

## ‘Get Fierce in 5!’: Depictions of the ‘Healthy’ Girl Body in *Seventeen* Magazine, 2016 to 2017

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Published: September 1, 2024

### ABSTRACT

*Seventeen* Magazine, the longest running magazine for adolescent girls in the United States, reinforces problematic images of the ‘healthy’ adolescent girl by routinely featuring slim celebrities and models, all of whom adhere to a desirable body ideal of hegemonic beauty. Misleading and contradictory narratives of postfeminist, neoliberal empowerment include telling girl readers to love their bodies while simultaneously portraying the slim body as preferable. Additionally, most issues of *Seventeen* feature a diet-themed section, thereby encouraging food restriction and the surveillance of eating. Findings from this feminist content analysis of the magazine from 2016 to 2017 challenge *Seventeen*’s stated mission of ‘celebrating real girls with our social-first approach, inviting them into the conversation and engaging them in real experience as they navigate major milestones’ (n.d., n.p.)

**Keywords:** fitness, health, neoliberalism, postfeminism, teen magazines, *Seventeen* Magazine

### INTRODUCTION

In this article I conduct a feminist content analysis of the USA teen magazine *Seventeen* for the years 2016 and 2017, focussing on themes of body and health. Despite *Seventeen*’s online claims, particularly since 2012, to promote body positivity, decrease photoshopped and other aestheticised images, and increase the diversity of representation by ‘celebrating real girls’ and the ‘major milestones’ they navigate (*Seventeen* media kit<sup>1</sup>), my findings reveal that little has changed in magazine’s presentation of the ‘healthy’ adolescent girl body. The construction and reconstruction of—and obsession with—the predominantly white, slim, fit body as ‘healthy,’ remains the focus of this section and is presented as the only acceptable body type for adolescent girl readers. This idealised image is further complicated by *Seventeen* adding layers of postfeminist empowerment discourse by encouraging readers to love their bodies while simultaneously bombarding teen girl readers with images of homogenised beauty and editorials stressing the necessity of self-discipline, self-surveillance, and self-maintenance. According to Gill (2007), these opposing messages ‘emphasise[s] the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes’ that include ‘the shift from objectification to subjectification... a focus upon individualism, choice, and empowerment...[and] an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference’ (149). These themes, Gill argues, ‘are structured by, stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to “race” and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability as well as gender’ (149). A review of existing literature shows a gap in how the white, slim, able-bodied teen girl is presented as the consummate ‘healthy’ body in *Seventeen* magazine. This study calls attention to this absence.

A large body of research (see Grabe, Ward, and Hyde, 2008; Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2004; Riebock and Bae, 2013; Tylka and Sabik, 2010) has examined the relationship between mass media exposure and adolescent girls’ and young adult women’s body perceptions and has found that adolescent girls may be uniquely impacted by online and print media content. Furthermore, studies have found that media engagement is associated negatively with body satisfaction and positively with negative eating behaviours (see Ferguson, 2013; Grabe, Ward, and Hyde, 2008; Levine and Murnen, 2009). Other studies have found that compared to adolescent boys, adolescent girls

<sup>1</sup> The original *Seventeen* Media Kit, that had neither author nor date, has been removed and replaced. <http://www.seventeenmediakit.com/r5/home.asp>.

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report lower body satisfaction and internalised body ideals to a greater degree, (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2004) and may continue to do so throughout their development (Daniels, 2009a).

Studies focused specifically on teen magazines, including their adherence to traditional western norms of femininity and beauty as cultural truths that are internalised by adolescent girls, found that teen magazines regularly featured advertising and self-help articles and quizzes that instruct adolescent girls how to improve themselves physically (Duke and Kreshel, 1998; Evans 1991; Pierce, 1990, 1993). Such 'blue prints for living' (Duffy and Gotcher, 1996: 33) and 'introductory handbooks in the lifelong continuum of women's "how to" guides' (Massoni, 2004: 51) exploit and exacerbate adolescent girls' anxieties about their bodies and can serve as a source of 'fear, insecurity, competitiveness and even panic' (McRobbie, 2000: 70). McRobbie (1991) further argues that women's magazines occupy a privileged position in that they 'define and shape the woman's world, spanning every stage from early childhood to old age' (83), noting that there are no male equivalents to these products. Men's magazines, McRobbie states, tend to be based on leisure pursuits or hobbies, which implies that there is no 'sense of a natural or inevitable progression' lifecycle for men (83). In recent years, men's lifestyle print magazines have become more commonplace with publications such as *FHM*, *Men's Health*, and *GQ*, however, they are fewer in number as compared to women's magazines, and are generally not geared towards adolescent boys. Moreover, Rosalind Gill (2007) asserts that women's magazines and media 'stress upon . . . personal choice,' postfeminist notions of self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-discipline, where 'femininity has been portrayed as contingent—requiring constant anxious attention, work and vigilance,' (155), ideas that are regularly promoted in the health and fitness sections of *Seventeen* magazine.

More recent research studies examine the complicating layer of postfeminism that 'disdains feminist activism even as it relies on feminist gains and uses neoliberal and empowerment rhetoric to revivify traditional feminine appearance regimes' (Whitney, 2017: 353) and encourage consumerism (see also Mann, 2012). Azzarito (2018) posits that 'ideologies of individualism, self-determination and self-responsibility are at the core of the neoliberal configuration of "new femininities" working at both the micro and macro levels to produce a "neoliberal body" needed for success in contemporary global economies where the ideal white feminine body is presented as 'being a result of an endless investment in the discipline, maintenance and control of the body' (136). The adolescent girl body that is 'slim,' and 'lean,' as well as 'active' is, according to Azzarito (2018), 'symbolic of an appropriate style of new idealized feminine presentation, as well as emblematic of girls' self-management and compliance to the neoliberal agenda' (137). Health practices, fitness, and physical activity cultivate the girl body to be disciplined and compliant, thereby creating the neoliberal body that becomes a "metaphor for success, morality, and good citizenship" (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009: 38). Similarly, McClearn (2018) contends that postfeminist media culture valorises 'self-discipline through exercise and dieting,' while simultaneously 'promot[ing] the idea that women of all shapes and sizes may find contentment within themselves and their bodies' (46). *Seventeen* has adopted these contradictory and problematic narratives throughout the pages of the health and body sections of the magazine, as further discussed below.

