen* magazine constructed teen girlhood and the social constructions of sex and sexuality. I looked at how this magazine, written “*by* women,” “*about* women,” and “*for* women,” exposed a “pervasive patriarchal and even misogynist culture” (Reinharz and Davidman, p. 147 and 155). The questions I asked center feminist voices, values, and research, answering the questions “Whose truth is heard and validated? Whose perspectives are trusted and valued? Whose manner of communication is reinforced and whose is ignored?” (Ropers-Huilman and Winters, p. 670-671).

I accessed *Seventeen* magazine via ProQuest Central-Galileo. The database includes the textual content of *Seventeen* magazine, including some advertisements, but no images from the magazine whether attached to content or advertisements. To create my corpus, I selected four issues, one per quarter, of *Seventeen* magazine during the years 2004 and 2017: February, April, August, and November. For each issue, I made a list of each article's title and the article topic (beauty, nutrition, etc.). Then, I skimmed each article to see if the content related to my research questions. From the initial list, I selected all articles that included keywords or covered content found in sex education curricula including topics such as consent and healthy relationships, anatomy, puberty, sexual orientation, sexual health, and interpersonal violence (“National Sex...”, p. 16). I downloaded all relevant articles as PDF files. I found a total of seventy-five content pieces that discussed sex, sexuality, and reproductive or sexual health (see *Table 1*). The

content pieces included letters to and from the editor, opinion pieces, surveys, and essays. As you can see in the table below, there is a drastic reduction in content between 2004 and 2017.

*Table 1 Magazine Content Pieces*

<b>Total Content Pieces Reviewed (336)</b>					
<b>Year</b>	<b>February</b>	<b>April</b>	<b>August</b>	<b>November</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2004</b>	39	34	36	30	139
<b>2017</b>	58	64	54	51	227
<b>Total Relevant Content Pieces (75)</b>					
<b>Year</b>	<b>February</b>	<b>April</b>	<b>August</b>	<b>November</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2004</b>	15	11	13	18	57
<b>2017</b>	5	7	3	3	18

The themes in this thesis were created using a combination of *in vivo* coding and secondary literature based on sexuality, reproductive justice, and pleasure. To generate subthemes related to sexuality, I used codes based on secondary literature found in Michelle Fine’s essay, “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire.” I sought to answer two questions relating to sexuality: Whose voices does *Seventeen* magazine exclude and center in discussions of sex and sexuality? How do these magazines normalize or “other” certain types of relationships, genders, and sexualities? To answer these sub-questions, I created four themes: “heterosexuality,” “virginity,” “LGBTQ+,” and “sexual violence.” (See themes in *Table 2* below). The subthemes “heterosexuality,” and “sexual violence” underscores Fine’s argument which argues that standard sex education curricula privileges “married heterosexuality,” which she deems inherently violent (Fine, p. 33). The theme “virginity” explains the cultural phenomenon that exists within the context of married heterosexuality. And



lastly, the theme “LGBTQ+” is significant because it explores how *Seventeen* constructs sexuality that exists outside of heterosexuality.

Next, I generated subthemes relating to reproductive justice using a combination of in vivo coding and coding of themes from secondary literature. These themes were created to answer three questions: What are *Seventeen Magazine* writers saying about reproductive justice? How are these writers framing the conversation around access to contraception, birth control, and abortions? Who do they present as having a legitimate claim to reproductive rights and who does not? Why? To answer these questions, I created three themes aligning with Ross and Solinger’s three primary principles of reproductive justice which include: the right *not* to have a child, the right to *have* a child, and the right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments.

To generate subthemes related to my third theme, pleasure, I used a combination of in vivo coding and coding of themes found in Fine’s essay. This theme aspired to answer two questions: How does *Seventeen* magazine present sexual pleasure? Who does the magazine suggest has the power to give and receive pleasure? For this theme, the two keywords “pleasure” and “desire” were used to bring attention to Fine’s “missing discourse of desire” in which she names the missing discourse of desire and pleasure from public school sex education. Fine writes “The naming of desire, pleasure, or sexual entitlement, particularly for females, barely exists in the formal agenda of public schooling on sexuality” (Fine, p. 33).

Through in vivo coding, I then created more subthemes relating to reproductive justice, pleasure, and desire. Seven more themes emerged through in vivo coding relating to reproductive justice, including “periods,” “menstruation,” “STIs,” “pregnancy,” “contraception,” “condoms,” and “abortions.” (See themes in *Table 2* below). These themes emphasize sexual and reproductive health issues as well as outcomes and results of a woman’s choice *to have* or *not* to

have a child. To further explore how pleasure and desire exists, or does not exist in *Seventeen* magazine, I generated the theme “orgasm” through in vivo coding. To assist with content analysis, I used the qualitative data analysis software program, NVivo. To do this, I organized important quotes from the dataset into folders based on the themes and subthemes in *Table 2* (below).

*Table 2 Examples of Themes/Subthemes Coded in NVivo*

Main Themes	Subthemes	Question this Answers
Sexuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Heterosexuality</li> <li>- Virginity</li> <li>- LGBTQ+</li> <li>- Sexual Violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Whose voices does <i>Seventeen</i> magazine exclude and center in discussions of sex and sexuality?</li> <li>- How do these magazines normalize or “other” certain types of relationships, genders, and sexualities?</li> </ul>
Reproductive Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the right <i>not</i> to have a child</li> <li>- the right to <i>have</i> a child</li> <li>- the right to <i>parent</i> children in safe and healthy environments</li> <li>- Periods/Menstruation</li> <li>- STIs</li> <li>- Sex Education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What are <i>Seventeen Magazine</i> writers saying about reproductive justice?</li> <li>- How are these writers framing the conversation around sex education and access to contraception, birth control, and abortions?</li> <li>- Who do they present as having a legitimate claim to reproductive rights and who does not? Why?</li> </ul>
Pleasure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pleasure</li> <li>- Desire</li> <li>- Orgasm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How does <i>Seventeen</i> magazine present sexual pleasure?</li> <li>- Who do the magazines suggest have the power to give and receive pleasure?</li> </ul>

In this research, I seek to bring attention to how *Seventeen* magazine portrays sex, sexuality, and reproductive health for its teen readers. This study highlights the various ways in which media spaces, such as magazines, influence social constructions of gender and sexuality for youth. Teen girl magazines socialize their readers to identify with societal norms that are both

implicitly and explicitly promoted through their content. According to Rachel Allyn, media can be a precarious space for teen girls who often use social media as knowledge for what it means to be a woman. Allyn states, “teen magazines teach girls to transform themselves into proper women according to prevailing cultural standards” (Allyn, p. 77). This research brings attention to how *Seventeen* magazine's construction of the ideal teen girl may harm the sexual and reproductive health and autonomy of its readers. Furthermore, this research contributes to the scholarship of women's, gender, and sexuality studies by influencing sex educators to continue their work empowering teen girls in their sexual autonomy, health, and reproductive rights.

This research includes some limitations that must be acknowledged and considered. First, the sample size of the study was limited. For the sake of time, I was only able to review a total of eight issues of *Seventeen* magazine, four from 2004 and four from 2017. During just those two years alone, there were a total of seventeen issues released. However, between the two years, from 2004 through 2017, there were over 150 issues released that I did not review. The second limitation to this study is a lack of inclusion of race, class, and ability. While these are extremely important issues to address, I decided that my scope would focus mostly on cisgendered power dynamics and sexuality, rather than on other intersecting oppressions.

## 2 THE POWER OF THE HETERO NORM

Knowledge and power work together; as Michel Foucault argued, they directly imply one another (Foucault, 1975). Foucault states, “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault, 1995, p. 27). According to Foucault, power produces realities, behaviors, and truths, while knowledge, on the other hand, reinforces power. Knowledge and power work together to create, uphold, and maintain institutional policies and laws created by white, conservatives that work to oppress the “other.” The “other” can be described as women, people of color, people of low economic status, and other marginalized groups. The U.S. public education system, for example, uses its knowledge and power to create and enforce laws and policies that decide what sexual health information students are learning in schools. While twenty-nine states require sex education to be taught in public schools, only fifteen of those states require this information to be “medically accurate” (“SEICUS State...”, p. 3).

During the early 2000s, teen magazines were a popular media outlet for teen girls to seek guidance on growing into young adulthood. For example, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation stated that in 2004, girls ages twelve and thirteen, “used magazines to formulate their concepts of femininity and relied heavily on articles that featured boys’ opinions about how to gain male approval and act in relationships with males” (“Key Facts”, p. 2). *Seventeen* magazine has targeted the demographic of teen girls ages twelve through sixteen, the age in which most teens are getting some sort of sex education in schools. In September 1944, *Seventeen* magazine published its first issue, and according to Kelley Massoni, utilized its content to construct the “teen girl ideal” and the “feminine ideal” using both images and written articles to discuss

“heterosexual romance,” traditional gender roles, and beauty products (Massoni, p. vi, vii and 12). To this day, women’s and teen girls’ magazines continue to follow the same script, promoting beliefs and expectations of cisnormativity and heteronormativity. Like public school sex education, teen magazines assume that their readers are cis-gendered heterosexual teen girls. In this chapter, I argue that in *Seventeen*’s representations of teenage femininity, the magazine creates, maintains, and reinforces heteronormativity amongst teen girls. In this chapter, I center on these three questions: How does the writing in *Seventeen* magazine explicitly and implicitly center power relations in sexuality? Whose voices does *Seventeen* exclude and center in discussions of sex and sexuality? How does *Seventeen* normalize heterosexuality and “other” homosexuality?

I selected the years 2004 and 2017 for this analysis because these years are both coming-of-age years for two different generations as well as important years for presidential elections and public debates on gender and sexuality. For example, in 2004, George W. Bush, a Republican president, was re-elected; he pushed abstinence-only sex education in schools and simultaneously created and supported laws and policies against abortions. Additionally, Bush’s policies on war, national security, and women’s rights further promoted binary gender roles and hierarchies. According to Iris Marion Young, in 2001, the Bush administration justified the war against Afghanistan as “a defensive action necessary to protect Americans” as well as promoted the false idea of “liberation of Afghan women” (Young, p. 3). This war promoted gendered power dynamics by “characterize[ing] men as the dominant protectors of the weaker sex” (Burrell, p. 315). The Bush administration reinforced heteronormative family values and gender roles, further maintaining laws and policies that were against same-sex marriage. The Obama

administration, on the other hand, supported the autonomy and empowerment of women, girls, and LGBTQ+ communities (Merod).

In his presidency (2008 – 2016), Barack Obama promoted vastly different policies than Bush. Obama cut all federal support of abstinence-only education and promoted comprehensive sex education. The Obama administration worked to promote gender equality and empower women by fighting for equal pay, supporting abortion rights, and improving access to higher education and reproductive healthcare. President Obama considers himself a feminist, working to change the narrative of the “demure” girl, the “assertive” male, and the “double standard that women are punished for their sexuality and men are praised for theirs” (Merod). In 2015, the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage, changing laws and policies that were harmful to LGBTQ+ communities. The Affordable Care Act (ACA), also known as “Obamacare,” expanded access to health coverage for all Americans, including the prohibition of discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities and individuals. Barack Obama and his team believed in equality for all individuals regardless of gender, sexuality, class, and/or race, and fought for the rights of underrepresented communities. However, in January 2017, Republican president, Donald Trump, took office, and began working to overturn everything the Obama administration did in support of women, girls, and LGBTQ+ communities. The Trump administration pushed abstinence-only education, supported the overturning of *Roe v Wade*, showed active opposition to same-sex marriage, and worked to weaken protections against LGBTQ+ discrimination and harassment at work and school. As these human rights campaigns, laws, and policies shift with each president, *Seventeen* magazine addressed each president and his beliefs. However, the magazine fails to show direct and explicit support for these fundamental issues that directly impact its readers.

In the eight issues of *Seventeen* magazine from 2004 and 2017, the writers and publishers cast out young girls and LGBTQ+ communities, reproducing the harmful narrative of the ideal teen girl as a heterosexual virgin. In this chapter, I apply Fine's four discourses of sexuality (sexuality as individual morality, sexuality as victimization, sexuality as violence, and the missing discourse of desire) to analyze the content of these eight issues. However, I adopted Fine's typology by recreating her four discourses of sexuality into three discourses of sexuality, starting with sexuality as individual morality, then combining sexuality as violence and victimization, and ending with the missing discourse of pleasure, rather than desire.

My departure from Fine's framework occurs in two sections. First, rather than separating sexuality as violence and sexuality as victimization, I chose to combine them as one, as neither violence nor victimization can occur without the other. If boys and men are violent predators, then girls and women must be their innocent victims. This discourse is upheld in public school sex education, by fearful parents, and in *Seventeen* magazine. Katherine Clonan-Roy writes, "sex may not be essentially violent, but girls learn of their inescapable vulnerability to potential male predators" (Clonan-Roy, p. 70). These discourses of sexuality as violence and victimization teach young girls that they have no sexual agency and that only boys have agency in sex and sexual desire.

Second, while Fine's four discourses of sexuality include the missing discourse of desire, I instead focused on the missing discourse of pleasure. My departure from Fine's framework is to distinguish desire from pleasure. While desire can be used to define one's sexuality (as "heterosexual" or "homosexual," for example) pleasure can be used to define an experience, a feeling, or a result of an action. According to Louisa Allen and Moira Carmody,

Desire therefore, creates a permanence of identity... In contrast, pleasure is only related to itself, it does not represent anything and therefore cannot be counterfeit... Talk of

pleasure in sexuality education might offer one way of unhooking young people from confining identities which deem that they should have a particular sexual response or expression based on gendered and sexual identity. (Allen and Carmody, p. 463)

I name the missing discourse of pleasure rather than desire to more deeply explore the gendered inequities that exist in public discourses of sex and sexuality.

