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The Age of Diminishing Innocence; Magazines Shift Focus As Teenage Girls Seem To Be Maturing Sooner

By ALEX KUCZYNSKI
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Atoosa Rubenstein, the editor in chief of CosmoGirl magazine, sat in the magazine's West 57th Street offices on a March weekday at high noon, a dozen assistant editors gathered before her.

The occasion: a CosmoGirl clinic, a kind of ritual indoctrination at which Ms. Rubenstein brings her troops into "the CosmoGirl zone," that specialized state of mind from which they can edit a magazine for today's 14-year-olds, who are, in Ms. Rubenstein's opinion, a far cry from the 14-year-olds of 20 years ago.

In one exercise, the editors -- all in their early 20's -- shouted out insecurities from their high school days: one had loathed her thick ankles; another mentioned an unrequited crush; heavy hips; having more facial hair than your brothers.

"That's good, that's good, but now we have to dig deeper," Ms. Rubenstein said. "Remember, teenage girls need to be more sophisticated today. I always say Monica Lewinsky is the quintessential example of a girl who could have used CosmoGirl. We have to give girls tools that they have not needed in past generations. The intricacies of being a teenager have definitely changed."

As the complications in teenage girls' lives have multiplied, so have the magazines that cater to them. While just three magazines -- Seventeen, Teen and YM -- dominated the field for decades, at least eight major magazines will soon be slugging it out in a marketplace where teenagers are considered prized lifetime acquisitions for advertisers.

(A complete list of magazines aimed at teenagers would number over a hundred, including magazines like Tiger Beat and Teen Style to Upfront, which The New York Times publishes in partnership with Scholastic Inc.)

Apart from multiplying, the magazines have changed in ways that are not always obvious from the bubbly covers splashed with images of teenage idols, zit-zapping advice and haircuts that rock. Underlying many articles is the guiding premise that teenage girls are swiftly becoming miniaturized versions of grown-ups, with just as many problems and responsibilities as their parents.

So along with articles about glitter nail polish and rock stars, the newer magazines are publishing such fare as essays on self-empowerment, and grown-up articles about racism, eating disorders, rape, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, depression and discrimination. They are also featuring articles about more quotidian grown-up subjects like financial management and using yoga to soothe the jangled nerves.

Annemarie Iverson, editor in chief of YM, said that she holds a cookie klatsch with a group of teenage girls every Friday. "The thing that is so remarkable is that whenever I talk to girls, I am just amazed at how their lives parallel mine," she said. "They are so stressed out. They need help more than you can imagine."

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For more than a half-century, the market for magazines aimed at teenage girls was populated by Seventeen, published by Primedia and now 55 years old; Teen, published by EMAP Petersen and now age 44; and YM, owned by the Gruner & Jahr unit of Bertelsmann, 69 years old. Each carried its share of fashion and beauty news, along with a smattering of health articles, but did not venture into any subject resembling grown-up territory for fear of reprisals from advertisers or mothers.

Seventeen was long considered the most prim and mother-approved. (Perhaps not coincidentally, Seventeen was edited by a former nun, Midge Turk Richardson, for two decades, until 1993.)

In the early 1990's, Sassy, a magazine founded in 1988 by Jane Pratt, sought to explore some of the darker, more complex issues teenagers face, like sexual harassment at school. But some of the articles -- like one that critics considered a guide to oral sex -- prompted religious groups to ask stores to boycott the magazine; major advertisers pulled their support. The magazine folded in 1996 after it changed owners.

But half a decade later, magazines for teenagers have reached a new level of adult frankness. Prompted mostly by the success of the Time Inc. publication Teen People, introduced three years ago, and by the growing Generation Y population, magazine publishers are rushing to publish more magazines aimed at that segment of the population.

In the fall Hachette Filipacchi, a unit of Lagardère, will bring out Elle Girl. Last week, Condé Nast's second issue of Teen Vogue was on newsstands. Also arriving last week was a magazine for the so-called "tween" market -- those readers in the 10-and-above category -- called Mary-Kate and Ashley Magazine, published by H & S Media; it bills itself as a self-empowerment bible for girls in late childhood and early adolescence and hopes to attract a significant number of teenage readers.

The girl reading the teenage magazines appears to be a product of Boomer feminism and Generation X post-feminism, said Jane Rinzler Buckingham, the president of Youth Intelligence, a market research firm that has studied the buying habits of teenagers for a decade. Ms. Buckingham said that teenage girls have more options and are more confused about their identities than they were 20 years ago.

