



From *Family Circle* to *Seventeen*: How the Magazine Industry Turned Feminism Mainstream

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Abstract: The 1950s and 60s saw the convergence of three movements – second wave feminism, youth culture, and the Marketing Company Era. These three movements collaborated to create a shift in messaging in magazines for young women from depictions of female domesticity to those of female autonomy through a reciprocal relationship between the reader and the magazine. Both pragmatic and radical women’s magazines emerged, straying from the stereotypical depiction of the domestic woman. *Seventeen* introduced the first teen magazine, appealing to girls’ impressionable ages to shape their views while making them feel seen. Ultimately, women’s magazines picked up on the changing tides, and feminist changes took place through content such as advertising, stories, news coverage, and political content. Sales data from magazines shows the efficacy of their strategies, as girls were following what the magazines had to say. By appealing to public sentiment through popular media, magazines were able to create mainstream shifts in such sentiment to advance women’s role in society. Today, social media and users mirror the reciprocal relationship between magazines and users many decades ago, offering an opportunity for women’s rights activists to effect change.

1. INTRODUCTION

Three movements – second wave feminism, youth culture, and the Marketing Company Era – converged to fundamentally change the content and approach of teen and women’s magazines in the 1950s and 60s. The new reciprocal relationship between reader opinion and media influence furthered mainstream views of women’s autonomy and place in society. Although past scholars have explored how second wave feminism, youth culture, and the Marketing Company Era independently affected women’s magazines, this paper will examine how these movements overlapped and interacted to promote common messages about women’s societal roles.

2. THE THREE MOVEMENTS

Second wave feminism took place from the 1960s through the 1990s. The movement came on the heels of the post-World War II era, which fostered the idea of an American Dream accomplished through a suburban lifestyle. For women, this dream required their role as a housewife estranged from worldly matters. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* sparked the movement and many second wave feminist principles by fleshing out the “problem that has no name” shared but not discussed by American women: women should, but do not, find satisfaction in “the fulfillment of their own femininity.”¹ This fulfillment included dedication to the home, children, and husband, as well as contentment in the monotony of domesticity integral to the American Dream.

Youth culture and the teen market were born from the altered economic and social landscape of the United States after World War II. As the children of the postwar baby boom entered their teens in the 1950s and 60s, society began to recognize them as a distinct age group and audience. The word “teenager” was coined by a writer in the 1940s to define an age group suddenly of great interest to marketers and social reformers and soon moved into wide circulation.² Economically, “real person

¹Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013).

²Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager: [a New History of the American Adolescent Experience]*, repr. ed. (New York: Perennial, 2006), 226.; Kelley Massoni, “Teena Goes to Market’: *Seventeen* Magazine and the Early Construction of the Teen Girl (As) Consumer,” *The Journal of American Culture* 29, no. 1 (2006): 31, accessed October 20, 2023,

income had risen tremendously” and “there was money around to be spent, if the industry could only come up with enough attractive ways to soak it up.”³ According to author Thomas Hine, this new economic opportunity allowed “the teenage market” to emerge “as a potent force.”⁴ Socially, teen marketing expert Eugene Gilbert found that “young people had become markedly more conformist since the war” and consequently “more susceptible to a well-positioned marketing campaign that played on their insecurities and desire to look and act like their peers.”⁵ A 1946 article in *Business Week* revealed a similar idea, writing that “the teen-age market” “is a jackpot market, because, unlike her older sisters, every teen-ager wants to look almost exactly like every other teen-ager.”⁶ In 1958, Gilbert told businessmen that the “purchasing power of teens was \$9.5 billion.” According to him, “57 percent of teenagers bought their own sports equipment and records, 40 percent their own clothes, and 35 percent their own shoes.”⁷ Companies began catering to these autonomous teenagers, giving them a voice in American society through both teen magazine content and economic freedom.⁸