In this chapter, I explore how *Seventeen* magazine normalizes and promotes heterosexuality while othering homosexuality. I begin with sexuality as a measure of Fine's concept of "individual morality" because of the various ways in which government policies, laws, and the media construct sexuality as inextricably linked to an individual's own idea of morality. Religion, schools, policies, and laws construct a "normal," "healthy" sexuality as one that should only occur between a married cisgender man and cisgender woman, solely for procreation. Marriage reinforces virginity, working to control the sexuality of women. Virginity is a harmful, sexist trope, which is constructed and upheld by the church and state creating stigma and shame for teen girls who choose to have sex outside of marriage. Religious practices, such as requiring girls to wear "purity rings," promote the sexist narrative of virginity. While church leaders teach women and girls to remain "pure" and "innocent" and to keep their bodies sacred, men and boys are not held to the same standard. According to Sarina Grewal, the virginity narrative perpetuates the idea that women and girls should be kept "intact" until marriage and "any premarital sexual relations would label her as tainted or morally corrupt" (Grewal, sec. 1, para. 5). In this research, I demonstrate how anything outside of this heterosexual norm, such as sex before marriage or sex with someone of the same gender, is portrayed as "taboo," "perverse," and "dangerous" (Foucault, p. 53). by the government, school system, and reinforced by *Seventeen* magazine.

Next, I investigate how *Seventeen* magazine frames sexuality as both violence and victimization, as we cannot have one without the other. Often, social media, school classrooms,



and even parents, uphold the narrative that male power is associated with violence. Adrienne Rich names eight “characteristics of male power,” which reinforce heterosexuality and male violence (Rich, p. 18). One of these characteristics of male power includes “men’s ability to deny women sexuality or to force it upon them,” for example, pornographic images of women enjoying sexual violence, naming “sadistic heterosexuality” as “normal” (Rich, p. 18-19). The narrative that sexuality is both inherently heterosexual and violent creates the ideology that women are victims of male power and dominance. This idea is known as the “rape paradigm,” holding women “responsible for her own victimization” (Rich, p. 23). The “rape paradigm,” also known as “rape culture,” normalizes sexual assault and victim-blaming, naming men as violent and women as victims. Rape culture defines “manhood” as “dominant and sexually aggressive” and “womanhood” as “submissive and sexually passive” (“Rape Culture...”).

Lastly, while Michelle Fine names the “missing discourse of desire” as a failure of sexuality education in schools, I name the missing discourse of pleasure in *Seventeen* magazine. Youth sex education often frames male sexual desire and pleasure as normal while simultaneously naming female desire and pleasure as abnormal and taboo. Fine writes, “Young women continue to be taught to fear and defend in isolation from exploring desire” (Fine, p. 30-31). Moreover, sexual pleasure is often unequally experienced within heterosexual relationships. Louisa Allen writes that sexual pleasure is “a site of political interest for feminists for whom ‘whose pleasure’ is prioritized in heterosexual relationships exemplifies unequal gendered power relations” (Allen, p. 171). This unequal gendered power relation recurs throughout *Seventeen* magazine through the narrative of the ideal teen girl.

In this data set, *Seventeen* magazine upholds the narrative that individual morality and sexuality are connected, naming the heterosexual virgin girl as “pure” and innocent.

Simultaneously, the lack of positive conversation around LGBTQ+ teens' experiences, issues, and fundamental rights reinforces heteronormativity and cisnormativity, othering and excluding LGBTQ+ teens. By constructing teen girls as victims of violent, male perpetrators that desire power over girls, *Seventeen* magazine can be seen as upholding the discourse of (hetero)sexuality as violence and victimization. Lastly, without naming pleasure and desire as an important part of sexuality for teen girls, *Seventeen* appears to deny women and girls the agency to have sexual desire and pleasure.

## **2.1 Sexuality as Individual Morality**

The notion that sexuality is tied to one's moral values and beliefs has been embedded into white, Christian, American culture for centuries. These cultural ideas of morality are often found in the church, in schools, and at home, instilling the belief that a sexually moral human is one that waits to have (heterosexual) sex until marriage, never engaging in homosexual acts. Fine writes, "this discourse [sexuality as individual morality] values women's sexual decision making as long as the decisions made are for premarital abstinence" (Fine, p. 32). Teen girls are taught that their virginity is tied to their purity and innocence, promoting heteronormativity while simultaneously othering LGBTQ+ teens. Sexuality as individual morality is created and maintained in *Seventeen* magazine through the normalization of stories shared based on virginity, heterosexuality, and "othering" of the LGBTQ+ teen.

During both the years 2004 and 2017, *Seventeen* magazine reinforces heteronormativity by publishing the majority of their articles on the "ideal" heterosexual cisgender teen girl. These stories include letters from teen girls asking for advice about their male crush or sharing embarrassing stories that happened in front of their male crush. On the other hand, the teens in this magazine who express interest in sex, almost always mention virginity, basing their worth

and their morality on saving themselves for “the right” guy. While heterosexuality is at the forefront of the magazine, stories of LGBTQ+ teens are missing from the published content. *Seventeen* magazine both explicitly and implicitly centers the heterosexual virgin while simultaneously erasing the LGBTQ+ teen. Below, I unpack the dangers of sexuality as individual morality.

### ***2.1.1 Virginit***

In American culture, virginity is an important part of teenage girlhood in which teen girls expend copious hours talking and thinking about how they hope to lose their virginity and to whom. Fine states, “adolescent females spend enormous amounts of time trying to ‘save it,’ ‘lose it,’ convince others that they have lost it or saved it, or trying to be ‘discreet’” (Fine, p. 37). Virginity is a cultural, religious, and socially constructed idea that is oftentimes related to morality and “good values” for a teen girl (Fine, p. 32). Virginity is most often discussed in the context of heterosexual relationships, assuming that penetrative sex, where a penis enters a vagina, is the only way to have sex or to “lose your virginity” (Margulies, 00:14). Through the fabricated idea of the “virgin” girl, gender-based power asymmetries are created in *Seventeen* magazine. In *Seventeen*, virginity is mentioned in thirteen different articles and referenced twenty-nine different times. The concept of virginity is always framed in the context of heterosexual relationships and is often described as something to hold onto and cherish. The heterosexual virgin girl is showcased as the ideal teen girl, whom the reader should strive to be. *Seventeen* magazine emphasizes virginity as individual morality through interviews with celebrities, discussions about faith and religion, and stories about dating, sex, and prom night.

In two separate celebrity interviews with Britney Spears and Jessica Simpson, *Seventeen* centralizes on the virginity, or lack thereof, of these two young women. In the interview with Jessica Simpson, the author of the article, Ginsberg, paints her as a good girl, a role model, and someone whom the readers should strive to be like. Ginsberg writes “Staying true to herself included a decision she made long ago about saving herself for her wedding night” (Ginsberg, p. 94). On the other hand, Deborah Baer, the author of the interview with Britney Spears, paints Spears as a confused teen girl who cannot control her sexuality. Baer argues that before Spears lost her virginity she was seen as a “virgin goddess,” however, once she “lost” her virginity, and started expressing her sexuality, many people viewed her differently. Baer writes, “she was America's sweetheart-until she started ‘acting up’” (Baer, p. 132). Once Spears become openly sexual and started showing off her body, she was judged for being overly sexual. Baer interviewed anonymous people in a public space about their opinions on Spears and one person states, “Britney? She’s a tramp” (Baer, p. 132). Because Spears explores her sexuality outside of heterosexual marriage, she is viewed as immoral and overly sexual. In these two stories with Simpson and Spears, *Seventeen* pushes the belief that these young celebrities should be pure, innocent virgins, maintaining the idea that “individual restraint triumphs over social temptation” (Fine, p. 33). By showcasing the belief that Britney Spears is a “tramp” for losing her virginity before marriage while Jessica Simpson is admired for waiting to have sex until marriage, *Seventeen* maintains the narrative that young girls have the individual responsibility to save their virginity for marriage.

*Seventeen* magazine published multiple stories that discuss faith and religion, showcasing how many of their teen readers relate virginity to their relationship with God. Three articles in *Seventeen* use the word “pure” to describe a virgin girl, upholding the belief that having sex

before marriage makes you no longer pure. One teen writes, “I took the Zero Pledge, promising to keep God first in my life and to keep myself pure by abstaining from sex until marriage” (Sloan, p. 126). Another teen, Ashley, writes, “I celebrate [my faith] by keeping my standards high. I won’t drink, do drugs, have sex until I’m married, watch pornography, or listen to inappropriate music. (“How Do You Celebrate...”, p. 51). In these stories, *Seventeen* provides a space for teens who advocate for the “virginity” narrative; however, they do not provide space to teens who take a sex-positive view of non-marital sex. Instead, abstinence until marriage is promoted as the right way to “lose your virginity,” following a moral code. This moral code or “moral literacy” includes “modesty,” “chastity,” and “‘abstinence’ until marriage” (Fine, p. 32). If a teen girl chooses to have sex before marriage, her modesty can be maintained by having sex with the “right” guy.

The narrative that waiting to have sex with the right person, specifically the right boy, is a heteronormative story that is often pushed onto teen girls. In one article from 2004, “The Accidental Virgin,” a twenty-one-year-old girl, Jessica, writes to the magazine about how she is still “accidentally” a virgin. In the headnote of the article, *Seventeen* starts the story out with a “17 tip” stating, “It can be more rewarding to hold out than to lose your virginity to a guy who’s not really special” (Harter, p. 102). Understanding critical thinking and healthy relationships is an important tool for teens in regard to sex and sexuality; however, this story upholds heteronormativity by implying that penetration is held at a higher standard than other sexual activities. The article goes on to share Jessica’s story, in which she explains that she’s been wanting to lose her virginity to “the right guy,” to someone she is in love with but, unfortunately, she has not yet fallen in love. Jessica explains that she contemplated having sex with a close guy friend whom she “hooks up with” on occasion; however, she writes “In the end, I did not settle

for like. If I can't settle for the almost-right winter coat, I certainly can't settle for the almost-right guy" (Harter, p. 103). In this story, Jessica chooses to wait to have sex with the right guy, rather than the "almost-right guy." It is her responsibility to save herself for heterosexual sex, which according to Fine is a "test of self-control; [and] individual restraint" (Fine, p. 33). While it is important to have sex with someone who respects you, virginity loss in this magazine is centered around heteronormative and gendered beliefs. *Seventeen* magazine upholds the narrative that it is the teen girl's moral responsibility to control herself, waiting to lose her virginity to the "right guy."

In another article from 2004, titled "A Night to Remember," a teen girl, Melissa, is planning to run away with her boyfriend on prom night so they can have sex together for the first time. The author writes, "The trip will get her grounded for the summer, but she tells herself it will be worth it. She wants their first time to be special" ("A Night...", p. 192). At the end of the story, the author writes a romantic story about how they don't end up running away together but, somehow, they end up alone in a dark room. As Melissa's boyfriend, Ronnie, is unbuttoning her dress, he tells her that he loves her. This plotline romanticizes the story of having sex with your boyfriend for the first on prom night, suggesting that this is the ideal scenario for losing one's virginity. While Melissa didn't wait to have sex until marriage, she still saved herself for the right guy who loves her. In this story, and other stories in *Seventeen* magazine, Melissa's boyfriend holds the power in determining her virginity loss. Medley-Rath writes, "girls may perceive boys as an authority figure on what causes virginity loss" (Medley-Rath, p. 35). Further, this gendered power dynamic upholds heterosexuality and the importance of preserving one's virginity. In this dataset, *Seventeen* magazine promotes heteronormativity by upholding the

narrative that heterosexual intercourse, with vaginal penetration from a penis, is the most important, sacred, sexual act.

### **2.1.2 *Heterosexuality***

*Seventeen* magazine reinforces heteronormativity by casting heterosexuality as the default sexual orientation of cisgender teen girls. Christian-American culture teaches the belief that heterosexuality has always existed and that it is the only acceptable sexual orientation. Katz traces its origins back to the late nineteenth century writing that we first saw the words “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” written in English medical journals in 1892 (Katz, p. 67). In the early 1900s, heterosexuality was enforced as the societal norm, aiding in a culture of procreation, consumerism, and capitalism for white populations (Katz and Foucault). Heterosexuality has been socialized as the only normative sexuality through all major societal institutions including the media. Adrienne Rich refers to “compulsory heterosexuality” as a “man-made institution” in which “there is a mystical/biological heterosexual inclination, a ‘preference’ or ‘choice’ which draws women toward men” (Rich, p. 17). *Seventeen* magazine reinforces compulsory heterosexuality in forty-nine articles by centering heterosexual narratives in letters from teens, embarrassing stories, dating advice, and celebrity interviews.

Heteronormativity is upheld in *Seventeen* magazine through published letters and personal narratives about faith and religion, tumultuous mother-daughter relationships, and complicated romantic friendships. Throughout all published content, heterosexuality is implicitly named. For example, the teen who submits questions, comments, or concerns, is always implicitly identified as a cisgendered girl, writing about her boy crush or her boyfriend. By only including stories that implicitly name a cisgender teen girl and her heterosexual relationships,

*Seventeen* magazine names heterosexuality as the default sexuality for teen girls. Rich writes, “heterosexuality is presumed the ‘sexual preference’ of ‘most women,’ either implicitly or explicitly” (Rich, p. 13). *Seventeen* continues to presume heterosexuality by including articles from teens in which they describe heterosexuality as a part of their faith. In one article from 2004, titled “Living by Code,” Ashley, age fifteen, writes, “I dress modestly, choose boys with the same standards as me, and I always turn to my heavenly father for some extra help and guidance” (“How Do You Celebrate...”, p. 51). So long as this teen maintains her relationship with God and finds a “good Christian boy,” she believes, her moral wellbeing will remain intact. Like Ashley, many teen girls who are raised in Christian households are taught by their parents, their pastors, and their youth leaders that remaining true to certain “moral” values ensures they have a good relationship with God so that they are sent to Heaven in their afterlife. These Christian beliefs of moral values are often used as scare tactics to enforce heteronormativity on teen girls. *Seventeen* magazine upholds the narrative that having good values and individual morals are tied to sexuality, specifically heterosexuality.