"Teenage girls today have to sort through so many messages," Ms. Buckingham said. "They don't know if they're supposed to grow up to be corporate working women and conquer the world, or stay-at-home moms, or Miss America or Hillary Clinton. The typical teenage girl isn't quite sure whether to worry about her pimple or whether to go out and win a Pulitzer. That's in part why you can have so many magazines."

Ms. Iverson of YM said that MTV has had the most profound influence on transforming children into sophisticated consumers. "I think the fact that most of their parents worked is an enormous influence," Ms. Iverson said. "They have been sort of left to their own devices."

Ms. Iverson's YM has a definite slant toward the music industry but also addresses some adult-sounding topics like "why do boys' testicles change color?" in a column offering sexual-health advice. CosmoGirl answers questions in a similar column, like one from a 15-year-old who asks why she feels insecure about letting her boyfriend see her naked.

Ms. Rubenstein told her CosmoGirl clinic audience that March afternoon that the attitude she most wants to instill in her readers is one of healthy skepticism. "This magazine is everything we finally learned at 25 we wished we had known when we were

15," she told her staff.

"Remember when you were 15 and you liked that guy and your friends all said, 'Oh, he's not calling because he's too shy'?" Ms. Rubenstein asked her charges. Several young women nodded in recognition of that woozy adolescent feeling. "Well, guess what? No, he's not shy. He just doesn't like you. Wake up."

And along with its jubilant how-to articles about shampoos and interviews with Nick, Drew, Justin and Jeff, CosmoGirl strikes a subtle tone of caution. A quiz for readers asked, "Are you a sucker?" and categorized readers' responses under headings like "Easily Fooled."

Mary-Kate and Ashley Magazine bills itself as a magazine about self-empowerment, very much in the style of grown-up magazines like O: the Oprah Magazine or even Self, its senior editor, Erin Brereton, said. (Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen are 14-year old twins whose made-for-television movies and television show "Two of a Kind" on the Fox Family Network have attracted millions of teenage and preteenage viewers.)

Ms. Brereton, who at 25 is one of the oldest editorial staff members, said that the magazine aims to treat girls like smart women. One of the first cover stories is "You're Better Looking Than You Think: Avoid the Media Hype."

"The typical way to deal with that for the other teen magazines would be to profile five girls with eating disorders," Ms. Brereton said. "We're not about tragedy stories. A lot of teen magazines throw in this self-empowerment message but surround it by so much beauty and fashion it becomes meaningless."

Mary-Kate and Ashley Magazine can sound very adult indeed. One article -- "Free Money! For Real!" -- follows the investment strategy of Shannon Walker, a 16-year-old student at North Chicago Community High School and advises readers to invest in funds that require small investments, like the Alger Balanced Fund. Another article asks, "Are You Tech Smarter Than Your Parents?"

Teen People has in the last year covered issues like depression, teenage suicide, violence and wartime rape and, in a two-part series, followed one 17-year-old reader who gave up her baby for adoption. The magazine, as most of them do now, has a sex column, and also includes a monthly financial column.

"Some people say, 'Oh how sad that kids have to face all these grown-up issues now,' " Barbara O'Dair, the managing editor, said. "I think the grown-up issues were always there, it is just that our parents protected us from them."

But with all these magazines out there catering to the teenage girl, are the chances of survival for all of them realistic?

Valerie Muller, senior vice president and director for print services at MediaCom in New York, the media agency owned by the Grey Global Group, said that advertisers are betting yes.

"This isn't all kid, teeny-bopper stuff now," she said.

Kevin G. Umeh, the president of Element, a market research firm that studies the buying patterns of teenagers, said that teenage magazines offer advertisers the best way to attract adolescent consumers while they are young and keep them.

"Teenagers are avaricious consumers," he said. "They do not have to pay rent, they don't have to pay for health insurance, so their income is almost entirely disposable. They

generally don't save. The trend is spend, spend, spend. And advertisers love to get them young because the chances they can keep them for life are good."

Some say the magazines help to create an environment of intense acquisitiveness, which may or may not be a good thing. James B. Twitchell, a professor of literature and the author of "Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism" (Columbia University Press, 1999), said that the teenage magazines fostered an attitude of consumer desire that would stick with their readers for life.

"These magazines are indulgent," Mr. Twitchell said. "They show that we are living in a world where things are doing the work of ancestry and religion and education in terms of generating social place and meaning. I don't know if that is a good thing."

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