The Marketing Company Era was defined by this new focus on appealing to the customer. Until the 1930s, companies were production-oriented: focused on making products from the resources they had available, not based on the needs and wants of the consumer. From the 1930s to the 1950s, companies turned sales-oriented, focused not only on creating a product, but on selling as much of that product as possible at a profitable price. In the 1950s and 60s, companies shifted to market orientation, prioritizing consumer satisfaction and using consumer input to shape the products it was creating. Robert J. Keith, the former Executive Vice President of Consumer Products and Co-Director of the Pillsbury Company, outlined the shift: “In today’s economy the consumer ... is at the absolute dead center of the business universe.”⁹ Companies used the consumer’s desires as criteria for determining which products to market, transformed their small advertising departments into marketing departments, and started positioning brand managers as the backbone of marketing, and ultimately, the determinant of a company's success. In thinking “first, last, and always of his sales target, the consumer,” businesses began to “adjust to the shifting tastes and likes and desires and needs which have always characterized the American consumer.”¹⁰

3. NEW WOMEN’S MAGAZINES

Magazines with more pragmatic content also began to emerge during this time. In the 1940s, when companies began to focus on sales, *Woman’s Day* and *Family Circle* gained wide popularity. These magazines were “for women who had to be careful about how they spent their money, who had to do their own housework, and who had little cash, if any, to spend on new fashions.”¹¹ While these magazines still depicted women in domestic roles, they did so less dramatically and more rationally by explaining why the advice was important instead of telling women to blindly follow it. In doing so, editors didn’t condescend to readers, an important shift in increasing levels of respect for young women. In addition to the language, the graphics of these magazines were more practical. There were “money-saving menus, dress patterns, and decorating and beauty hints,” as well as “Plain Janes in a row of models.” This new approach evidently fared well amongst women, as *Woman’s Day* advertising pages grew 10 percent in 1973.¹² Such numbers indicate that the magazines were successful in selling practical content in the sales-orientation era of the 1940s and 50s. However, these magazines still depicted domestic women, not yet using reader input to govern their content.

Businesses that increasingly catered to consumers needed new ways to advertise and understand consumer desires. From the 1950s to the 1960s, women’s magazines filled this need while themselves

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120904192358/http://web.wvcc.edu/jenniferboyden/files/2011/01/Teena-goes-to-Market.pdf>.

³ Hine, *The Rise*, 237.

⁴ Hine, *The Rise*, 237.

⁵ Hine, *The Rise*, 250.

⁶ “Teenage Market. It’s Terrific,” *Business Week*, 1946, 72, quoted in Massoni, “Teena Goes,” 39.

⁷ Hine, *The Rise*, 250.

⁸ Hine, *The Rise*, 250.

⁹ Robert J. Keith, “The Marketing Revolution,” *Journal of Marketing*, 35, accessed October 20, 2023.

¹⁰ Keith, “The Marketing,” 35.

¹¹ John William Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *The Magazine in America, 1741-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 267.

¹² Tebbel and Zuckerman, *The Magazine*, 268.

selling a product to women through editorial content. The relationships between these new magazines and their readers melded advertising with selling stories. Top women's magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal* and *McCall's* grew from about 5 million to 7 million readers and 4.5 million to 8.5 million readers from 1956 to 1966, respectively.¹³ Second wave feminists took note of the growing power of this print media. Betty Friedan herself recognized the importance of print media in furthering or hindering women's rights in *The Feminine Mystique* when she examined how women's magazines projected images of female domesticity in the 1950s.¹⁴ On the one hand, through both *The Feminine Mystique* and her activism, Friedan was at the center of dialogue surrounding abortion, public health, and birth mortality rates. On the other hand, her book was immensely popular. She understood that the content of mainstream magazines was critical to influencing public sentiment around the second wave feminist movement.

One result of this feminist push was a rise in radical feminist magazines. Perhaps the most well-known was *Ms.* magazine, the first national American feminist magazine that sought to bring the women's rights movement into mainstream media. It was less likely to portray women in family roles than traditional magazines like *McCall's* and *Redbook*, and three times more likely than traditional magazines to portray women in employment roles. Furthermore, *Essence* magazine, founded amidst the 1960s civil rights movement and the first magazine aimed at African-American women, encouraged women to challenge men's behavior and assured readers they could be themselves, messaging that was in line with the second wave feminist movement in its promotion of smart, independent women.¹⁵ But with about half a million readers each, these magazines attracted only a fraction of the readers that more popular women's magazines did. More broadly accepted and mainstream shifts needed to take place.