While heterosexuality is deemed the acceptable sexual identity, Christian American culture has enforced heteronormative guidelines for girls to follow within their relationships with boys. In 2004, Natalie, a teen girl, writes a letter to her mom asking her to accept the fact that she is becoming a woman and to trust her decisions with boys. Natalie writes, “you need to know that the values you've taught me will be there when that guy I met 10 minutes ago invites me to his place” (“Dear Mom...”, p. 184). In this letter, Natalie places her values on her sexuality, upholding the heteronormative trope that the morality of the ideal teen girl is based on her sexual relationship(s), or lack thereof, with boys. Heteronormativity reinforces the notion that girls should base their value on their attractiveness to boys, placing male subjectivity (male desires,



values, and beliefs) as an important part of female sexuality. Adrienne Rich says that one characteristic of male power includes “cramping” the “creativity” of women “so that cultural values become the embodiment of male subjectivity” (Rich, p. 20). In Natalie’s story, she is placing her values on her sexual relationships with boys, reinforcing heteronormativity and upholding male subjectivity to a higher standard than her own subjectivity. Placing cultural values on male subjectivity causes young girls to base their self-esteem, body image, and behaviors on male desire. Because the media, the government, and American culture place more value and emphasis on male subjectivity than female autonomy, young girls are constantly looking for acceptance from their male counterparts, always aware of their appearance and their actions when they are in male company.

Most of the “embarrassing stories” published in *Seventeen* magazine promote the heteronormative belief that young girls must behave in ways that are inviting or tempting for their male crushes. Cockburn and Clarke call this phenomenon, “heterosexual desirability,” in which traditional or stereotypical rituals are performed to be “acceptable/desirable [in] ‘appearance’ within the teenage feminine culture” (Cockburn and Clarke, p. 651 and 654). The teen girl must look attractive, be smooth in her actions, and do nothing that shows her human flaws. In a *Seventeen* article titled “Totally Embarrassing,” a list of seven stories was published where teen readers wrote to the magazine about embarrassing things they did in front of their crushes. Most of these “embarrassing stories” included normal bodily functions or simple mistakes, such as sneezing in the middle of a kiss, throwing up on Valentine’s Day, or having food stuck in your teeth. These stories are embarrassing for teen girls because they counter the idea of perfect feminine behavior that is sexually desirable for boys. Heterosexual desirability causes teen girls and young women to behave in ways that uphold ideals of heterosexual

femininity, striving to be the “perfect girl” based on “internalized patriarchal standards of bodily acceptability” (Cockburn and Clarke, p. 657). *Seventeen* magazine publishes stories that create and maintain this need for heterosexual desirability within teen girls.

In one embarrassing story, a teen wrote to the magazine about a time she hoped her heterosexual desirability was attracting her male crush. An anonymous teen girl, Mary, was watching her crush play guitar in her church worship band. Mary and her friend were in the front row of the concert and the guitar player was performing on stage right in front of them. As he played his music, he was watching Mary, or so she thought, and she was very excited to get her crush’s attention. However, her friend soon pointed out that he was actually staring at the music stand in front of her. Mary said, “so every time he looked at 'me,' he was really looking at his sheet music on the stand!” I couldn’t believe how lame I was” (“Totally Embarrassing!”, p. 134). The word “lame” is ableist language, reinforcing discrimination against people with disabilities. Jessica Ping-Wild writes, the term “lame” has historically been defined as “weak-limbed, broken, and crippled,” and over time, the word began to take on a new meaning, “weak and undesirable” (Ping-Wild, sec. 5, para. 2). In this embarrassing story and other stories like these in *Seventeen*, cisgender teen girls are portrayed as basing their worth and desirability on attention from boys. As teen girls seek approval from their crush, they must find the balance of preserving their sexual morality and self-respect as they seek to gain the attraction of their mate.

*Seventeen* also upholds heteronormativity by providing its readers with dating advice and “flirting tips.” In this magazine, gendered and sexualized power dynamics are maintained, upholding the belief that young men should be the target of young women’s time and attention. In the August 2004 issue of *Seventeen*, an article titled “How I Got the Guy” lists five ways for girls to get attention from their male crush. Jennifer, age nineteen, writes, “I always ask the

hostess to seat my friends and me with the cutest waiter, then when he walks by, I drop my fork on the floor. When we both go to pick it up, our hands touch-and sparks fly!” (“How I Got The...”, p. 138). In the November 2017 issue, Clare Thorp lists five tips to “get your flirt on,” providing readers with tips on how to get your crush to notice you. Thorp writes, “it's vital to lock eyes with the person you're obsessing over. It actually boosts attraction and gives your crush that fluttery sensation that feels amazing” (Thorp, p. 72). This story is an example of how women and girls are taught to engage in certain behaviors to attract men and boys’ attention. This notion is supported by Fine, who writes, “female subjectivities emerge through, despite, and because of gender-based power asymmetries” (YEAR, p. 41). Girls are told that they must always maintain desirability; they must gain the attention of boys in both feminine yet subtle ways.

Additionally, *Seventeen* magazine constructs individual morality through heteronormativity in celebrity interviews with people such as Britney Spears, Jessica Simpson, LeBron James, and Cameron Dallas. In these interviews, the topic of conversation with male celebrities and female celebrities is very different. The male celebrities are briefly asked about their dating life and then the interview continues, while the interviews with female celebrities are mostly based on their dating life, how the public views them as sexual women, and how marriage has “saved” their image, as previously discussed in this chapter. We see how the individual morality of the female celebrities is based strongly on their ability to control their sexuality and their image, while male individual morality is normalized through a lack of sexual self-control.

*Seventeen* magazine perpetuates gendered power dynamics in relationships in which men sexualize women while women strive to be desirable to men. In LeBron James’ interview in February 2004, *Seventeen* waits until the end of the conversation to ask him about his dating life

and whether he has time to date. James answers, saying, “Ah ... you know, sometimes. But most of the time I just try to shy away from that and focus on what I'm here for, and that's to play the game of basketball” (“Lebron James”, p. 89). The focus then moves on to talk about why girls should like basketball and why it’s important for him to date a girl who is interested in sports. The value of a woman is placed on her relatability to male interests and desires, rather than her own interests and desires. In April 2017, the magazine interviews Cameron Dallas, a musician and actor, asking him about his favorite foods and daily activities. The interview ends by asking about his celebrity crush. Dallas replies, “I think Rihanna's sexy. Just recently, I met her publicist and I was like, ‘Hey, if she's into short white boys, let me know!’” (“Yes, Cameron...”, p. 75). *Seventeen* also asked if Dallas would rather be in a relationship or single and he responds that he would rather be single. In the interviews with men, *Seventeen* asks about their celebrity crushes; however, in interviews with women, on the other hand, the magazine focuses on their virginity, or lack thereof. According to Adrienne Rich, the roles of men and women in capitalism, production, and reproduction reflect gendered power dynamics in relationships. Rich writes that consumerism has “reflected male needs, male fantasies about women, and male interest in controlling women—particularly in the realms of sexuality and motherhood” (Rich, p. 14). We see these gendered power dynamics reflected in the differences between the interviews with celebrity men, LeBron James and Cameron Dallas, versus the interviews with celebrity women, Britney Spears and Jessica Simpson.

In contrast to their interviews with celebrity men, *Seventeen*’s interviews with celebrity women focus on the woman’s sexuality, their relationships with men, potential future motherhood, and how their public image has shifted as their sexuality has changed. *Seventeen* magazine upholds the capitalistic need for heteronormative roles of production (male labor

outside of the home) and reproduction (female labor inside of the home). Adrienne Rich explains how this phenomenon is supported by American capitalism in which women's reproduction helps to maintain the economy. Rich writes, "advice given to American women.... particularly in the areas of marital sex, maternity, and childcare, has echoed the dictates of the economic marketplace and the role capitalism has needed women to play in the production and/or reproduction" (Rich, p. 14). In the interviews with Britney Spears and Jessica Simpson, *Seventeen* promotes the narrative that individual morality is based on waiting until marriage to have sex and procreate.

Women and teen girls who express their sexuality freely and choose to have sex before marriage are looked down upon by conservatives as immoral. However, once a heterosexual marriage is consummated, a woman's individual morality is automatically improved. *Seventeen* magazine promotes these ideologies in its interview with Britney Spears. Deborah Baer, the author of the interview explains how she is happy to hear about Spears's marriage. Baer writes, "When I heard about Britney's marriage, I smiled. Married, annulled, cleaned up, and sent away" (Baer, p. 132). While Britney's marriage was one of the shortest on record, a full fifty-five hours, the author upholds the narrative that marriage improves a woman's morality. Now that Spears is married, she believes, she is a better woman. For the rest of the article, Baer explains how Britney's life has turned around since she's been married, and that now she is able to make a better life for herself. We see a similar narrative in Jessica Simpson's interview which focuses on her first year of marriage with Nick Lachey. Merle Ginsberg, the writer and interviewer of this story, believes that Simpson's marriage to Lachey has improved her life as well. Ginsberg writes, "Jessica's just not into gyrating for those sexy music videos.... So she broke the rules to be truer to herself.... Staying true to herself included a decision she made long ago about saving herself

for her wedding night” (Ginsberg, p. 94). In this interview, Ginsberg seeks to associate Simpson's “truer” and improved self to her marriage and her virginity. In both Spears’ and Simpson’s interviews, the authors uphold the narrative that heterosexuality and abstinence until marriage are key to maintaining individual morality. By publishing interviews with only straight celebrities, *Seventeen* magazine silences and invisibilizes LGBTQ+ teens.

### ***2.1.3 LGBTQ+ Rights***

While a spectrum of sexualities outside of the heterosexual norm is more commonly seen within mainstream society today, the idea of “homosexuality” has been seen as taboo or perverse in Western society since the early 1900s. Foucault writes that the appearance of literature on “homosexuality” in the nineteenth century helped to create the “legitimacy” and “naturalness” of homosexuality (Foucault, p. 101). By writing about “homosexuality,” or LGBTQ+ experiences, issues, rights, and concerns, the reality that sexuality can be experienced outside of heterosexuality can become normalized, recognized, and appreciated. In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage and over a decade later, in 2015, the Supreme Court officially made same-sex marriage legal nationwide (Wolf). However, according to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), as of 2020, “8 states explicitly require teachers to portray LGBTQ people negatively in health education instruction or prohibit teachers from mentioning LGBTQ people” (SIECUS). On March 29, 2022, the governor of Florida passed the “Parental Rights in Educational” Bill, HB 1557, also called the “Don’t Say Gay Bill,” which “prohibits classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels” (CS/CS/HB 1557). While laws and policies have shifted both to support gay marriage and then again to undermine them, *Seventeen* magazine

remains silent on its stance. By publishing only ten articles that discuss LGBTQ+ relationships and experiences, five from 2004 and five from 2017, compared to the forty-nine articles written about heterosexual relationships, *Seventeen* further invisibilizes LGBTQ+ teens.

As teens mature into adulthood, they want their autonomous identities to be seen, heard, and visible to their peers, parents, and teachers. However, LGBTQ+ youth often feel invisible. They may face hostility, harassment, isolation, and exclusion at school, at home, and in public discourses. This violence is upheld through policies and laws, like the “Don’t Say Gay Bill,” or by religious beliefs that oppose same-sex marriage. When educators or policymakers support anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, they are less likely to address homophobia. For example, a study examining classroom teachers found that religious affiliation and LGBTQ+ inclusive education were strongly correlated. Tracey Peter et al. write, “a religion that officially opposes same-sex marriage, actually influences the likelihood of teachers intervening in homophobic or transphobic incidents” (Peter et al., p. 21). By ignoring homophobia and the individual experiences that LGBTQ+ undergo daily, these teens are further marginalized and excluded from their peers. To be more inclusive to LGBTQ+ teens, it is recommended that teachers, school leaders, and professionals make efforts to “de-invisibilize” their LGBTQ+ students, which can be done in a variety of ways such as through “posters, assemblies, clubs, events, [and] staffing” (Peter et al., p. 21). In this study, *Seventeen* magazine excludes LGBTQ+ rhetoric from its content, rendering LGBTQ+ teens as invisible.

The presidential elections of 2004 included the political debate as to whether same-sex marriage should be legalized in the United States. Because this was such an important topic this year, *Seventeen* included the debate in its magazine. However, same-sex marriage is the only mention of LGBTQ+ identities during the year 2004. While *Seventeen* magazine encourages

youth to vote on these issues, they do not explicitly encourage youth to support same-sex marriage. In one article, the magazine provided a list of the presidential candidates and their opinions on same-sex marriage. In another article, the magazine included a small segment about same-sex marriage, posing the question, “Will gay and lesbian couples be allowed to marry?” (Sole-Smith, p. 80). Sole-Smith writes,

IT'S UNCLEAR. Some people believe that only straight couples should be married by the state and qualify for certain federal benefits. Those who favor same-sex civil marriages believe all couples should have the same rights. Others support civil unions, which give some, not all, of the benefits. Although marriage laws vary by state, the President can put her or his force behind national legislation in favor of either position. (YEAR p. 80)

Providing this information can help youth to make their own decisions about this basic human rights issue. However, by remaining neutral and by not explicitly naming their support for LGBTQ+ people to marry whom they love, *Seventeen* is contributing to homophobia and the ostracization of LGBTQ+ youth and adults.

