

# “Sexualized” Clothing in Girls’ Magazines Across Time

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Girls' Life, 1994



Girls' Life, 2006



Seventeen, 1971



Seventeen, 2006

## Abstract

Theory and past research has suggested that there is an increase in the sexualization of women and girls in American culture. In this study, a content analysis was conducted to systematically analyze the change in the number of sexualizing characteristics (eg: low cut tops) of girls and women portrayed across time in the magazines *Seventeen* (N=1550 images from issues in 1971 through 2011) and *Girls' Life* (N=678 images from 1994 to 2011). The total number of sexualizing characteristics of the girls and women depicted in the ads and pictures in several issues of each magazine at each time period was calculated. One-way analyses of variance were conducted to examine whether the total number of characteristics in each depiction varied across time for each magazine, and the tests were statistically significant. Follow-up chi square analyses examining the presence of each sexualizing characteristic determined that there were significant increases in the depictions of low-cut tops, tops that emphasize breasts, tight fitting clothing, and makeup from the earlier issues to the later ones in both magazines.

## Introduction

The sexual objectification of women – basing women’s primary value on their sexual appeal to men, and defining appeal based on narrow standards of attractiveness (APA, 2007) – is a frequent occurrence in American culture. Theory and research suggest that the sexual objectification of women has increased in recent years. For example, Reichert and Carpenter (2004) found that the sexualization of women in advertisements increased significantly in the U.S. between 1983 and 2003. The sexualization in the culture is believed to be reaching girls (APA, 2007). For example, in a recent analysis it was found that 30% of clothing items available for pre-teen girls on the websites of 15 national stores had sexualizing characteristics (Goodin, Van Denburg, Murnen, & Smolak, 2011) such that the clothing emphasized or revealed a sexualized body part (e.g., bikinis and push-up bras), or had characteristics associated with sexiness (red satin lingerie-like dresses). The encouragement of sexualization practices in girls might lead them to accept the sexualized female role as both normative and ideal without realizing or understanding that there might be negative consequences associated with a sexualized appearance (APA, 2007; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). Currently, there is limited evidence about the degree of sexualization of girls in the culture. The present study tested the hypothesis that the sexualization of girls has increased across time. The study aimed to document the shift towards greater sexualization in the females depicted in the girl-oriented magazines *Seventeen* and *Girls' Life*.

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Girls' Life, 1994



Girls' Life, 2011



Seventeen, 1971



Seventeen, 2011

## Method

In this study, a content analysis was conducted to analyze the presence of sexualizing characteristics in portrayals of girls and women in the magazines *Seventeen* and *Girls' Life* across time. Two issues per year of *Seventeen* were analyzed (April and October issues) from the following years: 1971, 1981, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, and 2011. Three issues of *Girls' Life* per year were analyzed (August/September, February/March, June/July issues) from the following years: 1994, 1996, 2001, 2006, and 2011. Each depiction of a girl and/or woman was coded individually for the presence of sexualizing characteristics in all images that were one-quarter page or larger. If girls and/or women were portrayed in a group, only the girls who were the most visible and not predominantly covered by another person were coded.

The coding scale was adapted from the Goodin et al. (2011) study, which looked at sexualized clothing for girls, and Boyd and Murnen (2011), which analyzed sexualizing characteristics of popular girls’ dolls. The coding systems for both Goodin et al. (2011) and Boyd et al. (2011) were found to be reliable and valid. For the present study sexualizing characteristics included: Non-functional shoes, short hemlines, slit in skirt/dress, animal prints, leather/pleather, slinky materials, fishnets, red/black, bare midriff, low cut tops, tops that emphasize breasts, sexualized writing, tight-fitting clothing, makeup, highlighted hair, blown-out hair, belly-button ring, and cleavage emphasizing jewelry.