4. THE RISE OF TEEN MAGAZINES

Teen magazines emerged during the 1940s, 50s, and 60s in concurrence with youth culture, promoting new second wave feminist ideas about female autonomy through the presentation of the teen girl as a powerful consumer. Born in 1944, *Seventeen* was the first teen magazine in a time when the concept of a magazine dedicated solely to teenagers was unheard of. Estelle Ellis, Promotion Director at *Seventeen*, explained that "there was no awareness of teenage girls" at the time. "There wasn't even anyone producing clothes for this age group. There were no cosmetics being created for this age group. So it's hard to believe it, but at the time, it was totally... new terrain," she continued.¹⁶ According to Kelley Massoni, who studied *Seventeen's* formation of the teen girl as a consumer, Helen Valentine, the founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Seventeen*, started the publication because "teenage women needed a magazine of their own" and "had the potential to become an important new consumer market segment."¹⁷ This identification of teenage girls as a new market built on the emerging teen market as a whole. Ellis had to convince advertisers that the teen girl "reader market" was profitable and that "Teena had what it took to be a consumer."¹⁸ *Seventeen's* start was shaped by this focus on the teen girl as a consumer.

The magazine "advised the high school reader on how to be an ideal 'teen,'" describes Massoni.¹⁹ To create this image, the magazine's first promotional campaign, "Meet Teena," used demographic surveys to shape its mascot Teena into the "average" teen girl reader: 16 years old, 5'4", 118 lbs, public school student, middle class, works after school, helps with shopping and domestic activities,

¹³Ed Timke and Wenyue Gu, "Comparing Major Women's Magazine Circulation across the 20th Century," James Madison University, accessed October 20, 2023, <https://sites.lib.jmu.edu/circulating/2020/03/15/comparing-major-womens-magazine-circulation-across-the-20th-century-by-ed-timke-and-wenyue-lucy-gu/>.

¹⁴Friedan, *The Feminine*.

¹⁵Ashley Hunsberger, "The Framing of Feminism in Cosmopolitan Magazine during Second-Wave Feminism," *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 8, no. 2 (2017): 18, accessed October 20, 2023, https://elocdn.blob.core.windows.net/eu3/sites/153/2017/12/02_Cosmopolitan_Hunsberger.pdf.

¹⁶ Estelle Ellis, interview by Muriel Meyers, New York, NY, September 10, 1990.

¹⁷Massoni, "Teena Goes," 32.

¹⁸ "Seventeen: A Unique Case Study," April 15, 1945, Box 18, File 5, Estelle Ellis Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

¹⁹Massoni, "Teena Goes," 32.

and more.²⁰ Ellis described this tactic as “personifying the market”; by reflecting the average reader in its magazine, *Seventeen* was directly incorporating the consumer into its content. As a magazine precisely tailored to every aspect of its reader’s being, it captivated teen girls around the country and achieved immense success.

For the first time, teen girls saw themselves reflected in the content they read. One “Meet Teena” advertisement reads, “not so long ago ... Teena ... looked into the family magazine rack for something to read. She found a magazine chic enough for mother, another rugged enough for father, a third just right for brother Bill, yet nary a one for her!” The editors of *Seventeen* identified a consumer need and used that need to shape its success, indicative of the Marketing Company Era. Since the Teena character was sad that publishers didn’t care about her, *Seventeen* was able to appeal to teen girls by positioning them as influential consumers: “and it wasn’t long before people were talking about Teena the High School Girl who reads . . . influences the buying habits of her family . . . chooses the clothes she wears, the lipstick she uses, the food she eats. Others still more farsighted thought of Teena in terms of future buying power—a career girl, a college student, a mother!”²¹ The advertisement let *Seventeen*’s teen girl readers know that they were visible in the marketplace and possessed economic freedom, and its look to the future also supplied these girls with power over their careers and education.

While the magazine still initially depicted traditional gender roles, its ideas of female power and gender equality in all aspects of life increased with the rise of second wave feminism and the changing American social climate. Furthermore, the idea that teenage girls were influencing “the buying habits of [their] famil[ies],” was a recurring theme in *Seventeen* advertisements. One advertisement reads, “Teena... ’s the one who drags beaux, mother, dad to a picture.”²² Another reads that “you can be sure [the teen girl’s] decisions are down to earth. That’s why friends and family consult her on their shopping problems.” Similar advertisements also boasted that the magazine was passed from daughters to mothers and teachers.²³ Marketing executives successfully touted teen girls’ impact on their parents’ decisions.