Oftentimes, because of the ostracization and homophobia LGBTQ+ youth experience in schools, laws, at home, and in the media, youth are afraid to “come out” as LGBTQ+ for fear of how their parents, peers, and school administration will treat them. While *Seventeen* does not demonstrate overt homophobia, its lack of explicit support and solidarity for same-sex marriage shows LGBTQ+ youth that this magazine is not a safe space for them. On the other hand, *Seventeen* published a letter written to the magazine from a teen who explicitly states that she is against gay marriage. Laura, age 18, writes:

Do you ever talk about anything but gays and lesbians in your magazine anymore? I know they want to have their say, but it's too much to see in every issue.... I hope you realize that not everyone supports gays and lesbians, their "unions," and their parades.... I don't think I want to read another *Seventeen* until you prove that you don't just support gays and lesbians. (“Mail”, p. 22)



While *Seventeen* often chooses to respond to the letters they receive from readers, in this case, they chose to remain silent. Publishing this hate mail without showing how harmful these beliefs are to its reader's further silences and erases LGBTQ+ youth. Not only are they erasing the existence of LGBTQ+ folks, and not explicitly showing support for their human rights, they are actively publishing homophobic rhetoric. Publishing this content creates further stigma and shame for their LGBTQ+ readers to come out in 2004.

In 2017, on the other hand, there was an observable small shift in the way LGBTQ+ rights and experiences were written about in *Seventeen* magazine. While there were still only five articles that mention LGBTQ+ identities, each article covers a different topic, rather than only focusing on same-sex marriage as we saw in 2004. For example, in one article a teen male describes his experience as an openly gay student in high school, and in another, a teen girl asks for advice about bringing her girlfriend to prom. In one celebrity interview, the editor asks a famous singer, Lauren, from Fifth Harmony, about her experience coming out as a bisexual woman. And in a fourth article, a teen writes to the magazine about the importance of schools providing sex education for all teens, including LGBTQ+ youth.

In April 2017, we see one article in which *Seventeen* acknowledges trans existence for the first time in this dataset. A trans male high school student, Lucas Segal, age seventeen, writes to the magazine about his horrible experiences trying to use the bathroom at school. Earlier in 2017, the Trump administration rescinded Title IX protections for trans students at school, requiring that trans students use the bathroom based on their gender assigned at birth. In Lucas' story, he describes how he is an average-looking boy, he wears boy's clothes, he has a girlfriend, and he has a goatee. However, Lucas was assigned female at birth and transitioned from female to male the summer before his sophomore year of high school. When he returned to school after

his transition, he experienced difficulties with his school's gendered bathroom policies and procedures. The principal proposed that he used the nurse's bathroom instead of the boys' bathroom so he could avoid any bullying that might happen from his peers. However, the nurse's bathroom was far away from his classrooms and it felt ostracizing to have to do that every time he had to pee. Lucas writes: "It's demeaning to feel as if you're not welcome to pee anywhere except the nurse's bathroom - it's like you have a disease or something. But I'm aware that some people in the world are afraid that anyone who is transgender is secretly a pedophile" (Stanley, p. 20). Lucas's story shows how homophobia and cisnormativity show up in social spaces daily, including the basic human need to use the bathroom. While publishing Lucas's story is extremely important for sharing the experiences that many trans youth face today, there is still much more explicit support *Seventeen* magazine needs to be inclusive to LGBTQ+ youth.

In the years 2004 and 2017, there is a positive shift in the way *Seventeen* magazine represents LGBTQ+ identities. In 2004, *Seventeen* only discusses the political debate around same-sex marriage whereas, in 2017, the magazine shares individual stories and experiences from their LGBTQ+ readers. In 2004, the discussion of same-sex marriage is important, however, *Seventeen* does not take an explicit stance on supporting their LGBTQ+ readers in this debate. In 2017, on the other hand, the magazine shares specific experiences of LGBTQ+ teens; however, it still did not explicitly state its support for LGBTQ+ human rights issues. Additionally, the magazine only shares one story from a lesbian teen, one story from a gay teen, one story from a bi teen, and one story from a trans teen. While sharing these stories can look like progress on the surface, highlighting a whole group's experiences based on only one representation is tokenistic. By 2017, *Seventeen* is implicitly showing their support for LGBTQ+ teens by publishing their stories, however, they are minimizing their experiences by not

explicitly addressing their support for these communities or sharing resources and information to support their mental and physical health. By avoiding explicit discussions of diverse sexualities, *Seventeen* is upholding the notion that talking about sex creates sexual beings.

## 2.2 Sexuality as Violence and Victimization

Public debates about youth sexuality between policymakers, parents, and school boards center on a fear that teaching youth about gender and/or sexuality will create sexual subjects. In 2000, Janice Irvine argued that conservative adults expressed anxieties around sex education, spreading the false narrative that talking to teens about sex would persuade them to explore their sexuality. Irvine writes, “this anxious warning-- that sex education itself makes kids go out and have sex - is as old as sex education itself” (Irvine, p. 60). Irvine’s argument is still being supported today. Over twenty years later, in March 2022, the governor of Florida passed the “Parental Rights in Education Bill,” also known as the “Don’t Say Gay Bill,” which restricts teachers in public schools from discussing gender and sexuality in the classroom. The restriction upholds heteronormativity and cisnormativity by othering persons who identify outside of these norms. Additionally, not discussing gender and sexuality in the classroom upholds the notion that gender, sexuality, and sexual desires are “dangerous” (Irvine and Fine). *Seventeen* magazine both creates and upholds the beliefs in the “dangers” of youth sexuality, subscribing to the narrative of the “violent,” male “predator” and the “powerless,” female “victim” (Fine, p. 31 and 42).

Sexual violence occurs when someone non-consensually touches, watches, exploits, harasses, or assaults another person (“What is Sexual Violence...”, p. 1). Perpetrators of sexual violence often seek a feeling of power over the victim or survivor. According to the U.S.

National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC), “1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys have been sexually abused before the age of 18” (“Teenagers and...”, p. 1). In these statistics, we see how young girls, more often than young boys, are the victims or survivors of sexual abuse from male perpetrators. *Seventeen* magazine utilizes young girls’ stories of sexual violence to uphold the narrative of the young girl victim and the dangerous male predator.

Between the years 2004 and 2017, there is an increase in awareness and advocacy around sexual assault through laws, policies, organizations, and social movements. In 2001, the first-ever national Sexual Assault Awareness Month was held by the NSVRC, and in 2004, the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault launched the first-ever online “hub” for sexual violence prevention (Sullivan and Thomas). In 2006, the “Me Too” movement was founded by Tarana Burke, a Black woman; however, it did not go viral until 2017 when a white woman, Alyssa Milano, began using the hashtag on social media. While sexual violence awareness in the U.S. and around the globe was increasing, *Seventeen* magazine’s awareness appeared to be decreasing, publishing eight articles on sexual violence in 2004 and only one article in 2017.

### ***2.2.1 The Female Victim***

In 2004, *Seventeen* seeks to bring awareness to sexual assault by publishing articles with teens' stories and experiences, providing advice, and promoting events. In one article, the magazine provides a bullet point list of “what the threat or act of violence... does to a young woman,” shares teens’ stories of sexual assault, and then provides information on how one can donate to help victims of sexual assault (Ensler, p. 76). One article, “Sister’s in Need,” seeks to bring awareness by promoting V-Day NYC in 2004, an event that seeks to end sexual violence globally. This same article also highlights individual stories of teen sexual abuse around the

world, in the U.S., Kenya, and Romania. This article, and other stories in *Seventeen* magazine, highlight various examples of sexual violence, ranging from sex trafficking to nonconsensual photographing.

In November 2004, an eighteen-year-old girl shares her story in which she experiences “upskirting” by a man who follows her around the mall, videotaping her under her skirt without her consent. At the end of this article, the *Seventeen* author, Nancy Rones, provides some advice to teens telling them either to confront the perpetrator and/or to call a national hotline for support afterward. Rones writes, “If you feel someone is too close to you... either walk away or strongly say: ‘I’m uncomfortable with you being so close. Please stand a little farther away’” (Rones, p. 74). In 2017, the only article written about sexual violence in this dataset focuses on sexual harassment at work, posing the question as to whether a teen should date a coworker. *Seventeen* tells the teen, “Ask yourself, Am I being pressured? Promised a perk? If yes, talk to a manager” (“Your Cheat...”, p. 72). These questions are important examinations of how sexual violence might show up in the workplace. However, this advice solely focuses on how teen girls can avoid victimization without addressing how teen boys can avoid being perpetrators. Here, *Seventeen* magazine teaches teen girls that it is their responsibility to avoid violent boys, relieving teen boys of any accountability. Audrey Hickey argues that *Seventeen* normalizes girl victimhood of unwanted sexual advances from boys, writing, “it is the norm for magazines attribute responsibility of sexual consequences to girls, thereby absolving males of any responsibility” (Hickey, p. 72).

### 2.2.2 *The Violent Male*

In the United States, and many other countries, teen girls are held to a moral standard that differs from teen boys. Girls are taught that they must remain innocent, pure, and virginal until marriage while boys on the other hand are taught to fight for taking the virginity of girls. Male sexual violence is normalized, and according to Fine, having a strong sex drive is even encouraged. Fine writes, women are socialized to believe that men have a right to “force” their sexuality “upon them” (Fine, p. 19). While *Seventeen* strives to support teen girl victims of sexual assault, they also normalize the socialized belief that men inherently have a right to force their sexuality upon women.

In the article, “Mind Games Guys Play,” published in April 2004, eight teen boys share examples of what they do to win over a girl they like. This list includes actual stories in which teen boys “play games,” lie, and act uninterested to get a girl to like them (“Mind Games...”, p. 100-101). By providing these stories, *Seventeen* is supporting the harmful narrative that has been told to young girls for so long; that if a boy is mean to you, it is because he likes you. One seventeen-year-old boy, Seven, says that he seeks to get a girl's attention by complimenting her. Once she becomes interested in him, he acts like he is no longer into her. He writes, “when we start dating, I'll make her feel like she's the only person in the world. But every once in a while I gotta be a little mean so she won't walk all over me and she knows what's up” (“Mind Games...”, p. 101). Seven's story perpetuates gender norms, supporting the sexist idea that boys must be mean to girls to keep them in their place and under their control. By not challenging boys' heterosexist ploys for girls *Seventeen* magazine is upholding the narrative that boys are inherently violent and aggressive while girls, on the other hand, are passive victims.

In February 2004, a *Seventeen* magazine article titled “What They Say When You’re Not Listening...,” provides quotes from fifteen teen boys including how they talk about girls they like to their friends. While some of the quotes are kind, gentle, or silly, others are sexist and aggressive, centering male sexuality as something that is out of their control. *Seventeen* is upholding the gender binary that boys should be chasing or “pursuing” girls. One teen boy says that when he and his friends see a girl at a party, they all discuss who is going to talk to her first. A second teen boy writes, that when he asked his friend for advice about a girl that doesn’t seem into him, he was told to “be persistent” to get her to like him (“What they Say When...”, p. 70). The narrative to “be persistent” when a girl isn’t showing interest in a boy upholds rape culture, enforcing the idea that saying no does not really mean no. *Seventeen* upholds the narrative that boys have a one-track mind for sex. Keith, age eighteen writes, “When guys talk about girls, they’re mostly talking about plain and hard facts-- it’s just our nature. Girls like to talk about sweet things guys have done, and personality and all that. We like to talk about sex” (“What they Say When...”, p. 71). In this story, male sexuality is normalized while female sexuality is subdued. Like public school sex education, *Seventeen* upholds the norm that male sexuality and pleasure are biological facts while female sexuality and pleasure are subdued and silenced (Fine, p. 36).

### **2.3 The Missing Discourse of Desire and Pleasure**

Gender-based power dynamics exist and thrive in sex, society, and discourses of sexuality. *Seventeen* magazine constructs power dynamics in sexuality by portraying male desire and pleasure as the norm while leaving female desire and pleasure unspoken. Further, power is utilized to control who experiences pleasure and how. Foucault writes, “Pleasure and power do

not cancel or turn back against one another, they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another” (Foucault, p. 48). Gendered-power dynamics of sexual pleasure and desire are maintained and upheld in this dataset of *Seventeen* magazine.

Out of the eight issues of *Seventeen* that were reviewed, only one article explicitly names pleasure as a part of sex and sexuality. In the February 2004 issue of *Seventeen*, Jessica, age seventeen, wrote to the editor that she started having sex with her boyfriend but has not yet “had an orgasm.” Jessica asked the magazine for advice and *Seventeen* responded,

The truth is, not everyone has orgasms, especially when they've just started to have sex. You're getting used to this new experience, and it may take a while for you to really relax. Keep in mind that the act of intercourse itself doesn't necessarily bring pleasure. You have to be comfortable with yourself, the other person, and also the process in order to feel true intimacy. (“Your Sex...”, p. 62).

Here, *Seventeen* tells the readers that being comfortable with both yourself and your sexual partner is a good first step to experiencing true intimacy and pleasure. While this is good advice, neither Jessica nor *Seventeen* mentioned whether her boyfriend experienced orgasm during sex. Within the context of the writing, the boyfriend’s orgasm was implied, upholding societal norms of gendered pleasure and power.

Popular culture and the media create false ideologies about sex, for example, the belief that men have sex to achieve orgasm while women have sex to please men. Katherine Rowland argues that American culture takes sexual pleasure and desire away from women but exaggerates male pleasure and desire. Rowland writes, “Unlike men, who presumably have sex because they like getting off, we’re further told that women don’t really need physical pleasure to be satisfied.” (Rowland, p. 40). In this context, *Seventeen* is upholding the cultural implication that men always achieve orgasm during sex while women don’t need sexual pleasure. Additionally, the magazine forgets to acknowledge the orgasm gap between heterosexual men and women. According to Alex Broster, a sex and relationship writer, the orgasm gap explores how



heterosexual men (95%) are substantially more likely to experience orgasm during intercourse than heterosexual women (65%) (Broster). In its response to Jessica, *Seventeen* ignores the fact that sex can be pleasurable without ending in orgasm and doesn't offer other ways sexual pleasure can be experienced outside of penetration. In this research, *Seventeen* upholds the belief that women and girls don't have a desire for sexual pleasure, further creating the narrative that sex is solely for male pleasure.