My analysis builds on Ballentine and Ogle's (2005) 'The Making and Unmaking of Body Problems in *Seventeen Magazine*, 1992–2003' with a more specific focus on depictions of the adolescent girl body in the health and body section of the magazine. In their 2005 study, Ballentine and Ogle examined 266 body-related articles appearing in 132 editions of the magazine between 1992 and 2003, categorising them as the making and unmaking of body problems, respectively. The making of body problems included showing only tall, thin models over models who might be described as 'curvy.' This trend implies that to be seen as attractive, readers must achieve this ideal, and these ideals are reinforced when 'describing or constructing for readers a variety of body problems, or appearances that were to be avoided and distained' (209). The magazine then provides readers with ways to fix these "problems" by 'zap[ping]' arm flab, and 'stomach fluff,' so that their readers can 'be the girl they really want to be' (290). In this unmaking of body problems, readers are invited to try *Seventeen's* suggested workouts and diets to achieve the ideal *Seventeen* girl body. These two separate but parallel categories of editorial content conveyed to readers a contradictory message that is commonplace in *Seventeen* magazine—how to love your body, but also how to force it into adhering to narrowly defined, hegemonic ideas of white European beauty, all under the guise of health and fitness. Ballentine and Ogle posit that this content helped to

normalize the body as a locus of control, advising readers to undertake body management routines or to consume given body products and services in an attempt to rectify bodily woes. Second, content advised girls to stage resistance against dominant female beauty ideals, redefining cultural messages for personal relevance, as a means by which to unmake their body problems. (292)

These scholars define 'the body of desire' in *Seventeen* as 'smooth, trim, toned, tight, long, lean, flat, strong, young, sexy, healthy, clean and free of odour and certain types of hair' (Ballentine and Ogle, 2005: 290). To achieve this body of desire, *Seventeen* readers must spend time, money, and energy to achieve this ideal, thereby creating extensive body projects (Brumberg, 1997). The above definition is adopted for this essay when describing the

desirable and/or slim, fit, healthy body in this study. A survey of existing literature found that there are few studies that focus specifically on the health and fitness section of *Seventeen*, making an updated analysis of this segment an important area of inquiry and contribution to research.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

*Seventeen* was chosen for this study not only because it was the site of Ballentine and Ogle's 2005 study, but also because it is the longest running teen magazine in the United States. *Seventeen* was specifically marketed to teenage girls starting in 1944, and regularly featured a section of the magazine focused on health and fitness for many years. In addition, *Seventeen* was selected in order to assess the truth of its claims to increase diversity in the magazine, specifically the issues articulated in the April 2012 Change.org petition, submitted by thirteen-year-old Julia Bluhm, who called for the magazine to feature 'real girls,' arguing that photoshopped images have caused her and her peers to feel bad about their bodies (*HuffPost*, 2012, n.p.). In response to Bluhm's petition, then *Seventeen* editor-in-chief Ann Shoket met with Julia, had a 'great discussion' and stated that 'Julia left understanding that *Seventeen* celebrates girls for being their authentic selves, and that's how we present them. We feature real girls in our pages and there is no other magazine that highlights such a diversity of size, shape, skin tone and ethnicity' (*HuffPost*, 2012, n.p.). Later that year, Shoket stated that she and her team felt that they needed to be more 'public about their commitment' to being authentic, and created a Body Peace Treaty for the magazine staff, which was a 'list of vows on how we run things here to always make you feel amazing' (*HuffPost*, 2012, n.p.).

The materials examined in this study consist of the body and health sections in sixteen print issues of *Seventeen* magazine from December and January 2015/2016 to November/December 2017. The body and health sections contain approximately four pages of editorial content with two to four pages of product advertising for items such as tampons, deodorant, shaving gel, and make-up. Given the feminist perspective of my research, I employed a content analysis; according to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007), feminist researchers have used content analysis to 'explore a range of issues that are central to our understanding of gender and difference, as well as research aimed at social action . . . [to] explore issues that are central to women's lives' (234). Qualitative methods are often used in feminist research to position women and their experiences at the centre of inquiry and can, therefore, lead to social change and facilitate social justice for women (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007; Marshall and Rossman, 2006).

Following Lindlof and Taylor (2002) I used a two-phase data analytic technique of open and axial coding. I began with multiple readings of all the content in the body and health section of the selected issues of *Seventeen* magazine, including the advertisements, articles, and sub-articles in that section. From there I engaged in an open coding process to generate a list of recurring themes across the content in the body and health section. Sample codes addressed who was in the editorial, what activity they were participating in, the gender of the models/athletes, the copy accompanying the editorial (for example, words like 'empowerment,' 'fun,' 'fitness,' and 'health'), the products being sold, narratives of foods/diet/meal plans, and the physical size of the models. This open coding process required multiple iterations as I built my coding scheme. Next, I combined broader themes into more concise categories that addressed the relationships between fitness and health in the magazine such as faux empowerment and the importance of celebrity. This inductive approach yielded four themes directly from the data during the coding and analysis process. The four themes that emerged from this feminist content analysis included the slim and fit (white) body; the right kind of celebrity; faux empowerment; and diets, not riots.