Seventeen’s marketing strategy also manifested youth culture. First, the magazine had to establish the teen as a distinct group. According to Massoni, since *Seventeen* was “competing head-to-head for advertising with other fashion magazines, it had to establish both its readership and itself as distinct entities in the publishing world so that advertisers would see that they could only ‘reach’ the teenage buyer via *Seventeen*.”²⁴ Editors also understood the minds of young readers. An advertisement titled “*Seventeen* Gets Them Young” writes that *Seventeen* influences girls “when they’re still impressionable” “before they’ve been sold for good!”²⁵ The idea that teenagers, while having great freedom, “must fill [their minds] with the input of others,” was pivotal to the magazine’s campaign, says Massoni. One advertisement claims, “Our girl Teena (unlike her older sister) wants to look, act, and be just like the girl next door.”²⁶ The editors knew the value of teenagers’ young minds when developing their advertisements and stories and used this knowledge of their readers to succeed. As teen girls influenced each other, magazines had to appeal to the masses. These factors allowed *Seventeen* to maximize a new, fruitful market of young girls. While the magazine sought to influence these girls toward buying products and following advice columns, the very market attention these girls were attracting reveals their recognition as a powerful, respected economic and social force.

The influence of *Seventeen*’s marketing was impressive. From selling 400,000 copies in its first issue to approximately 8 million by the 1950s, *Seventeen* commanded a powerful market segment. On its five year anniversary, the magazine published a print ad describing the changes that had taken place in the teen market:

²⁰ "Life With Teena," 1945, Box 18, File 1-2, Estelle Ellis Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

²¹ "Meet Teena," Box 38, File 5, Estelle Ellis Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

²² *Seventeen* Advertisement, Box 38, File 5, Estelle Ellis Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

²³ "You Can't Tear Her Away from *Seventeen*," Box 10, Estelle Ellis Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

²⁴ Massoni, "Teena Goes," 38.

²⁵ "Seventeen Gets Them Young," Box 26, File 1, Estelle Ellis Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

²⁶ "Teena is a Copycat," Box 38, File 5, Estelle Ellis Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Fashion manufacturers are creating clothes styled and patterned exclusively for the teen age girl. Retailers are expanding teen shops, hiring advisors, organizing high school boards, planning ads, windows, and department displays to attract Teena and her friends to every department in a store. Cosmetic and toiletries companies are packaging special products for the teen consumer . . . and are selling their sales staff on the importance of catering to the adolescent.²⁷

Ellis summed up *Seventeen's* influence: "Well, we made history, we made publishing history." She describes how the magazine "identified the youth market long before anyone understood where this behemoth of a market was going or before everybody knew that [*Seventeen*] would create... a youth culture that would shape the world for decades to come..."²⁸ By identifying the teen girl as a profitable market in the midst of second wave feminism, youth culture, and the Marketing Company Era, *Seventeen* was able to influence its readers through mainstream means.

In sum, a variety of new magazines emerged in the 1950s and 60s that promoted messages more empowering for young women. Magazines with more rational content, radical feminist magazines, and teen magazines all earned immense popularity amongst young women and spread ideas consistent with those of the second wave feminist movement.

5. SHIFTING ATTITUDES IN WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

With more varied options, the content of popular women's magazines began revealing and furthering the shifting public sentiment surrounding women's role in society. In the 1950s, the content of women's magazines promoted female domesticity and a limited role outside the home. As previously mentioned, Betty Friedan outlined this phenomenon in *The Feminine Mystique*, drawing heavily on the messaging in women's magazines to display how women were conditioned to be satisfied with domesticity. For example, she observes that *McCall's*, one of the most popular women's magazines of the time, had no mention of the world beyond the home during the 1950s. According to Friedan, women's magazines depicted the woman's world as confined to one's own body and beauty, men, babies, and home, and "there was no anomaly of a single issue of a single women's magazine."²⁹ In a meeting with a group of magazine editors, Friedan observed the editors' discourse: one editor said "plaintively," "'Can't you give us something else besides 'there's death in your medicine cabinet?' Can't any of you dream up a new crisis for women? We're always interested in sex, of course.'"³⁰ Such discourse reveals that editors at the time believed they could frame the boundaries of women's sexual freedom. In addition, "reading and learning about new products in the marketplace became part of the housewife's job," demonstrating how editors consciously relegated women to the home and distracted them with domestic matters.³¹ Male editors told magazines what to publish and magazines told women what to think.