In the February 2004 article, "Sister's in Need," a teen in Kenya was forced to have her clitoris removed through a cultural practice known as Female Genital Cutting (FGC). FGC is a cultural practice in some regions of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, in which the clitoris of young girls is removed for non-medical reasons. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there are no medical benefits for FGC and it often causes extreme pain and long-term health issues. Furthermore, FGC is "often motivated by beliefs about what is considered acceptable sexual behavior. It aims to ensure premarital virginity and marital fidelity" ("Female Genital..."). While *Seventeen* magazine briefly mentions that FGC can be both emotionally and physically harmful, there was no mention of how this may negatively impact a girl's physical health and/or sexual pleasure in the future. *Seventeen* fails to acknowledge the importance of clitoral stimulation as a key pleasure site for women and girls. There are no articles in this dataset that mention masturbation as a way for teen girls to experience pleasure. According to Erica Koepsel, most women reach orgasm from clitoral stimulation, as the clitoris has a high concentration of potentially pleasurable nerve endings (Koepsel, p. 23-24). Further, Koepsel writes, that by providing youth with medically accurate information about the clitoris, teen girls "will be better equipped to make decisions about their sexuality in a healthy manner" (Koepsel,

p. 24). This lack of inclusion of sexual pleasure and desire for teen girls in *Seventeen* magazine reinforces the narrative that female desire and pleasure are not important and inexistant.

## 2.4 Conclusion

Reshaping Michell Fine's four discourses of sexuality, *Seventeen* magazine creates and maintains sexuality as individual morality, as violence and victimization, and as lacking desire and pleasure. After analyzing eight issues of the magazine, four from 2004 and four from 2017, I found that the content is *Seventeen* doesn't change much with time. The writing in the magazine explicitly and implicitly centers power relations in sexuality, naming the ideal teen girl a heterosexual virgin. The magazine portrays the teen girl as the pure, innocent, victim of dominant, male violence. Lastly, teen girls are viewed as having no sexual desires or pleasure, while boys are viewed as having uncontrollable desires and inherent pleasure.

Individual morality is often constructed through a religious lens, naming heterosexuality as the societal norm. *Seventeen* magazine maintains these norms by centering the stories of heterosexual teens through dating advice and embarrassing stories. Furthermore, *Seventeen* promotes the harmful narrative of the ideal, "pure," virgin girl by highlighting stories in which girls are "saving themselves" for marriage and/or the right guy. This narrative is upheld through celebrity interviews, articles about abstinence and religion, and stories about dating and prom night. Simultaneously, stories from LGBTQ+ teens are rarely written and shared, further maintaining the belief that these communities are not accepted in teen magazine spaces.

Religious policymakers view youth sexuality as "dangerous," labeling young girls as the victims of violent male sexuality. *Seventeen* magazine promotes these beliefs by sharing stories that create and uphold the image of sexuality as violence and victimization. In these stories,

young girls are victimized by young men and are taught to just say no. On the other hand, stories promoting male aggression, violence, and the sexualization of women are normalized without question and without naming sexism and heteropatriarchy. Women are viewed as objects of male sexual desire beginning from youth. While male sexual desire is described as simply a part of “biology,” female sexual desire is left unspoken. These gendered power asymmetries are woven throughout the text of *Seventeen* magazine, using knowledge and power to create the ideal teen girl. In my next chapter, I explore how *Seventeen* provides a reproductive injustice lens, disempowering teen girls in their sexuality, their sexual and reproductive health, and their autonomy over their own bodies.

### 3 REPRODUCTIVE INJUSTICE

In 1994, the term “reproductive justice” was coined by a group of Black women at the national pro-choice conference in Chicago, Illinois (Ross, 2006, p. 1). Centuries of systemic and medical racism in the United States forced Black women, and other women of color, to undergo nonconsensual sterilization and abortions. The pro-choice movement, which was predominantly run and supported by middle-class white women, focused on fighting for women’s rights to abortions; however, it did not consider systematic racism and the intersections of race and class (Ross, 2006, p. 59). Reproductive justice, on the other hand, combines reproductive rights and social justice to support the autonomy of women, particularly women of color, in their sexual health, rights, and well-being. Loretta Ross and Ricki Solinger name three primary principles of reproductive justice, including “(1) the right *not* to have a child; (2) the right to *have* a child; (3) [and] the right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments” (Ross and Solinger, p. 9). Reproductive justice supports Black women in their fight for autonomy over their reproductive health, including the right to have children, when and if they choose.

The conservative right has a long history of using policies, programs, and public education as forms of control over an individual’s reproductive choices since *Roe v Wade* extended constitutional protection to abortion. Building on Ross and Solinger’s definition of reproductive justice, I define reproductive injustice as discourses created by laws, policies, and systems that construct sex, sexuality, and reproductive health as something which should be defined and controlled by the state rather than by the individual. In this chapter, I explore how *Seventeen* magazine provides a reproductive injustice lens through its discourses on sex, contraception, abortion, and teen pregnancy, by producing teen sexuality as dangerous and immoral.

The overturn of *Roe v Wade* is just one example of reproductive politics which, according to Loretta Ross, “are about who decides ‘whether, when, and which woman can reproduce legitimately and also the struggles over which women have the right to be mothers of the children they bear’” (Ross, 2006, p. 61). Unfortunately, this abortion bill is not new, and debates over abortion rights have been under scrutiny for decades. In 2003, President George W. Bush signed the “Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act,” deeming abortions a “terrible form of violence... against children who are inches from birth” (“President Bush”). One year later, in 2004, Bush signed the “Unborn Victims of Violence Act,” which, “define[s] fetuses as victims of crimes in cases when women have miscarried, for example, and prosecutors claim that the unborn child has been murdered” (Ross and Solinger, p. 219). And while this law states that it exempts abortions, pro-abortion groups feared how the language of the act might “encourage people to think about the unborn child” (Holzapfel, p. 440).

Like most republican presidents, Bush was both pro-life and in support of abstinence-only education. During his presidency, teen pregnancy rates and STI rates increased, with around 16,000 pregnancies and cases of STIs reported amongst teen girls ages ten to fourteen (McGreal). In 2004, the Abstinence Only Until Marriage (AOUM) curricula went under systematic review by U.S. Representative Henry A. Waxman who found that “two-thirds of the programs contained basic scientific errors”; these errors provided false information about HIV transmission, “effectiveness of contraceptives,” and “reinforced stereotypes about girls and boys” (Fine and McClelland, p. 309). Without providing teens with medically accurate information or resources on how to have sex safely, teens are less likely to know about how to prevent unwanted pregnancies, diseases, or infections (As-Sanie et al., p. 1519).

As liberal politics became popular over the next two decades, new policies and laws were still being implemented to enforce strict abortion rights and reproductive health services. The Affordable Care Act was passed in 2010 under the Obama Administration and mandated that health insurance plans cover all contraceptives under their insurance, including emergency contraception, such as Plan B (Siltrin). Teen pregnancy rates fell nine percent in 2016 from the previous year; however, one-third of the country enacted new abortion restrictions, which according to the Guttmacher Institute, brought the number of laws and policies that restrict abortion access up to a total of 338 (Siltrin, “Policy Trends...”). In 2017, the Real Education for Healthy Youth Act was implemented, requiring that grant money be used by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education to implement comprehensive sex education in schools (H.R. 3602). Comprehensive sex education provides students with accurate information about human sexuality, helps to develop sexually positive attitudes and communication skills, and encourages youth to make autonomous decisions about sex (“History of Sex Education”, p. 2). Comprehensive sex education seeks to support teens in making autonomous decisions about sex and sexuality, providing them with information about contraception methods, such as abortions, pregnancy prevention, and STI prevention. However, laws and policies regarding access to sexual and reproductive health services are constantly changing as new politicians take office.

As political debates regarding women’s reproductive health services shift, media sources such as newspapers, magazines, and the internet, often seek to provide insight as to how these changes might affect their readers. For example, *Ms.* magazine, an online magazine that seeks to uplift feminist women’s voices, published an opinion piece about reproductive rights just thirteen days after the Supreme Court’s decision to overturn *Roe v Wade* was leaked to the public in May

2022. *Ms.* writes, “Regardless of its final decision, the Supreme Court has already made it clear that women are still not considered full citizens in its eyes... this case is about denying choice and controlling liberty. Women’s liberty” (Akers). However, not all magazines connect with their reader demographic by providing support and political opinion pieces. *Seventeen* magazine, a magazine whose market demographic is teen girls ages twelve through sixteen, could provide some important information to its’ readers regarding political changes that directly address their sexual and reproductive health. Through its writing and silence on sex education, contraception, birth control, abortion, and teen pregnancy in this dataset, *Seventeen* magazine teaches it’s readers that teen sexuality should not exist and that teen girls should have no agency in their reproductive health choices. In this chapter, I pose two questions: How do the writers in *Seventeen* magazine frame the conversation around sex education and access to contraception, birth control, and abortions? Who do they present as having a legitimate claim to reproductive rights and who does not? Why?

This chapter is organized into three sections, starting with sexuality as individual morality, moving on to sexuality as violence and victimization, and lastly, the missing discourse of desire. The first section explores how *Seventeen* magazine constructs teen sexuality as immoral decision-making that disrupts the heteronormative nuclear family. Additionally, *Seventeen* upholds the narrative that talking about sex creates more sexual subjects, maintaining the conservative belief that “speech about sex unhealthily stimulates sexual thought and practice among students” (Irvine, p. 60). By staying silent about teen sexuality, *Seventeen* magazine upholds the narrative that discourses of sex create sexual citizens. And by only discussing emergency contraception and abortion as necessary in extreme cases, the magazine upholds the conservative belief that teen sexuality is related to individual morality. In the second section,

sexuality as violence and victimization, I investigate how *Seventeen* upholds the narrative of the violent male and the victim girl by only discussing teen pregnancies resulting from incest or rape. And in the last section, the missing discourse of desire, I explore how *Seventeen* magazine shapes teen girls as objects of male desire.

### **3.1 Sexuality as Individual Morality**

The conservative idea of sexuality as individual morality can be found intertwined within sex education curricula, abortion laws, and views on teen parenting. According to Michelle Fine, individual morality in sex education is tied to abstinence and “good [family] values” (Fine, p. 32). Public school sex education defines the “moral” teen as a heterosexual virgin who doesn’t need access to abortions. Reproductive justice, on the other hand, equates individual morality with the belief that teen girls and women should be provided with medically accurate sex education and should have the freedom of choice over their sexual and reproductive rights. These sexual and reproductive rights include when and what types of contraception to use and whether or not to have children. Ross and Solinger write, “the human right to health includes the right to reproductive health, a condition that can be met only when accurate and honest information, materials, and services are distributed fairly and equitably” (Ross and Solinger, p. 163). During the years 2004 and 2017, *Seventeen* magazine provided minimal information on reproductive justice initiatives such as sex education, abortion rights, and supporting teen parents, thus providing reproductive injustice to its teen readers.

#### **3.1.1 Sex Education**

Sex education is a reproductive justice tool that can and should be used to teach youth about healthy relationships, consent, contraception methods, reproductive health, and more.



However, the conservative right often believe that sex education “raises questions of promoting promiscuity and immorality” (Fine, p. 30). These conservative narratives have been a part of a long-standing political debate and are both false and harmful to youth. According to Christine Soyong Harley, President and CEO of SIECUS, sex education is not just about safe sex, it is the “key to dismantling the systems of power, oppression, and misinformation that allow today’s biggest sexual and reproductive health and rights injustices to exist in the first place” (Soyong Harley). However, *Seventeen* magazine fails to acknowledge the importance of sex education.

Only one article in the eight issues of *Seventeen* magazine discussed the importance of sex education in public schools. In 2017 a teen girl, Leslie Diaz, age eighteen, wrote to the magazine about how she convinced her school to provide “real, science-based sex ed” (Stanley, p. 16). Diaz told *Seventeen* that when she and her high school boyfriend decided to have sex, they went to the local store to buy condoms; however, the store employee refused to sell the condoms to them, saying it was illegal for teens under age eighteen to purchase condoms. However, the 1977 Supreme Court ruling, *Carey v. Population Services International*, says that it is unconstitutional for any state to prohibit the sale of contraceptives to individuals of any age (“Carey v. Population Services...”) Unfortunately, Diaz and her boyfriend had not been provided with proper sex education and were uninformed of their rights, so they left the store without contraception. The teens soon realized that the cashier was using his own beliefs of “individual morality” to judge whether she and her boyfriend should be having sex. Diaz said, “It's scary to think that a cashier who lied and tried to shame me increased my risk of getting pregnant or an STI” (Stanley, p. 16). After Diaz was denied services, she used the internet to research her sexual health rights, sparking a passion for sex education to be implemented into her school for all students. However, cashiers aren’t the only ones trying to stop teens from getting the

contraception they need and deserve. Conservative political leaders, in the past and present, have been working to create barriers for teen girls and women to access reproductive health services.

Loretta Ross writes,

Policies that restrict abortion access, distort sex and sexuality education, impose parental notification requirements for minors, allow husbands to veto options for abortion, and limit use of emergency and regular contraception all conspire to limit access to fertility control. (Ross, 2016, p. 55)

These policies and abortion restrictions negatively affect teens, adults, and families, and continue to be a never-ending argument in political discourse.

### ***3.1.2 Emergency Contraception and Abortions***

On January 22, 1973, the court ruling of *Roe v. Wade* was put into place saying that “a state law that banned abortions except to save the life of the mother was unconstitutional” (“On this...”). By 1985, students in Philadelphia school districts were still not allowed to talk about abortions; teachers could define what an abortion is but nothing further (Fine, p. 38). Fine poses the question, “How can definition occur without discussion, exchange, conversation, or critique unless a subtext of silencing prevails?” (Fine, p. 38). This question interrogates how teens are expected to make autonomous decisions about their sexual health without being provided with the proper tools, information, or resources to do so. Thirty years after *Roe v. Wade*, *Seventeen* magazine ignores the importance of abortions by only briefly discussing them in four articles from 2004. In most of these articles, abortion is talked about in a negative context, and not once did the *Seventeen* explicitly provide information, resources, or support for teens who may need to access abortion services. By not providing their teen girl readers with the proper tools for accessing abortions safely, *Seventeen* magazine is implicitly silencing abortions and upholding

the conservative belief that having sex, taking emergency contraception, and utilizing abortion services are acts of individual morality.