### The Slim and Fit (White) Body

Out of the sixteen issues of *Seventeen* included in this study, twelve body and health sections featured pictures of models, celebrity trainers, or Fitstagrammers (Instagram fitness experts) on the opening page of the section. Importantly, only one health and body section (June/July 2016) featured a professional female athlete, suggesting that showcasing female athletes is not a priority for the magazine, as further discussed below.

Six of the twelve section opening pages of the health and body section featured white women. Surprisingly, six of the sections featured bi-racial and Black models on the opening page, challenging narratives that, historically, *Seventeen* magazine is solely focused on the white middle-class girl (Pierce, 1993). While this racial diversity is important to note, girls of other races, gender identities, and ethnicities are virtually absent from this section of the magazine, indicating that *Seventeen* defines diversity as limited to a handful of African American and biracial teen models. Furthermore, the inclusion of girls of colour does not negate the narrative of the fit, slim, healthy body that is racialized as white. Rather, this limited inclusion is depicting black bodies that conform to a European idea. Muhammad and McArthur (2015) argue that 'being both Black and female in society has continued to create and reinforce a U.S. culture satiated with derogatory representation of Black women and girls,' adding that Black girls' responses to representation is 'timely because their perspectives have been consistently understudied in education, misrepresented in public outlets, or simply overlooked' (134–135). While *Seventeen* has not directly claimed that anti-racist work is part of their mission statement, 'celebrating real girls' should go beyond superficial narratives so

that the 'buzzwording of intersectionality' (Joseph and Winfield 2019; 409), or in this case 'diversity,' is not exploited in the pages of this magazine.

Of the twelve editorial pages that feature models, trainers, and Fitstagrammers, eleven are fit, athletic, and slim, conforming to the desirable body described by Ballentine and Ogle in their 2005 study. The March/April 2017 issue features a white appearing model, dressed in a white bikini top and sweatpants, stretching on the grass before a workout. She is tan and slim, with well-defined arms and a flat stomach, despite leaning forward towards her toes. She is not shown participating in an actual sport, nor is she sweating. This type of exercise related photograph, according to Daniels (2009a) is common in teen magazines, where static photographs of women are routinely used. This trend is repeated in October 2016 where Caucasian appearing trainer and Fitstagrammer Katie Austin showcases five 'Netflix and chill' moves readers can do while watching their favourite shows. Her pink crop-top reveals a thin, tanned stomach and defined arms, while she demonstrates exercises such as side leg lifts, lunges, squats, and spider planks (62–63). Austin's hair is styled in a tidy braid, and she is smiling in each picture.

When Black and multiracial models are featured in this section of *Seventeen*, they are shown in very similar ways in four of the six issues. August 2016 model Sarah Kaufmann's flat stomach and slim arms are visible in her crop top. The May/June 2017 model is wearing short shorts, and a low-cut tank top while leaning (not riding) on a bicycle. Similarly, December 2016/January 2017 showcases a model in a boxing gym sporting short spandex shorts and a shirt that reveals a sliver of her flat stomach, and thin arms. She has boxing gloves artfully draped around her neck, but she is not shown exercising. Rather, this depiction could be read as a racist trope of black aggression by readers. These three editorial pictures exemplify Daniels (2009b) findings where models shown participating in a physical activity were more likely to be engaged in fitness, rather than sport activities (19). The May 2016 section of 'Health and Body' focused on the benefits of running, including mention of an increase in brain cells to entice readers into this type of exercise. Next to a full-page picture of an unnamed, Black, thin model in a multi-coloured sports bra and leggings, the copy reads,

Can't imagine the sport will ever be your OTP? We feel you. But before you decide that next time you're going to lace up is . . . never, get this: Science shows there is a runner in all of us. (The structure of our bodies is perfect for it.) BTW, it's also free and gets you crazy fit. So grab your kicks and let's do this. (75)

The copy implies that running is an accessible form of exercise for all readers, however, the hurdles that Black adolescent girls who want to participate in sports like running are not included (Ogunrinde, 2022). Furthermore, only one body type is shown, indicating that running is a sport for slim, already fit *Seventeen* readers. The model shown has a focused look on her face and her arms are bent at the elbow in a running pose, however, she is only shown from the waist up, indicating that she is likely not actually moving.

The December 2016/January 2017 issue highlights trainer Olivia Amato, creator of 'feel good cardio' (69) from Shadowbox gym in New York. The accompanying pictures depicts Amato participating in her fitness activity, a rare finding in the cadre of magazines analysed for this study. Amato is shown smiling widely in fitted camo printed leggings and a cropped top, jumping rope in a boxing gym with her muscled abs on display. This is one of the few examples depicting a model or trainer participating in a cardio-based activity. Amato is the rare visual example of how 'depictions of women engaged in sport suggest that women, like men, can be powerful and strong' making their bodies 'not for display but rather are instrumental,' which contradicts 'traditional media representations of women' (Daniels, 2009b: 19).

These examples show that regardless of race, there is one (racially coded as white) ideal body type that is acceptable in *Seventeen* Magazine and this has not changed in more than a decade: she is slim, she is very fit, she is perfectly coiffed, she is rarely shown exercising, she is somewhat muscular but still feminine, and she does not sweat. The celebrities and Fitstagrammers highlighted in this section are toned, but not overly muscular so as to appear the least bit masculine, thereby reinforcing traditional concepts of femininity (Young, 2015). Furthermore, she embodies desirability (see Ballentine and Ogle, 2005) and idealised beauty and style even when exercising, furthering images of the sexualised female athlete for an assumed heterosexual, white male audience as Crosby (2016) notes. In sum, her investment in a fit, slim body will lead to her success in society (Azzarito, 2018).