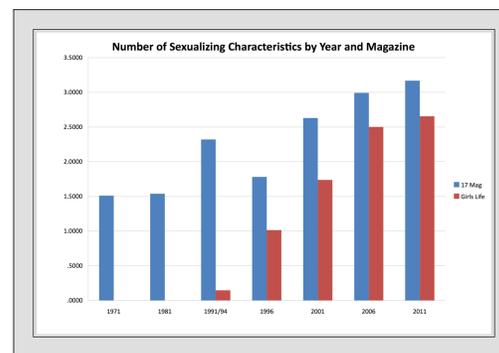


Figure 1

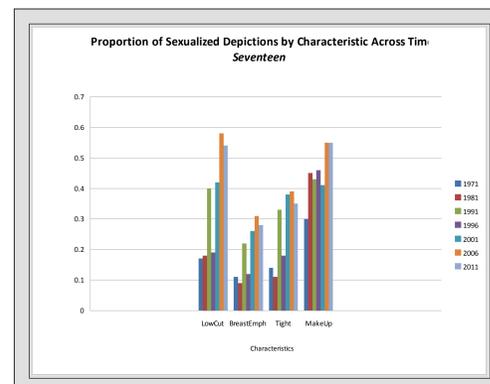


Figure 2

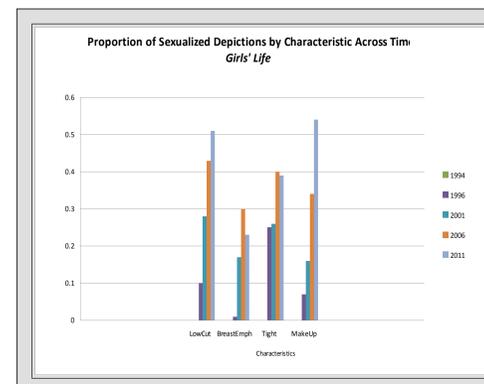


Figure 3

## Results

A total of 1550 images were coded in *Seventeen* and 678 images in *Girls' Life*. One-way analyses of variance were conducted to examine whether the total number of characteristics in the depictions varied across time for each magazine (thus, the independent variable was year, the dependent variable the total number of sexualizing characteristics in each depiction). The tests were statistically significant for both *Seventeen*,  $F(6, 1543) = 32.014, p < .001$  and for *Girls' Life*,  $F(4, 673) = 35.172, p < .001$ . For *Seventeen*, the mean number of sexualizing characteristics per depiction was 1.51 in 1971, which increased to 3.17 in 2011. For *Girls' Life*, the mean number of sexualizing characteristics per depiction was .14 in 1994, which increased to 2.51 in 2011. See Figure 1 for a graphic depiction of the result. Follow-up chi square analyses examined the frequency of each sexualizing characteristic to see if it changed over time. Figures 2 and 3 present some of the significant characteristics that changed over time,  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

Results from this study indicate that the sexualization of girls has increased from the 1970s in the magazine *Seventeen* and from the 1990s in the magazine *Girls' Life*. Specifically, the depictions of low-cut tops, tops that emphasize breasts, tight fitting clothing, and makeup have dramatically increased over time. With the increase, these messages may become normative in girls’ lives, making it more likely for them to accept the sexualized female role (APA, 2007; Murnen & Smolak, 2011; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). These messages may limit girls’ identification with other roles, encouraging them to uphold a sexualized ideal above everything else. This is concerning, especially since previous studies have indicated a number of negative effects due to sexualization, such as girls being perceived as less competent (Graff, Murnen, Smolak, submitted). The objectification of women has been linked with the development of self-objectification, the tendency to treat one’s body as an object. Self-objectification has been found to occur in girls as early as in the fifth grade (Lindberg, Grabe, & Hyde, 2007). Research indicates that women who surveil their bodies to a great degree are more likely to report body shame, which is linked to the development of eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction (Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 2011; Moradi & Yu-Ping, 2008). Thus, future research should further analyze sexualization practices in the culture, including the messages found in other media sources, and possible links to self-objectification in girls.

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