In this dataset, *Seventeen* magazine constructs emergency contraception as a negative result of teen delinquency. In April 2004, *Seventeen* published an article titled, “Emergency Contraception,” in which they frame emergency contraception (E.C.) as a negative outcome of sex in which teen girls have no autonomy over their bodies. At the beginning of the article, *Seventeen* provides some basic information on the morning-after pill, which at the time the FDA was still deciding whether or not it should be sold over the counter (Stillman, p. 88). Next, the article provides two very short stories from teen girls who used the pill and whether they would take it again. The first story was written by a nineteen-year-old, Cassandra, who said she needed to use E.C. because she was sexually assaulted. In the second story, Tara, age seventeen, took it because her boyfriend asked her to, without any further explanation as to why he asked. Tara writes, “I’ll never take it again,” because it made her feel sick to her stomach as well as caused negative psychological effects. She writes, “I felt like I had had an abortion, even though technically I know I didn’t, and that was extremely hard for me to deal with... One second I’d be happy, and the next I’d be bawling my eyes out” (Stillman, p. 88). By only discussing the negative outcomes and side effects of E.C. without providing further information as to why it should be a legal option, *Seventeen* creates stigma and shame for teens who use E.C.

*Seventeen* disempowers its readers in their reproductive decisions by not explicitly providing support to teens who chose to use E.C. or abortions. In the same article, “Emergency Contraception,” the magazine shares the results from an online poll that asked its teen readers if they would take the E.C. pill. The results showed that 78% of teens said yes while 22% said no (Stillman, p. 88). Underneath the results, the magazine provided opinions from teens as to why

they would or would not take E.C.. Ashlie, age seventeen says, “Yes. Selling the morning-after pill over the counter will prevent many abortions” (Stillman, p. 88). Whitney, age seventeen, disagrees, saying that she would not take the pill. She writes, “No. This pill promotes a message that says, ‘Unprotected and casual sex is okay because I can fix any consequences’” (Stillman, p. 88). By sharing Whitney’s negative viewpoints on E.C., *Seventeen* is upholding the conservative belief that teens should not be having sex and instead need to practice sexual self-control. Fine argues, “The language of self-control and self-respect reminds students that sexual immorality breeds ... personal problems” (Fine, p. 32). *Seventeen* magazine upholds the narrative that “sexual immorality” only creates personal problems by providing negative commentary from teens about E.C. While it is important to hear from both sides of the debate, *Seventeen* has chosen to remain silent by not explicitly stating its opinion on women’s reproductive issues.

The third time abortions were mentioned in *Seventeen* magazine was in April 2004, in a column the magazine calls “Mail,” in which readers submit their opinions about articles that were previously printed. In this piece, one young adult, Sara, aged twenty, writes to the magazine about how upset she is that *Seventeen* did not talk about the pro-life/pro-choice debate, a political debate that directly affects its readers. Sara writes, “The pro-life/pro-choice debate is among the most important issues facing voters in this election... Frankly, I find this omission an embarrassment to the ‘most-read young women's magazine’” (“Mail,” April 2004, p. 26). Sara is upset that *Seventeen* does not address its support for abortions and she tells the magazine that they need to do a better job of fighting for their readers’ reproductive rights. Directly under Sara's note, the editor of the magazine explains why they did not talk about abortion rights. The editor writes,

The reason abortion rights weren’t covered in our story is because all of the Democratic candidates support a woman's right to choose-so instead of repeating ourselves over and

over, we elected to leave it out. President George Bush is the only candidate who does not support abortion rights, except in cases of rape or incest, or to protect the life of the mother. ("Mail," April 2004, p. 26)

In this quote, *Seventeen* defends its omission by pointing out the distinctions between democratic and republic candidates rather than providing facts and information about abortion rights and services. By doing this, the magazine is upholding the narrative that teens have an individual responsibility to learn information to make the right decisions about their bodies. However, without proper guidance, tools, and support, teen girls cannot make informed decisions about their reproductive health.

*Seventeen* magazine upholds the conservative Christian belief that abortions are immoral and unjust. In August 2004, *Seventeen* published another "Mail" column from a reader who had a visceral response to Sara's letter about abortions. Jill, age sixteen, is very upset with the magazine. She believes that *Seventeen* should not discuss issues like abortion, as the Bible forbids certain behaviors, and teens who participate in such acts are making individual immoral decisions. Jill explicitly names pro-choice decisions as bad, immoral decisions:

And then there was that "prochoice" girl-or should I say the "pro-murder" advocate. How can anybody support the genocide of innocent human beings? What if your mother had chosen pro-choice? Oh, and women do have the "right to choose"-- to choose to abstain from premarital sex, you hypocritical idiots! ("Mail," August 2004, p. 37)

While providing opposing beliefs and attitudes about public debates is important for learning and gathering information, *Seventeen* chooses not to respond to Jill's angry letter, remaining silent.

This silence is implicitly telling its readers who have had abortions or who may be seeking abortions that their choices are wrong. By not being explicit about its stance on abortions, and by publishing negative letters about abortions and E.C. from teens, *Seventeen* is showing its lack of support for the pro-choice movement.

Once again, in another article from August 2004, titled “Choose Your Leader,” *Seventeen* remains silent about the pro-life/pro-choice debate. In this piece, the magazine lists seven different topics which the 2004 presidential candidates address in their campaigns, including abortion rights. The article states, “Bush is pro-life and opposes abortion except in cases of rape, incest, or a threat to the life of the mother,” while John Kerry, on the other hand, “is pro-choice: He supports a woman's right to have an abortion” (“Choose Your...”, p. 144). Again, *Seventeen* is stating the same facts they used in response to Sara's angry letter, remaining quiet about its personal stance on the issue. According to Fine, “The silence surrounding contraception and abortion options... denies adolescents information and sends the message that such conversations are taboo” (Fine, p. 39). By not addressing the harmful narrative that abortions are only necessary in cases of rape or incest, *Seventeen* is upholding the belief that abortions are a question of individual morality.

*Seventeen*, a magazine whose target demographic is teen girls, could be utilized as a safe and supportive environment for teen sexual and reproductive health. Instead, it chose to provide the most basic facts without showing explicit support or guidance to its readers. According to Loretta Ross, even when the law, the church, the government, and “moralistic pronouncements” oppose women’s reproductive rights, women “tend to make the decision about whether or not to use birth control or abortion, or to parent, for themselves” (Ross, 2016, p. 55). However, women and teen girls need support from any and all organizations that support reproductive justice. By not explicitly showing its support, *Seventeen* magazine is providing a reproductive injustice framework to its readers and frames teen sexuality as a question of individual morality. But what if a teen chooses to have sex and becomes pregnant? Does *Seventeen* magazine think teen parenting is a better option than having an abortion?

### 3.1.3 *Pregnant and Parenting Teens*

Pregnant and parenting teens walk around their homes, their schools, and their communities with every person knowing they have decided to have sex. Conservative adults are uncomfortable knowing and acknowledging that teens have sex, equating pregnant and parenting teens with individual immorality. Often, these conservative adults want pregnant and parenting teens to be hidden for fear that other students will make the same mistake. For example, according to Wanda Pillow, some schools routinely refer pregnant students to alternative schools, rather than providing them with assistance and support at their current school (Pillow, p. 67). Pillow writes, “discourses of contamination justify removing the pregnant or mothering student from the school setting based on the fear that her sexual immorality will spread to other students” (Pillow, p. 67). *Seventeen* upholds these discourses of contamination and further invisibilizes pregnant and parenting teens by not including their experiences in the magazine’s content. Since teen mothers already face exclusion and barriers at school and home, teen magazines should be a space where pregnant and parenting teens can find refuge and community. By not providing support for pregnant and parenting teens, *Seventeen* magazine creates more stigma and shame, further ostracizing them, creating more barriers, and deeming them immoral. *Seventeen* mentions teen pregnancy in two more articles but fails to offer any resources, guidance, or comfort.

In this research, *Seventeen* magazine frames teen pregnancy as an issue of individual teen responsibility rather than a collective, communal duty of caregivers and educators to provide information and support. In an article mentioned earlier in this chapter from 2017, Leslie Diaz, a teen reader, convinced her school to provide proper, comprehensive sex education. In this article, Diaz says that the county she lives in has one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the state

and some of her family members were teen moms. Diaz goes on to say, “Whenever I see pregnant classmates, I think, Wow, the education system really failed them. The issue felt personal to me, and I wanted to fight for my community” (Stanley, p. 16). While Diaz blames the system rather than the individual, as she should, *Seventeen*, provides no follow-up education or information for its readers who may be pregnant or parenting. Pillow argues that schools, educational leaders, researchers, and policymakers remain silent about teen pregnancy because it is a “highly politicized, moral, sexual issue” (Pillow, p. 79). Instead of telling its readers how they could also get sex education at their schools or find ways to access contraception or other sexual health resources in their communities, *Seventeen* remains silent.

At the end of this article, *Seventeen* promotes the new TLC docuseries, *Unexpected*, which follows teen couples who are pregnant and parenting. The magazine provides quotes from teen moms about how hard their life is now that they are parents. One of the characters from the show, Lexus, age sixteen says, “It’s really stressful... Hopefully seeing my struggles will make people want to practice safe sex” (Stanley, p. 16). While it is important to provide real stories about the challenges of teen parenting, these teens need support from their communities, not further ostracization. In this dataset, *Seventeen* does not explicitly, or even implicitly, advocate for its teen readers who may be pregnant or parenting. *Seventeen* does not provide any resources, support, information, or tools, to ensure that teens who are pregnant or parenting can have children in a safe and healthy environment. By showing its lack of support, *Seventeen* is making teen pregnancy and parenting an issue of individual responsibility and individual morality rather than the responsibility of the government and the school board.

Much like school policies and school officials, *Seventeen* magazine does not take any accountability for preventing teen pregnancy or for supporting teens who choose to parent. Title



IX, a federal civil rights law, places rules and regulations on the discrimination of teen parents in the classroom. However, many pregnant and parenting students still experience hardships in their educational support and success. According to Pillow, some State Boards of Education treat pregnant and parenting teens as if they are a student with a cold that is “temporary, not serious,” and contagious, rather than something that will affect the student long term (Pillow, p. 74). The idea that pregnancy is like a cold reinforces the idea of individual responsibility, making it the student's responsibility to catch up with her schooling, “rather than the school's responsibility to implement policies to standardize and protect the rights of the pregnant/mothering student” (Pillow, p. 75). *Seventeen* magazine upholds these beliefs by remaining silent, normalizing the narrative that it is the teen girls' individual responsibility not to get pregnant, rather than the government's responsibility, or even the magazine's responsibility, to provide teens with information on how to prevent unwanted pregnancies or how to parent safely. The three magazine articles that mention pregnant or parenting teens create the belief that teen pregnancy occurs only because of rape or incest, naming teen pregnancy as an act of male violence and female victimization.

### **3.2 Sexuality as Violence and Victimization**

Government programs, classroom curricula, and parents or guardians often teach girls and women how to avoid violent male predators while simultaneously not teaching boys and men how to avoid being violent male predators. Women and girls are advised on how to dress, how to act, and how to always be aware of their surroundings, promoting the notion that women and girls must always be in control of their own bodies. On the other hand, boys and men are given no responsibility for controlling their bodies or their actions. This same notion of self-

control is upheld in the belief that it is the woman's responsibility to avoid unwanted pregnancies or STIs by taking birth control or by always making sure you are having sex with the "right" guy. Michell Fine argues that sex education classrooms that emphasize abstinence education and "saying no" teaches teen girls that they are victims of male desire. Fine writes, "To avoid being victimized, females learn to defend themselves against disease, pregnancy, and 'being used'" (Fine, p. 32).

In this dataset, *Seventeen* magazine fails to address inequities in race, or even address race at all, in sexual assault and sexual violence cases amongst youth. Women of color are more likely to experience sexual assault than white women and Native American women experience sexual assault "more than twice that of other women" (Ross and Solinger, p. 154). Reproductive justice acknowledges the racial disparities in sexual violence and fights for the autonomy of women to make informed decisions about their bodies. This dataset of *Seventeen* magazine, on the other hand, constructs sex, sexuality, and reproductive health as acts of male violence and victimization.

### ***3.2.1 Pregnancy as Female Victimization of Male Violence***

In worldwide stories of love, war, and daily encounters, women are too often named as survivors of violent men. In this research, *Seventeen* magazine upholds the narrative that teen girls are victims of teen boy violence by publishing horrific stories of rape and incest. Afrosexology, a Black women-led organization, agrees that American culture upholds this narrative. By providing guided messages about the gendered ways we are socialized to behave, Afrosexology seeks to dismantle systems of patriarchy and white supremacy, empowering Black women to explore their sexual liberation. In an Instagram post, Afrosexology names seven ways

in which we are socialized to be sexually assaulted and to be sexual assaulters. Afrosexology states,

Those of us who are raised and socialized to be feminine are given messages since childhood to be polite, not to be too aggressive, to follow directions, and to follow the lead of men. As we grow, we are told that boys who are mean to us like us, that men can't control themselves sexually, that men are violent, that sex is something we owe to men. (Afrosexology\_)

These gendered messages promote the narrative that sexuality is violence and victimization. In four articles from 2004, *Seventeen* magazine portrays teen pregnancy as female victimization of male violence by only sharing stories of pregnant teens as a result of rape or incest.