Only two out of sixteen body and health sections of *Seventeen* challenge the trend of the slim, athletic, desirable body described by Ballentine and Ogle in 2005. The November 2016 issue of the magazine features a ten-page *Seventeen* 'summit' in place of the usual body and health section in which five adolescent readers discuss issues surrounding body insecurity, social media struggles, and the power of words. Three of the five summit girls are Caucasian-appearing. The girls' pictures vary between two full body shots and three close ups, none of which appear airbrushed and may not have been taken by professionals. This feature attempts to show girls in more realistic ways and allows them space to discuss issues that affect them, a sentiment echoed in the *Seventeen* magazine toolkit. In the following section that *Seventeen* dubbed the 'body confidence special' five additional readers who have faced body image issues such as anorexia, facial scarring, and being labelled 'chubby,' are featured along with

a bilateral amputee. The Summit girls are presented as ‘overcoming’ various hardships by embracing their individuality and eventually, finding peace, and fulfilment in their uniqueness. In this section, *Seventeen* challenges the perception that there is only one way to be beautiful by using postfeminist neoliberal language that encourages readers to love their bodies even if they do not embody the slim idea that is pervasive in other sections of the magazine. *Seventeen* also provides a rare example of a teen girl with a physical disability in the pages of the magazine. Seventeen-year-old Pamela shares that due to losing her legs at a young age, she considers her ‘body normal because this is the just the way I am,’ adding that she has a ‘strong self-image because my parents and sister have always told me that I’m perfect’ (Stanley, 81). Pamela states, ‘But I’ve had to deal with other people’s awkward stares and reactions to my prosthetics, and that’s when it’s hits me that I don’t look like most people. I’ve wondered, is that okay? Should I feel sad? But then I remind myself that I rock at life’ (81). Pamela discusses the many sports she participates in including cheerleading, tennis, softball, track, soccer, volleyball, and swimming, concluding ‘my body can do what any else’s can do – and a lot of times, it can do it even better’ (81). In this example, *Seventeen* is attempting to challenge the belief that girls with disabilities live lives that are filled with barriers, violence, and stigma (Stienstra, 2015) however, Pamela’s story may also be read as an example of ‘inspiration porn,’ a term coined by advocate, comedian and journalist Stella Young in a popular 2014 TED Talk<sup>2</sup>. Inspiration porn can be defined as a ‘visual image of a person with a disability’ who is ‘successfully engaged in or mastering a physical activity or sport along with a caption suggesting the viewer should be inspired’ (Martin, 2019: 198; Grue, 2016). Ayers and Reed (2022) posit that ‘inspiration porn reinforces to non-disabled people the central idea that disability is a tragedy to overcome, and a plight that non-disabled people are grateful to avoid’... further adding that ‘a disabled individual must not only overcome their disability, but also strive to achieve goals far beyond their disabled and non-disabled peers alike’ (91). *Seventeen* illustrates these ideas by showing photographs of Pamela carrying a surfboard on the beach, along with a stylised picture of her soccer-shoe-clad feet with a soccer ball and caption stating that she recently made the all-star team. While *Seventeen* should be commended for showcasing ‘real girls’ in this specific issue, content is limited to ten pages and the rest of the section is filled with airbrushed models or, in some cases, drawings of girls who also fit this hegemonic beauty ideal while exercising (see March/April 2017; June/July 2016; October/November 2018), thereby negating this pseudo message of empowerment and body acceptance. In this, *Seventeen* is not living up to its mission statement of ‘celebrating real girls’ (*Seventeen* media kit, n.d., n.p.).

Only one issue of *Seventeen* challenges the trend of featuring thin trainers, celebrities, and models in the body and health section. In September/October 2017, a popular plus-size yoga instructor, podcast host, blogger, and Instagram ‘fave’ Dana Falsetti is featured. According to Falsetti’s website, they were not a ‘traditional’ yoga student and felt that studios were not ‘particularly welcoming to her, nor did they embrace the notion of including less able-bodied people’ (Feature Friday, 2018<sup>3</sup>). Falsetti’s goal was to make ‘a safe space for a community of marginalized people to explore a practice originally intended for all’ (Feature Friday, 2018), and address the body privilege that thin and fit people may not be aware of when exercising. Harjunen (2019) notes that exercising for non-normative bodies is ‘not always a source of well-being, empowerment, or positive embodied experiences’ as ‘some body types are not so welcome in the field of exercise’ (173), a problem Falsetti is attempting to remedy through their advocacy.

Falsetti is the only fitness expert featured who does not fit into the slim and taut ideal featured in the body and health section of *Seventeen*. They are also the only expert whose body is mostly covered by long leggings and a full-length tank top, indicating that while *Seventeen* preaches acceptance of all bodies, perhaps the only bodies that should wear stomach revealing clothing are slim ones. Furthermore, pictures on Falsetti’s website show that they often wear cropped tops or sports bras while teaching and practicing yoga, indicating that the decision to photograph them in this particular outfit was likely made by magazine editors and could be interpreted by readers as a form of body shaming.

Overwhelmingly, in the health and body section of the magazine, *Seventeen* still showcases the young, fit, able-bodied, often white model who is solely responsible for her own fitness success. While *Seventeen* has made improvements in showcasing racial diversity in the past decade, there is still work to be done. Girls with more diverse body shapes, different sizes, abilities, races, and ethnicities should be regularly featured. Additionally, *Seventeen* should work to move away from the discourse of the fit girl body as the primary ‘source of power’ for girls and work to change the narratives of the teen girl body as ‘already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, disciplining and remodelling (and consumer spending)’ (Gill 2007: 6) if the magazine wants to truly embrace the ‘real girl’ message it claims is important to highlight.