According to Friedan, however, there was "a schizophrenic split" in "the image of the American woman" at this time.³² Her observation of this "split" occasioned a shift in magazine focus from the domesticated image of womanhood to the more progressive outside-the-home version, which encompassed the greater importance of sexuality, reproductive rights, and gender equality in general.³³ Magazines picked up on these changes and began depicting fewer housewives and more "women being successful," describes Kyra Gemberling.³⁴ Moreover, there was a decline in the number of women shown in the home and an increase in the number of women outside the home in traditional magazines like *McCall's* and *Redbook* from 1959 to 1969.³⁵ Friedan wrote that by "1962 the plight of the trapped American housewife had become a national parlor game. Whole issues of magazines, newspaper columns, books learned and frivolous, educational conferences, and television

²⁷"You Can't Blow Away Five Years!," Box 38, File 5, Estelle Ellis Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

²⁸Ellis, interview.

²⁹Friedan, *The Feminine*, 36.

³⁰Friedan, *The Feminine*, 37.

³¹Gemberling, "Feminine Agendas."

³²Friedan, *The Feminine*, 46.

³³Gemberling, "Feminine Agendas."

³⁴Gemberling, "Feminine Agendas."

³⁵Hunsberger, "The Framing," 18.

panels were devoted to the problem.”³⁶A shift was taking place from depictions of women as domestic and weak to those of women as successful and powerful.

6. ADVERTISING

One area that furthered this shift was advertising, which increasingly catered to women’s interests instead of trying to sell products directed by men. Advertising in these magazines was quite influential. Popular magazines in the United States had become integral to marketing: by 1900, advertisements constituted up to 50 percent of magazine content, often more than 65 percent, and advertising typically accounted for half of a magazine’s revenue.³⁷Friedan wrote that “the mass-circulation magazines” were “vying fiercely with each other... to deliver more and more millions of women who w[ould] buy the things their advertisers sell. Does this frantic race force the men who make the images to see women only as thing-buyers?”³⁸It seems this understanding of women ultimately changed with the rise of second wave feminism and the Marketing Company Era.

A prime example of the shift in advertising towards women was in fashion. A 1940 issue of *Ladies’ Home Journal* shows a fifty-year old woman in an article titled “She Has More Time To Be Attractive.”³⁹The article reasons that, with the kids out of the house, older women have more time to focus on their appearance and pay attention to fashion and beauty trends. This tactic is used to advertise a “calfskin bag, doeskin gloves,” and “alligator belt.” With one of their main responsibilities, children, out of the picture, women were told to invest more time in their other responsibility, beauty. About two decades later, however, there is a prominent difference in *Ladies’ Home Journal’s* advertising. An advertisement for Warner’s A’Lure elastic bras writes, “Did you know that every time you breathe, your bra size changes? Does *your* bra change with you?”⁴⁰ The advertisement reveals that companies were prioritizing comfort instead of mere beauty and putting out products that women wanted. Furthermore, by tailoring lingerie to the tastes of women, companies were giving women autonomy over their bodies. This new recognition of female preferences is indicative of the Marketing Company Era and the growing power being given to women.

7. STORIES

The stories in magazines reveal a similar shift. In the 1950s, stories minimized the decisions and capabilities of women. Friedan describes a fictional story titled “The Sandwich Maker” in *Ladies’ Home Journal* that depicts an American wife: “She hates having to ask her husband for money every time she needs a pair of shoes, but he won’t trust her with a charge account ... She tries to earn money by selling sandwiches, but husband says, ‘You’re a mother. That’s your job. You don’t have to earn money, too.’ It was all so beautifully simple! ‘Yes, boss,’ I murmured obediently, frankly relieved.”⁴¹ The story demonstrates the submissive character women were expected to adopt as perpetuated through magazines. Teen magazines also once communicated similar messages. One article from *Seventeen* magazine, titled “Etiquette: Prom Primer,” positioned the boy as the economic authority in a relationship. The girl is told to “leave all the money affairs to him,” sacrificing her financial freedom.⁴² Another article offered advice about dating through a story, writing to girls directly that “People looking for dates don’t want to be challenged, they want to be reassured.” The article implied that girls were required to change their behavior for a boy to accept her, and readers believed it. One reader wrote, “I believe it is the duty of every girl to keep men happy... to be willing to make

³⁶Friedan, *The Feminine*, 25.