In the issues reviewed, *Seventeen* magazine upholds the narrative that boys and men are unable to control their violent, sexual urges around girls and women. In February 2004, *Seventeen* published an article titled "Sisters in Need," which I mentioned in chapter two, that shared stories of three teen girls around the globe who are survivors of sexual assault. In one story, a nineteen-year-old from Oklahoma, Shannon, often found herself in unhealthy relationships with violent men. Shannon started having sex when she was fourteen years old; at some point she was molested by a friend's father; and by sixteen, she "purposely got pregnant" (Ensler, p. 77). The author writes, "But the baby's father left after four months. She married someone else, and he regularly choked her, put out cigarettes on her, and beat her, once for an entire day" (Ensler, p. 77). While it is important to share stories of teen girls who have experienced domestic violence and sexual assault, these are the only stories of teen relationships and teen pregnancy that we see in *Seventeen* magazine that year. By providing stories of teen relationships and teen pregnancy that only name men as violent predators, the magazine teaches teen girls that by avoiding sex they can avoid violence. According to Fine, "These [typical] views assume that as long as females avoid premarital sexual relations with men, victimization can be avoided" (Fine, p. 32). Without sharing other background information on Shannon's life

or why she chose to get pregnant and parent at such a young age, *Seventeen* portrays teen pregnancy as the result of the victimization of sexual abuse. By not sharing any stories of teen pregnancy that involve healthy relationships with men, *Seventeen* is portraying boys and young men as violent abusers.

By only sharing stories about teen pregnancy as a result of sexual violence, *Seventeen* magazine upholds the narrative that men are inherently violent and unable to control their sexuality. In the November 2004 issue, an article titled “Horror in Suburbia” tells a story about a young girl, Hope, and the trauma she experiences as a young teen. At a young age, Hope’s mother dies from AIDs, and from here, her life continues to get worse. Almost immediately in this story, the author tells the readers about Hope’s traumatic life, writing that Hope’s middle school teacher suspected she may be abused and possibly pregnant. The author goes on to say that Hope had been adopted by a new family, whom she calls her “step-family,” and that her stepbrother had begun to secretly molest her at night. The story then provides graphic detail about the abuse she experienced by her stepbrother. Eventually, Hope gets adopted by another family, but she continued to deal with long-term mental and physical illnesses as a result of his abuse. While the author never confirms whether Hope was pregnant, *Seventeen* provides the readers with the narrative that pregnancy can be prevented so long as teen girls avoid relationships with men, who are inherently violent.

*Seventeen* upholds the narrative that teen girls only need contraception for preventing pregnancy as a result of male violence, rather than because young women desire sex. In the 2004 article, “Choose Your Leader,” the article writes, “Bush is pro-life and opposes abortion except in cases of rape, incest, or a threat to the life of the mother” (“Choose Your...”, p. 144). By providing readers with Bush’s pro-life views on abortions without explicitly stating how pro-life

is harmful to teen girls and women, *Seventeen* is upholding the belief that abortion is only necessary because of violent men who commit rape or incest. In this dataset, *Seventeen* magazine typically frames sex and contraception as a defense mechanism from violent men, not as a choice that a young woman makes because she, too, is a sexual being. Fine writes, “Female adolescent sexuality is represented as a moment of victimization in which the dangers of heterosexuality for adolescent women... are prominent” (Fine, p. 31).

In the April 2004 issue of *Seventeen*, an article titled “Emergency Contraception,” mentioned earlier in this chapter, provides information about the morning-after pill. In this article, the author frames the need for emergency contraception (E.C.) as something that is only needed due to extreme cases, such as sexual assault, rather than something that can be used as an alternative contraception method for teens who choose to have sex. Cassandra, age nineteen, was prescribed E.C. at a rape clinic after a boy she knew unknowingly put the date-rape pill in her drink. Cassandra says “They did all kinds of tests, which proved that I had been penetrated... I took E.C. because I felt betrayed. He had taken so much away-I had planned to stay a virgin until my wedding night. Now I've lost that” (Stillman, p. 88). This story perpetuates the idea that sexuality is violence and victimization, rather than something that people choose to do outside of heterosexuality and/or marriage.

In these stories of male violence and female victimization, *Seventeen* maintains and creates fear of teen sexuality, upholding the narrative that positively talking about teen sexuality will create more sexual beings. According to Fine, “Sexuality as violence presumes that there is a casual relationship between official silence about sexuality and a decrease in sexual activity- therefore, by not teaching about sexuality, adolescent sexual behavior will not occur,” (Fine, p. 31). However, the silencing of teen sexuality and the teaching of sex as acts of male violence, do

not result in a decline in teens having sex. Contraception is not needed solely to prevent pregnancy from rape or incest. Reproductive justice activists and organizations have been pushing for “legal, effective, and accessible contraception and abortion... [which are] crucial to women's reproductive safety and dignity” (Ross and Solinger, p. 55). Women and teen girls have sex for their own desire and pleasure and continue to fight for their rights to choose whether, when, why, and how to use contraceptive methods.

### 3.3 The Missing Discourse of Desire

In the content reviewed, *Seventeen* magazine, like public school sex education, is missing the discourse of desire and pleasure. By focusing solely on pregnancy prevention and STI prevention, teen sexuality is presented as dangerous and taboo. Fine poses the question,

If sex education were designed primarily to prevent victimization but not to prevent exploration of desire, wouldn't there be more discussions of both the pleasures and relatively fewer risk of disease or pregnancy associated with lesbian relationships and protected sexual intercourse, or the risk-free pleasures of masturbation and fantasy? (Fine, p. 42)

As Fine suggests, pleasure-centered sex education both promotes and supports risk-free sexual activity. However, *Seventeen* decenters the various pleasures that can exist within sex and sexuality for teen girls. Male pleasure and desire are centered while female sexuality and desire are unexplored, hiding the natural functions and physique of the female body. Instead of guiding teen girls to openly explore their sexuality in a positive, fun, and safe way, *Seventeen* magazine portrays sex and the female body as something to fear and hide, rather than something to love and explore.

### 3.3.1 *The Fear of STIs*

By instilling the narrative that having sex is solely correlated with contracting an STI, *Seventeen* magazine portrays teen sexuality as something dangerous and unpleasurable. In the popular teen movie, *Mean Girls*, released in 2004, the high school P.E. teacher, coach Carr, briefly teaches a sex education class in which he convinces his students not to have sex. Coach Carrs says, “At your age, you’re going to be having a lot of urges. You’re gonna wanna take off your clothes and touch each other. But if you do touch each other, you will get chlamydia... and die” (*Mean Girls*). While this movie scene was meant to be a satirical take on public school sex education, coach Carr represents the conservative religious mindset of the dangers of youth sexuality. Conservative school officials often believe that teaching abstinence is the only appropriate form of sex education, fearing that including information on sex and contraception will increase teen sexuality. However, Fine uncovers a correlation between positive attitudes about sexuality and contraceptive use, writing, “By not teaching about sexuality, or by teaching sex-negative attitudes, schools apparently will not forestall sexual activity, but may well discourage responsible contraception” (Fine, p. 31). *Seventeen* magazine upholds the narrative of youth sexuality as something to fear by only associating sex with negative outcomes rather than the possibility of desire and pleasure.

In the content reviewed, *Seventeen* magazine frames sex as something that only ends in the negative repercussions of pregnancy or STIs, rather than something that can be enjoyable. In three articles from 2004, “The FACTS About Cold Sores,” “17 Sex Survey: Contraception,” and “Your Sex Dilemmas- Resolved,” *Seventeen* breaks down statistics, information, and tips on how to avoid STIs by promoting the use of condoms and other contraceptive methods. All three articles provide facts and statistics about contraceptive use and STIs and even provide website

links for getting more information on contraception. While it is very important to provide teens with resources and tools to have sex safely and responsibly, by only discussing sex in a negative light, *Seventeen* is supporting the conservative heteronormative belief that sex is solely for procreation rather than pleasure. By upholding abstinence as the standard, teens who choose to have sex are othered. In the article, “17 Sex Survey: Contraception,” Rachel, age seventeen, tells the magazine that she does not have to be concerned with the consequences of sex, such as STIs and pregnancy, because she chooses abstinence. Rachel writes, “I never have to worry about STDs and have never had a pregnancy scare because I use abstinence. My mom was 19 when she had me. I never want to be in that position and know that I never will be. Abstinence is my surefire insurance!” (“17 Sex...”, p. 119). While abstinence is a great option for teens who want to wait until marriage to have sex, some teens may want to explore their sexuality before they get married, and some teens may choose to never get married. By including Rachel’s message without providing any messages about why teens might choose to have sex, such as the desire for connection or desire for pleasure, *Seventeen* is naming teen sexuality as something to avoid and to fear.

Some teen girls have a desire for sex and for experiencing sexual pleasure; however, these teens’ stories are completely missing from the text. Any time youth sexuality is named, fear of pregnancy or STIs becomes the focal point of the topic. Fine argues that desire and pleasure are silenced in public school sex education, writing, “When spoken, it is tagged with reminders of ‘consequences’-emotional, physical, moral, reproductive and/or financial” (Fine, p. 33). *Seventeen* upholds this argument by not addressing the fact that some teen girls may desire sex and can experience pleasurable sex. In the article, “The FACTS About Cold Sores,” *Seventeen* provides its readers with factual information about what cold sores are, how they can be



prevented, and what the signs and symptoms of cold sores are. Cold sores are developed from herpes virus 1, also known as oral herpes, which is very common and can be contracted through kissing and sharing drink cups. *Seventeen* writes, “Oral sex can transfer the virus to the genitals (as can touching a sore, then touching your genitals). Oral sex can also transfer genital herpes (herpes simplex virus type 2) to the mouth” (“The FACTS...”, p. 44).

While providing teens with facts about STIs is important in reducing the contraction of and spread of STIs, conservative educators often use glaring messages and images as scare tactics to promote abstinence. However, by only discussing teen sexuality as something that results in negative consequences, STI prevention messaging can instead create feelings of shame and guilt. Jenny Higgins and Jennifer Hirsch, professors of gender and sexuality, warn that “negative messages about sexuality can undermine, rather than promote, effective condom use” (Higgins and Hirsch, p. 240). By creating a narrative of fear around teen sexuality, *Seventeen* magazine constructs sex as unpleasurable and undesirable for the teen girl. By upholding the narrative that sex is something to avoid *Seventeen* magazine constructs youth sexuality and the teen body as something to contain and hide, taking away any discourse of desire.

### ***3.3.2 Periods and Body Hair as Undesirable***

Periods and body hair are two natural parts of a teen girl’s maturing body. However, women and girls are often shamed and made to feel embarrassed by these normal bodily functions. Period shaming teaches girls and women to hide their periods, Krisi Pahr writes, and to “speak of them in whispers like Voldemort, ‘that which must not be named.’” (Pahr). Parents and teachers can inadvertently period shame by not allowing frequent bathroom use at school, not talking about periods, and not educating young boys about periods. The belief that periods

should be secret and hidden creates and upholds the misogynistic belief that women's natural bodies are undesirable; "It's detrimental to their mental health, body image, and self-worth, and... can have a long-lasting impact" (Pahr). A similar form of shame happens with teen girls and their natural body hair. Social media and the beauty industry have convinced women and young girls that they must have beautiful, thick hair on their heads, but must simultaneously be smooth and hairless everywhere else. Instead of providing their teen readers with confidence, *Seventeen* magazine goes along with the narrative that periods and body hair are embarrassing and shameful.

At a young age, teen girls begin experimenting with ways to look beautiful and sexy. By changing and morphing their natural bodies into something that is attractive to boys, these girls express a "desire for male attention" (Fine, p. 36). Teen girls and women express this desire for attention through their clothing, hairstyles, makeup regimes, and by shaving their body hair. In a 2004 letter from the editor, *Seventeen* magazine's editor at the time, Atoosa Rubenstein, jokes about how her mom planned to keep her a virgin in high school by not allowing her to shave her legs until her senior year. Rubenstein writes,

It worked. Not only did I avoid the whole 'friends with benefits' thing-but I barely had any friends period! (just teasing...) The fact is that Mom felt the quicker guys (flirting, dating) became a part of my life, the quicker I'd fall off the path to success. So she saw it as her mission to keep them away. (Rubenstein, p. 55)

By publishing this letter, the editor perpetuates the belief that women must shave their legs to be sexually desirable to men. Rubenstein's joke about not shaving to "keep the boys away," upholds the social construction that girls and women must maintain certain body standards to appease male desire rather than constructing their own ideals of beauty.

Teen girls and women are often upheld to unrealistic beauty standards that teen boys and men don't have to confine to. Fine argues that young women are taught to position themselves

within the sexual self-interest and desire of men rather than finding sexual self-interest and desire within themselves. Fine writes, “If we re-situate the adolescent woman in a rich and empowering educational context, she develops a sense of self which is sexual as well as intellectual” (Fine, p. 42-43). *Seventeen* upholds the belief that teen girls must continue to conform their bodies and minds for male desire and pleasure rather than learning and creating their own sexual autonomy, desire, and pleasure.

Young women and teen girls are encouraged to hide their normal bodily functions, such as the long-standing rumor that girls don’t poop, to maintain their attractiveness to men. *Seventeen* upholds this narrative that teens should hide their bodily functions by publishing multiple “embarrassing stories” about periods. In three different articles, teen girls write to the magazine about an embarrassing moment relating to their period. In these stories, the girls either simply mention the word period, accidentally, or they start their period near their boy crush. These stories uphold the narrative that periods are “gross” and should be hidden from society, especially from men and boys. Additionally, these stories uphold the belief that women’s biological processes are undesirable and that women must always maintain their desirability to men. In one story from the February 2004 issue, one teen girl accidentally says the word “period” to her crush and expresses that she is mortified. The anonymous writer says that she finally got up the nerve to talk to her crush and she walked up to him and said “I like the project you did on periods,” and to that, he responded, “I didn't do a project on periods!” (“How Embarrassing!”, February 2004, p. 24). After that, she says they never got together, and she blames it on the period talk.