### The Right Kind of Celebrity

As a way to legitimise the body projects and body repair that *Seventeen* details, the use of named experts is common, as is referencing popular celebrities. The presence of celebrities can, according to King (2017), function

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxrS7-L\\_sMQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxrS7-L_sMQ)

<sup>3</sup> She/her pronouns were used for Falsetti at the time of this interview in 2018. Falsetti currently uses they/them pronouns.

in allowing fans to 'identify with celebrities and aspire toward their success while also offering a conciliatory explanation to fans for why they have not achieved similar eminence' (87). Belch and Belch (2013) found that celebrity and 'expert' trends have been popular in magazines for more than 60 years, adding that teen magazines were the most likely to use celebrities such as popular actors/actresses, models, and entertainers in their advertisements, with only two examples of professional athletes shown in their study (381). This indicates that in the health and body section of *Seventeen* magazine, adolescent girl readers are more likely to encounter popular entertainers, models, and actresses than professional or decorated athletes, further contributing to the invisibility of female athletes.

The use of experts and routines presented in a step-by-step format in this section of *Seventeen* 'provides readers with a seemingly no-fail plan for successful implementation of the given body project,' while the use of experts 'legitimize[s] the project as effective' (Ballentine and Ogle 2005: 293). These articles encourage self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline, and the risk of failing (Gill, 2007) to adhere to these expectations. In the magazine issues examined for this study, the trend is now focused on a specific sport such as running, yoga, surfing, or boxing that celebrities supposedly participate in. Instead of placing importance on improving what Ballentine and Ogle referred to just one 'body malady' (293), this shift in focus from one body 'problem' to whole body health may be seen as an improvement over past years, however, almost all of the celebrities, models, and trainers adhere to an aestheticised body ideal that implies that girls and women 'are responsible for producing themselves as desirable heterosexual subjects' (Gill, 2007: 8).

Celebrity status shows up in several ways in this section of the magazine; for Gill (2007) this offers a clear example of 'the cultural obsession with celebrity, which plays out almost exclusively over women's bodies' (6). Belch and Belch (2013) state that the use of popular celebrities is a way to attract the attention of the reader in a 'cluttered media environment' and to 'impact consumers' decision process by favourably influencing their evaluations, feelings, attitudes and purchase intentions toward their brands' (370). One example of celebrity endorsement in the health and fitness section of *Seventeen* is by referencing a female celebrity by name and picture, claiming that this is her exercise of choice, thereby giving readers the opportunity and know-how to attempt to emulate her. The December 2015/January 2016 issue features a trainer at a boxing gym and the copy asks if readers are '[i]nspired by Gigi Hadid's boxing Instas?' (69) and provides five boxing manoeuvres that readers can try at home to acquire Hadid's impossibly thin body. Here, Hadid has been linked to a form of exercise that readers may have available in their hometowns or bedrooms, exemplifying the celebrity 'match up' theory that Belch and Belch (2013) explore. Using Hadid as an example of what one can look like if they work out at a boxing gym, *Seventeen* is illustrating the connection between her workout routine, attractiveness, and her popularity. With a following of almost 79 million on Instagram, Hadid embodies the 'stopping power' that according to Belch and Belch (2013), will bring attention to the product, or in this case, exercise featured. Hadid is mentioned again in the March 2016 body and health section that explores the 'deal with celeb health trends' (80) where her cryotherapy treatments are shared. These 'celeb health trends' include the waist trainers that several of the Kardashian women have helped to popularise, Bella Thorne and Nicki Minaj's tea-tox (a diet tea that supposedly helps one lose unwanted weight), and the vitamin infusions that Cara Delevingne, Rhianna, and Rita Ora favour. In an attempt to promote realistic and potentially less dangerous methods for weight loss, *Seventeen* turns to expert Rebecca Blake, a senior director of clinical nutrition at Mount Sinai Beth Israel Hospital in New York, to debunk these trendy celebrity practices. Blake states how unbeneficial and possibly dangerous these trends can be while *Seventeen* provides readers with an 'instead try' suggestion that includes taking a yoga class, avoiding these trends all together, or practicing moderation when following any trend. Quashing these myths may be helpful for some teen girl readers but the pull of celebrity may entice others to try these trends, regardless of the opinion of a medical professional.

Popular Instagram trainers, not professional female athletes, are featured in three of the sixteen magazines in this study, confirming Sherwood, Osborne, Nicholson, and Sherry's (2016) assertions that media coverage of female athletes is still lagging. Only two covers of the magazine mention anything about working out (October 2016: 'the couch workout' and May/June 2017: 'lazy girl workout hacks') and none of the covers feature a professional female athlete, indicating that this magazine may have little appeal for girls interested in sports while simultaneously reinforcing the otherness that often accompanies female athletes (Pirinen, 1997). The three Instagram-popular trainers featured are body inclusive yoga instructor Dana Falsetti who advises readers on five yoga moves to help with better posture (September/October 2017), Fitstagrammer Katie Austin models five moves readers can do while watching television (October 2016), and Olivia Amato who shows readers how to get slim like Gigi Hadid by using her boxing methods. While *Seventeen* has the option to interrogate and intervene against oppressive and homogenous depictions of the 'healthy' adolescent girl, the magazine instead reinforces the 'feminine persona' (Crosby, 2016) required of the successful, attractive teen girl, usually by referencing popular, young female celebrities.



## Faux Empowerment

*Seventeen*, like magazines aimed at older women, is full of contradictions that send teen magazine readers mixed messages about their bodies (Ballentine and Ogle, 2005). Ballister (1991) states that

women's magazines posit a collective and yet multivalent female subjectivity, which they simultaneously address and construct. In doing so, despite the often-contradictory nature of this collective subjectivity, there are clear limits and boundaries to the variety of 'readings' and 'interpretations' available in the text. (172)

Currie (1999) suggests that women's magazines are a commercial medium that orchestrate women's activities in relation to their bodies and are increasingly mediated by these social texts. Duke and Kreshel (1998) argue that the focus on home and family has been replaced with a focus on the body so that 'an obsession with the physical has replaced women's former obsession with "home and hearth"' (49). *Seventeen's* focus on the slim, fit body reinforces the preoccupation with physical appearance, then further complicates this by adding layers of postfeminist faux empowerment through which readers are encouraged to love their bodies via language such as 'strong,' 'every body,' and 'fun.' Here, *Seventeen* continues 'to function as a way to keep women's power restricted, to subtly equate whiteness and lighter skin with beauty and desirability and to keep women separated from one another' (LaWare and Moutsatos, 2013: 191).

The faux empowerment presented in the body and health section of *Seventeen* Magazine is evidenced by a close reading of the text in this section as well as the visual representations the magazine chooses in which the vast majority of the Fitstagrammers, models, and celebrities featured adhere closely to the slim and taut body ideal Ballentine and Ogle found in their 2005 study. The postfeminist, neoliberal language of self-love, empowerment, and self-achievement (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018a) that *Seventeen* uses in this section encourages teen girl readers to love their bodies regardless of their size, colour, and physicality. However, rarely is a variety in bodies shown, and this, according to McClearn (2018), produces a disciplinary discourse that encourages men to 'bulk up' and women to 'slim down' (46). This slimming down likely hinders the performance of female athletes and, in order to increase their performance, they may need to add more weight to their frame 'than images of the ideal body sanctions' (McClearn 2018: 47) thus creating an undesirable body in broader culture that would likely not be featured in *Seventeen*.

Perhaps the best illustration of this faux empowerment can be found in the June/July 2016 issue in which 18-year-old pro surfer Bella Nichols is featured holding her surfboard on a beach. She is looking over her left shoulder, smiling at readers, wearing short swimsuit bottoms that reveal the bottom part of her buttocks. She is white-appearing, young, tan, thin, conventionally attractive, and epitomises that 'desirable body' ideal analysed by Ballentine and Ogle (2005). The copy on this picture says, 'get surfer-girl strong' and 'every body is a beach body! But if you're looking to boost your strength game, this rad workout from 18-year-old pro surfer Bella Nichols will help you crush it.' Interestingly, Nichols is the only professional athlete featured in the issues analysed for this study, and she is not shown participating in her sport (surfing) in any of the pictures chosen for her editorial, a common trend according to Daniels (2009b). Out of 620 images of female athletes in several teen magazines including *Seventeen*, Daniels found that only 7% showed women engaged in sport or fitness activities and the majority of these (64%) were engaged in activities such as walking, aerobics, stretching, or abdominal routines (18). Additionally, if one did not read the tiny accompanying copy, readers might assume Nichols is a model, not a professional surfer who won the 2016 World Junior Championship and was sponsored by Billabong. Several contradictions are evident in this feature. Clearly, 'every body' is not a beach body as *Seventeen* exclaims since Nichols is the only professional athlete featured and she exemplifies a slim, desirable body ideal. Also, readers do not see Nichols participating in her sport, thereby rendering her talent invisible and secondary to her attractiveness. While the pictures of Nichols are not highly sexualised as is common practice when the 'sex appeal' of female athletes is the predominant focus of media coverage (Riebock and Bae, 2013), Nichols's beauty is very much the central focus. Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce (2017) posit that 'the growing popularity and visibility of athletically competent, strong and beautiful female athletes . . . suggests the emergence of a potentially ruptural femininity that steps outside gender binaries and therefore offers the potential to disengage the long-standing articulation of sport and masculinity' (366). However, Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce also note that 'this mode of femininity is not available to all' and is restricted to those who embody 'desirable White Western femininities' (367), as shown in the pictures of Nichols.

In discussing the 'disciplining' of Olympic athlete Lolo Jones, Crosby (2016) critiques the double binds that many female athletes must negotiate: the interlocking and inseparable oppressions that include the feminine/athlete and the virginal/exotic. *Seventeen* has enforced this double bind by feminising Nichols and displaying her athletic ability as 'incompatible with appropriate feminine markers' (Crosby 2016: 237), which is likely why she is not shown surfing. Furthermore, Crosby posits that 'when a heterosexual, feminine persona is

cultivated, women are more likely to receive benefits, such as media attention, fan approval, reduced heterosexist discrimination, and necessary financial endorsements, while a masculine appearance often impedes a female athlete's ability to make a living in sport' (238). Regrettably, very little information is given about Nichols; she is asked a total of six questions, one of which asks for her 'Insta' (Instagram) name and another one which asks about her 'go-to snack' (yogurt and bananas). She is asked about her 'first time on a board' (she was eight and her dad made her do it) and about her 'peak career moment' (winning the 2016 World Junior Championship) (June/July 2016, 57–58). The superficiality of most of the questions *Seventeen* asks Nichols may indicate to readers that the sexism that Nichols has likely encountered in a male dominated sport are not important and that it is her beauty, not her skill, that landed her in the pages of the magazine. The magazine missed an opportunity to provide Nichols with the space to share any challenges she has faced in her sport due to her gender and her age. Instead, *Seventeen* stayed away from any sort of content that might be considered controversial or remotely political, leaving readers with a peripheral, one-dimensional image of Nichols that weds faux empowerment and postfeminist ideas in the way she is represented, suggesting that girls in sports have moved beyond sexism and are 'autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever' (Gill, 2007: 12).