In a second story, another anonymous teen writes to the magazine about a time during a family Christmas event in which her period leaked through her pants on a white carpet in front of

her boyfriend. Her cousin yelled, “Ew, gross!” and when she came back from the bathroom everyone was “gathered around the spot, discussing the best way to get the stain out of the carpet” (“How Embarrassing!”, April 2004, p. 44). In the third story, a teen girls crush asked to borrow a pen in biology class. She writes, “I reached into my backpack, but I was so flustered that I ended up grabbing a tampon and handing it to him!” (Traumarama, p. 105). Once she realized she gave her crush a tampon instead of a pen, she was extremely embarrassed and ran out of the room as soon as class was over. All three of these “embarrassing stories” are upholding negative feelings of shame and uneasiness for teen girls regarding their periods. Not once in this dataset did *Seventeen* provide any source of comfort or normalization of periods for teen girls who either wrote or read these “embarrassing stories”.

*Seventeen* magazine creates and maintains “period shame” for young girls by supporting the belief that periods should be kept secret from boys to maintain desire. However, by normalizing period talk, the narrative could change, and periods could become less shameful and embarrassing for teen girls. Pahr writes, “A lack of education and plain-speaking about periods and the menstrual cycle leads to them becoming taboo subjects that aren’t discussed or widely understood even though half the population of the planet experiences them” (Pahr). The narrative that talking about periods and menstruation is taboo supports the misogynistic belief that the female body only exists for male desire. The female body and female desire for sex are hidden, subdued, and silenced allowing more space for male desire to be supported and maintained. Fine writes, “expressions of female voice, body, and sexuality are essentially inaudible when the dominant language and ways of viewing are male” (Fine, p. 34).

Additionally, public school sex education classes often uphold the belief that periods should be kept hidden from men by separating boys and girls when teaching basic reproductive

anatomy and biology. The boys' class focuses on erections and ejaculation while the girls' class focuses on periods and pregnancy. Peggy Orenstein asks, "Where is the discussion of girls' sexual development? When do we talk to girls about desire and pleasure? When do we explain the miraculous nuances of their anatomy?... No wonder boys' physical needs seem inevitable to teens while girls' are, at best, optional" (Orenstein, p. 52). Once again, girls' bodies are equated with fear, disgust, danger, and a lack of desire and pleasure while male bodies, desires, and pleasures are normalized and supported. Fine writes, "female desire and pleasure can gain expression only in the terrain already charted by men" (Fine, p. 34).

### 3.4 Conclusion

Reproductive justice, according to SisterSong, is "the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities" ("Reproductive Justice"). The content in *Seventeen* magazine, on the other hand, provides a reproductive injustice lens to their readers as it does not uphold the principles of women's reproductive rights. In the issues reviewed, *Seventeen* frames sex education, contraception, and abortions as moral decisions that are only necessary because of male violence, framing female victims of rape and incest as the only women who have a legitimate claim to utilize reproductive services. *Seventeen* upholds the narrative that body hair and periods are embarrassing, undesirable, and should be hidden from boys and men. Reshaping Michell Fine's four discourses of sexuality, *Seventeen* magazine creates and maintains sexuality as individual morality, as violence and victimization, and as lacking desire and pleasure in their 2004 and 2017 issues.

Sex education, emergency contraception, abortions, teen pregnancy, and teen parenting are all questions of one's individual morality, according to this dataset *Seventeen* magazine. While sex education should be used to inform youth about their sexual and reproductive health, rights, and services, conservative policymakers instill fears that sex education creates immoral sexual subjects. *Seventeen* frames emergency contraception and abortion only as something that is necessary in extreme cases. By not taking an explicit stance on abortions, *Seventeen* emphasizes the belief that abortion rights are a question of one's morality, rather than a human right. Additionally, the stories of pregnant and parenting teens are almost inexistent, except in circumstances of rape and incest, framing teen pregnancy as an issue of morality, male violence, and female victimization. Lastly, female sexual desire and pleasure are missing from *Seventeen* magazine as they uphold the narrative that girls must hide their natural bodily functions from boys to preserve male desire.

The June 2022 Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v Wade* stigmatizes sex outside of marital procreation, naming youth sexuality as taboo, a question of individual morality, and an outcome of male violence and female victimization. Further, the court is deeming women as second-class citizens, unable to make moral decisions over our own bodies. All women's lives will be negatively affected by the overturning of *Roe v Wade*; and more stigma, shame, and fear around youth sexuality will likely develop. Girls' and women's bodily autonomy has been stripped away, leaving little to no room for choosing their own fate. This Supreme Court decision exacerbates male control over the female body by enforcing strict regulations as to whether, when, where, and how women and teen girls have abortions. Additionally, states may choose to enforce parental consent laws, which will create even more barriers for teens to seek abortion care safely and economically. Some teens may fear that telling their parents about their

decision to seek an abortion may cause them to get kicked out of their house or increase physical abuse (“Laws Restricting Teenagers’ Access...”, para 2). Many states will not make exceptions for cases of rape, incest, or sexual assault, and according to Eleanor Klibanoff, abortion bans may increase harm to domestic violence victims. Klibanoff writes, “Domestic violence victims are among the least likely to be able to travel out of state or safely self-manage a medication abortion at home, leaving them no choice but to carry a pregnancy to term” (Klibanoff, para 15). By not supporting teens who choose to seek abortion care, *Seventeen* magazine further creates stigma, shame, and fear around youth sexuality, providing reproductive injustice to its readers.

## 4 CONCLUSION

Nearly two decades after my coming-of-age years in the early 2000s, the digital world has expanded into something I never could have imagined. Today's teenagers have access to a plethora of dating apps, image and video sharing apps, and other social media platforms directly at their fingertips. New knowledges about sex, sexuality, and reproductive health can be learned and shared instantaneously and messaging platforms can be used to communicate questions, wants, and desires of sex and sexuality with each other. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, communication via social media platforms amongst teens has increased, making communication about sex and sexuality even easier and more prevalent than before (Hamilton, et al.). According to Hamilton et al., "Research suggests that adolescents very frequently use social media to communicate with romantic and sexual partners—both general communication... and sexuality specifically" (Hamilton, et al., p. 7).

Additionally, with an increase in LGBTQ+ representation on social media platforms, more teens today identify as LGBTQ+ than in previous generations. Meredith Deliso reports that nearly 15.9% of Generation Z identify as LGBTQ+ compared to 9.1% of Millennials and 3.8% of Generation X (Deliso, para. 5). Today's teens are feeling more confident in expressing their sexuality outside of heteronormativity. Moreover, organizations like the Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Power and Potential (GCAPP) and Advocates for Youth are working hard to support teens in their sexual autonomy by providing medically accurate, LGBTQ+ inclusive, age-appropriate, sex education resources and tools for teens and sex educators. With the overturn of *Roe v Wade*, comprehensive sex education is more important than ever. This research provides sex educators with information as to how social media platforms may influence social constructions of sex and sexuality.



In my introduction chapter, I demonstrate how U.S. public school sex education has shifted within the past one hundred years based on political debates within each time frame. In 1988, Michelle Fine uncovers four discourses of public-school sex education which I find are reinforced in this dataset of *Seventeen* magazine. In chapter two, I examine how *Seventeen* magazine constructs the ideal teen girl as a cisgender heterosexual virgin, invisibilizing LGBTQ+ teens. Finally, in chapter three, I explore how *Seventeen* disempowers its readers in their decision to have sex, use contraception, have abortions, and/or choose to parent. In all three of these chapters, I name teen girl pleasure and desire as a missing discourse in *Seventeen* magazine.

In this study, I asked how does *Seventeen* magazine present discourses of sex, sexuality, and reproductive health to its readers? During the years 2004 and 2017, *Seventeen* magazine creates and maintains heteronormativity which silences and erases LGBTQ+ individuals. This narrative is further supported in Medley-Rath's research on *Seventeen* magazine between 1982 and 2001, in which she argues that heterosexuality dominates *Seventeen* magazine. By providing heteronormative definitions of sex and virginity loss, Medley-Rath states, "*Seventeen* maintains heteronormative, sexist virginity scripts for its readers" (Medley-Rath, p. 36) By shaping virginity as the acceptable norm, teens who choose to have sex are interrogated with fear, stigma, and shame of pregnancy and STIs. Additionally, in this dataset, *Seventeen* magazine and the conservative right frame youth sexuality as dangerous, subscribing to the belief that boys and men are inherently violent. Audrey Hickey argues that magazine scripts about sexuality are harmful to teen girls, stating, "They [teen girls] adopt the opinions that boys are sexually aggressive, that females should be passive, and that engaging in sex is a major risk" (Hickey, p. 74). On the other hand, *Seventeen* shows little to no support for teen girls who choose to have sex. These teens are framed as making bad, immoral decisions and therefore, are not supported

when they need access to contraception or abortion services. Reproductive justice supports everyone in making their own decisions about their bodily autonomy. However, by restricting information, resources, and support for sexually active teens, this dataset of *Seventeen* magazine does not provide a reproductive justice lens to its readers.

Next, I asked: what are *Seventeen* magazine writers saying about reproductive justice? I found that *Seventeen* magazine did not explicitly name reproductive justice in the issues reviewed. Instead, the magazine frames reproductive rights and services, such as contraception, birth control, and abortions, as resources that are not needed by most of its readers. *Seventeen* upholds the conservative belief that the only women and girls that have a legitimate claim to reproductive rights are girls and women who have been victims of male violence. Further, there is no discourse on race or the medicalized racism that women of color face in the healthcare systems in the United States. Last, I asked, how does *Seventeen* magazine present sexual pleasure and desire? In the eight issues reviewed, *Seventeen* only mentions pleasure and desire within girlhood in one article. However, throughout all of the issues reviewed, the magazine suggests that pleasure and desire for boys and men is inherent and acceptable.

Policymakers continue to pass laws and bills that control the sexual and reproductive autonomy of women, teen girls, and LGBTQ people. For example, the overturning of *Roe v Wade* on June 24, 2022, will create even more barriers for individuals to access safe and affordable abortions, further creating increased stigma and shame for women and teen girls who want to end pregnancies. Additionally, the implementation of Florida's "Parental Rights in Education Bill," also known as the "Don't Say Gay Bill," which was signed in March 2022, bans teachers in kindergarten through third grade from including sexuality and gender education in

their classroom. Both recent policy changes further uphold Fine's discourses of sexuality found in public school sex education.

By sharing how the 2004 and 2017 issues of *Seventeen* magazine lacks explicit support for their teen readers' sexual and reproductive autonomy, scholars and educators can better understand how public discourses of sex, sexuality, and reproductive health directly impact youth. In a 2008 study of youth sexuality, researchers found that teen birth rates in the U.S. were four to eight times more likely than in Germany and the Netherlands (Hickey, p. 75). In the United States, parents, teen magazines, and other mainstream media sources frame teen girl sexuality with a negative connotation, emphasizing the risk of STIs and pregnancy. In Western European countries, on the other hand, youth sexuality is normalized. Audrey Hickey suggests that positive messaging about youth sexuality might contribute to the low teen birth rates in western European countries. Hickey writes,

Western European parents also reflect dominant messages about sexuality. Adults view teen sex as a normal part of development .... Consequently, teens do not have to hide their sexual activity from their parents, and they feel comfortable discussing contraceptives with them. (Hickey, p. 75)

Creating a cultural shift in the United States which normalizes youth sexuality would contribute to a decrease in STI and pregnancy rates amongst teens. By analyzing *Seventeen* magazine, researchers and sex educators can better understand what role social media plays in the social constructions of teen girl sexuality.

Since writing this thesis, I have found that my research does not encompass the totality of *Seventeen* magazine. In fact, I found that today's online version of *Seventeen* magazine published at least four articles expressing their explicit support for the protection of abortion access since the overturn of *Roe v Wade*. Additionally, I found that in 2022, *Seventeen* published at least one article showcasing the celebrations of pride month for LGBTQ+ individuals and

communities in June. While I have not done further research to dive deep into the analysis of *Seventeen* magazine today, it appears that some of its viewpoints on sex, sexuality, and reproductive health may have shifted for the better.

Future research must be done to explore how contemporary teen magazines and social media sites are responding to recent changes in national policies and laws. With the overturning of *Roe v Wade* and the implementation of the Don't Say Gay Bill," legal experts fear that other human rights will soon be taken away. For example, Alejandra O'Connell-Domenech suggests that the rights to contraception, same-sex marriage, interracial marriage, and control of medical treatment may be stripped away. O'Connell-Domenech writes, "Striking down the constitutional right to an abortion could open the door for states to pass laws both banning abortion and restricting birth control, incorrectly conflating the two and branding contraceptives as abortion-causing medication – which they are not" (O'Connell-Domenech, sec. 2, para 1). It is the responsibility of sex educators to keep teens informed on how these changes to our constitutional rights will personally affect them.

In the United States today, sex education in public schools is currently being taught by health and P.E. teachers, school nurses, and/or outside organizations (Wood, sec. 4, para. 1). According to Sarah Wood, "the quality of sex education... depends largely on the state and district you live in" (Wood, sec. 2, para. 3). Sex education curriculum can vary widely within each district depending on what the parents and school board decide (Corley). Alison Macklin, the policy and advocacy director of The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), states that thirty years of research supports how comprehensive sex education allows for people to have healthier sex lives. Macklin says, for people who grow up with sex education, "you see less incidences of sexual assaults and sexual violence, ... you see

more inclusion and the feelings of worth, you see more positive mental health outcomes, especially for LGBTQ+ individuals” (Corley). While public school teachers and nurses are the main sex educators for our youth, parents, community leaders, and outside organizations are also sex educators. As sex educators, it is our responsibility to provide medically accurate, pleasure-centered, inclusive sex education to support bodily autonomy and healthy relationships for youth.

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