The faux empowerment language used in Nichols' editorial can also be found in other issues of *Seventeen*. La Ware and Moutsatsos (2013) argue that appropriation of the language of empowerment and feminism can be 'defined in terms of an assertive, socially conscious, individualism which resists limiting definitions of femininity and possibility by reinterpreting and redefining those possibilities and by recognizing that each feminist has an opportunity to create a world of her choosing' (190). Examples of this appropriation of faux feminist and faux empowerment language can be seen in the commonly used language in the body and health section of *Seventeen* that include an emphasis on the words 'strength,' 'fun,' and 'power' but not on weight. While this change is a welcome departure from the magazine's long-term trend of describing normal body features as problematic and in need of 'zapping' so that readers can become 'the girl they really want to be' (Ballentine and Ogle, 2005: 291), a focus on self-surveillance and a desirable body ideal are still present. The March 2016 issue claims that while 'group workouts can be intimidating AF' [as fuck] they 'can actually be a lot of fun' (69). A boxing work out featured in December 2015/January 2016 is a 'powerful mix of strength-building punches and feel-good cardio' (69); and the August 2016 issue introduces readers to 'HIIT (high-intensity interval training) moves . . . [that are a] Beyonce dance party' (63). Surprisingly, *Seventeen* is very careful to avoid words such as 'tone' and 'sculpt' that may be read as objectifying in nature and position the body as something malleable and mouldable (Hauff, 2016; Prichard and Tiggemann, 2005), perhaps in an effort to appear to be promoting self-acceptance and body positivity to readers. Instead, *Seventeen* uses phrases that are focused on overall fitness and feeling 'good' with headlines such as 'feel good cardio' (January 2016: 69), 'get fit without working out' (May/June 2017: 64), and 'songs to get you fitter' (November/December 2017: 64). However positive this change in language is, *Seventeen* still promotes a false idea of empowerment by focusing on only one body ideal for readers in their attempt to produce positive copy. Unsurprisingly, *Seventeen* rarely presents any kind of alternative to this image of 'health,' thereby reinforcing the 'class-less, race-less sameness' (McRobbie, 2000: 69) of the teen magazine reader.

## Diets, Not Riots

*Seventeen Magazine* has a long history of including diet advice alongside visual representations of idealized, slim beauty (Ballentine and Ogle, 2005), making a connection between restricted food intake and a slim body clear for readers. As Ballentine and Ogle found in their 2005 study, *Seventeen* also regularly included copy that blamed readers for dietary indiscretions, indicating that corrective measures must be taken to slim down and to do so quickly. In the selection of magazines analysed in this study, the trend of openly shaming readers for not following a strict, low-calorie diet is absent. While this is another positive, corrective measure to note, *Seventeen* still places a focus on a low-calorie diet in the health and body section of the magazine, indicting to readers that food restriction should still be part of their body projects. The health and body section of the magazine is still overwhelmingly staffed with images of the slim, fit body, continuing to link a strict, low-calorie diet to an ideal physique in a less obvious way. In this regard, little has changed since Ballentine and Ogle's 2005 study.

Eleven of the sixteen issues of the magazine examined in this study featured a section that was focused specifically on food labelled as 'healthy snacks.' *Seventeen* has replaced the more blatant diet language noted by Ballentine and Ogle (2005) and has attempted to shift the representational focus to 'healthy' foods that have the added benefit of 'clearing skin, banishing bloating,' and giving readers more energy (May 2016: 80). Absent are the glaringly blameful tones that were common in Ballentine and Ogle's study that presumably made readers fearful for the upcoming swimsuit season or holiday parties. Health coaches and dieticians are often featured as experts, suppling readers with their personal favourite recipes (March/April 2017; February 2016) and explaining the benefits of eating 'emerald-hued vegetables' (November/December 2017, 63) and other 'healthy' fare. Experts and suggested recipes are commonly used strategies in women's magazines, according to LoRusso and Reynolds (2016), and were regularly featured in *Seventeen*. The October 2016 issue encourages teen girl readers to eat the 'rainbow'



of vegetables, explaining that some can boost your immune system, reduce the risk of certain kinds of cancer, and ‘amp up your energy’ (64). This editorial did not feature any models, but rather large photographs of each food, a trend that was repeated often in this section. May of 2016 provides readers with a guide to fruits and vegetables that they call ‘blends with benefits’ that will help readers with improving their brain health, reduce bloating, produce flawless skin and provide ample energy (80), further masking the distinction between appearance and health. This focus on ‘healthy’ food and its connection to a slim body may be read as part of the makeover paradigm that constitutes postfeminist media culture, according to Gill (2007). This paradigm, Gill argues,

requires people (predominantly women) to believe first that they and their life is lacking or flawed in some way, and second that it is amenable to reinvention or transformation by following the advice of relationship, design or lifestyle experts, and practicing appropriately modified consumption habits. (16)

For *Seventeen* readers, the health coaches featured in the magazine may serve as a reminder that their lives (and diets) are in need of constant surveillance and monitoring. In this case, the ‘consumption habits’ that Gill (2007) addresses is encouragement to consume ‘healthy,’ low-calorie foods while readers are inundated with repeated images of slim, attractive models throughout the magazine.

When readers fail to follow the consumption habits postfeminist media culture mandates, *Seventeen* offers suggestions of how to get back on track and does so without using the ‘blaming’ language found in Ballentine and Ogle’s study. The February 2016 issue featured an editorial that pitted an egg sandwich against a chocolate muffin for breakfast stating, ‘Having a dessert-before-homeroom kind of morning? We feel you! If you already had your cake this is how you can still eat well, too’ (56). *Seventeen* encourages readers to avoid a sugar crash by eating cheese or fruit, followed by a turkey sandwich, hummus and veggies ‘(Get this: It’s good for your skin!), and a well-balanced dinner of lean beef and broccoli stir-fry’ (56). In the September/October 2017 issue, the focus is again on breakfast options that are ‘easy, healthy recipes that will fire up your body (and brain!) even when you’re in a hurry’ (68). The goal of *any* breakfast, according to Brigitte Zeitlin, R.D., is a combination of fibre and protein to ‘get your energy going’ (68). In both instances, *Seventeen* has shifted the focus to ‘health’ via performance-based foods that can help with focus, fighting inflammation, and clearing skin.

Two of the sixteen issues address ‘health’ by debunking food myths such as celebrity diet trends that include tea detoxes and vitamin infusions (March 2016) and the various claims made by flavoured water companies (August 2016). Neither focuses on ‘health’ in the same way as other months; this may speak to editorial staff attempts to move away from the connection between a desirable body and dieting. Both issues featured nutrition experts’ opinions that the health benefits claimed for these products are misleading, false, and possibly dangerous. Only one issue (June/July 2016) featured homemade snacks that did not include a slant towards being low-calorie or labelled as ‘healthy.’ Readers are taught how to make various ‘frosty pops’ [popsicles] for their ‘next chill sesh’ [session] (60). These ‘pops’ include watermelon slushes, key lime pie, and chocolate banana. A dietician from the Cleveland Clinic is quoted as saying, ‘On hot days, cold liquids can be absorbed into the system faster than warm liquids, which helps fight against dehydration’ (60). The focus on ‘health’ and low-calorie options that is common in this section of the magazine is absent in this month’s issue. Further, it is important to note that the word ‘diet’ rarely, if ever, appears in the copy of this section of the magazine, particularly in the context of encouraging readers to practice food restriction to achieve a desirable body. This is a trend reversal from Ballentine and Ogle’s 2005 study when a focus on changing the body rapidly through dieting and exercise to lose weight quickly was regularly presented as a goal for readers. While this is a positive change, the celebrities and models featured in the editorials were overwhelming slim, making the connection between a strict, limited calorie diet and a desirable body indisputable.

## CONCLUSION

*Seventeen* has attempted to correct some of the problematic messages it ignored for decades, specifically in the re-tooling of its body and health section, and this trend is encouraging. However, while many of these attempts at inclusivity, diversity, and the narratives about loving one’s own body are commendable, this study’s feminist content analysis of the body and health section of a year of *Seventeen* Magazine issues (2016 to 2017) demonstrates that it has continued to promote a very narrowly defined idea of the ‘healthy’ adolescent girl body. These depictions have the potential to contribute to teen girls’ low body satisfaction and their growing obsession with self-surveillance, self-monitoring, and self-discipline, which can negatively impact mental health. *Seventeen*’s strategy has largely failed to remedy the contradictory nature of its messages about adolescent readers loving one’s body and continuously monitoring and trying to fix it. Instead, as this study shows, layers of neoliberal, postfeminist faux empowerment messages through the language, models, and celebrities are represented throughout the magazine. *Seventeen* is still only providing occasional examples of positive bodies that have previously been devalued in the

health and body section of the magazine, while simultaneously encouraging readers to 'listen to their own voices rather than to define self through others' expectations and values' (Ballentine and Ogle, 2005: 301). Unfortunately, little progress has been made since Ballentine and Ogle's 2005 examination of the body-related articles in the magazine's 1992–2003 issues.

It is not surprising that the editors of *Seventeen* magazine continue to favour the female celebrity or model who is young and white, traditionally feminine, able-bodied, and fit over professional female athletes who may not fit this narrow ideal. These elements are essential in recreating the neoliberal, postfeminist girl-power ideal that scholars have analysed and that many of the celebrities and models featured in the magazine have promoted. *Seventeen* readers are encouraged to consume products that will lead to a slim, fit body, emulating celebrities as well as Fitstagrammers who have been encouraged and rewarded for turning themselves into commodities through self-marketing (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018b), all under the guise of 'health.' Not only does this supposed ideal help to mask the structural inequalities *Seventeen* readers negotiate in their daily lives, it also fails to address their various social identities, further marginalising readers of various races, ethnicities, religions, body types, sizes, and abilities. One response to the lack of representation of adolescent girls with disabilities can be seen in how they self-represent on various social media platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram. Referencing girls with disabilities specifically, Sarah Hill (2017) argues that this self-representation on social media can 'act as a form of social advocacy and awareness raising' (114) that is clearly absent in *Seventeen Magazine*. In another example of self-representation, in 2012, Andréa Butler founded *Sesi*, a magazine geared specifically for Black teens in response to the lack of diversity she saw in magazines like *Seventeen* growing up (Walsh, 2020). Further research and content analysis on this publication, as a comparison, would be welcome. In these examples, we see adolescent girls creating media that addresses their needs and interests when magazines like *Seventeen* are insufficient.

Moreover, *Seventeen* has missed the opportunity to showcase professional female athletes in a way that challenges the 'othering' depictions that Pirnien (1997) discusses. Research on sports media demonstrates that women in traditionally feminine-stereotyped sports (e.g., gymnastics) that emphasise grace and aesthetic beauty are portrayed more often than women in traditionally masculine-stereotyped sports (e.g., basketball) that entail power and strength (Daniels, 2009b: 17) and this is shown in the pages of *Seventeen*.

*Seventeen Magazine's* continuing promotion of postfeminist ideals and apparent refusal or failure to understand the potential impact on girls' body image, despite pleas from readers and a significant body of media research studies, exposes broader questions, including for example, how can *Seventeen* provide teen girl readers with more authentic depictions of 'health' without recreating problematic narratives about dieting and a slim, fit (white) body as the only acceptable body type for adolescent girls? We need more content analysis of teen magazines to make visible the ways in which such body problems and issues have been manufactured and normalised in late 'post-feminist' capitalism, allowing for misleading solutions from often uninformed or misinformed sources. This also has implications for feminist research and analysis that is aimed at social action and facilitating healthy body attitudes for adolescent girls and boys.

In 2018, *Seventeen* announced that the magazine will no longer be in print on a regular basis and will instead, move to a digital platform, as is the current market imperative for many magazines. Now in its manifestation as an online publication, we can only hope that the magazine will use its digital platform to further more positive, varied depictions of health and fitness, whilst providing more inclusive and diverse representations of 'real girls.'

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**Citation:** Crookston, s. (2024). 'Get Fierce in 5!': Depictions of the 'Healthy' Girl Body in *Seventeen Magazine*, 2016 to 2017. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 8(2), 37. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/14949>

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