³⁷“History of Publishing,” Britannica, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/publishing/Scholarly-journals>; Martha A. Starr, “Consumption, Identity, and the Sociocultural Constitution of ‘Preferences’: Reading Women’s Magazines,” JSTOR, last modified September 2004, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29770262#>.

³⁸Friedan, *The Feminine*, 65.

³⁹*Ladies’ Home Journal*, October 1940, 26, accessed October 20, 2023, https://archive.org/details/sim_ladies-home-journal_1940-10_57_10/page/26/mode/2up.

⁴⁰*Ladies’ Home Journal*, May 1958, 9, accessed October 20, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/ladies-home-journal-v-075-n-05-1958-05/page/n9/mode/2up>.

⁴¹Friedan, *The Feminine*, 45.

⁴²C. Hatch, “Prom Primer,” *Seventeen*, May 1957, 54-56, quoted in Tessa Mazey-Richardson, “From Private to Public? Changing Perceptions of Young Women in *Seventeen* Magazine, 1955–1965,” *Global Studies of Childhood* 8 (2018): 295, accessed October 20, 2023, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2043610618792335>.

sacrifices,” revealing the dangerous influence of these magazines on young women.⁴³ These stories depict the messaging of magazines that discouraged female autonomy in the 1950s. However, a shift was slowly taking place, and signs of unrest about these depictions were emerging. In 1956, *McCall's* ran an article titled “The Mother Who Ran Away,” a story about a mother who could not express her discontent being confined to the home and as a result, tried to escape.⁴⁴ The article brought the highest readership of any article *McCall's* had ever run, revealing that women were intrigued by a life outside the home and that such stories sold.⁴⁵ If magazines wanted to succeed, they had to write more of them.

The 1960s saw magazines promote greater female power and autonomy. Friedan describes that in 1960, *Redbook* invited young mothers to write for an article called, “Why Young Mothers Feel Trapped.”⁴⁶ The editors received a shocking 24,000 replies. Tessa Mazey Richardson, who conducted a comprehensive study of copies of *Seventeen* from 1955 to 1965, observes that around the same time as “Why Young Mothers Feel Trapped,” *Seventeen* began to receive feedback from readers that the content they were putting out promoted “unrealistic depictions of girls.” With the rise of second wave feminism, *Seventeen's* messaging began to misalign with the changing social climate of the United States.⁴⁷ In order to retain their readers, magazines had to adapt to this shifting social climate. There was direct interaction between consumers and producers, as readers were not passive consumers and provided feedback that shaped the editors' content, exemplifying the strategies of the Marketing Company Era.

To do so, magazines made content for girls more lighthearted and less prescriptive. At the turn of the decade, articles about dating in *Seventeen* were classified in the contents page under the heading “You and Others,” defining the teen girl's romantic life through relationships with required proper etiquette. By 1963, similar articles appeared under the heading “Having Fun,” suggesting that girls were no longer required to be in a relationship with a strict set of rules or expectations. Mazey-Richardson observes that such editorial changes loosened the previously rigid depictions of gender roles in a relationship.⁴⁸ In a pamphlet titled “Your New Emotions,” *Seventeen* provided advice to young girls navigating a relationship and teen love. One line in the pamphlet reads, “The simple, firm ‘No’ is your best weapon.”⁴⁹ The advice dissuaded girls from advancing in intimacy if they were not comfortable, placing control in their hands and representing the female autonomy second wave feminism sought to make mainstream.

Shifts were taking place in adult women's magazines, too. Middle class women's occupational statuses were being presented more positively in stories, straying from “defining the worth of women through unpaid domestic functions.”⁵⁰ Mentions of women's intelligence also increased from 1970 to 1975, as well as its positive depictions.⁵¹ Magazines were adapting to changing public sentiment brought about by second wave feminism in order to appeal to readers, in turn promoting messages that influenced public opinion themselves.

8. NEWS COVERAGE AND POLITICAL CONTENT

Women's and teen magazines' coverage of news and politics also transitioned from separating women and public issues to engaging women in political matters. Continuing to recount the editors' meetings she attended, Friedan described a male magazine editor in the 1950s who said:

Our readers are housewives, full time. They're not interested in the broad public issues of the day. They are not interested in national or international affairs. They are only interested in the family and the home. They aren't interested in politics, unless it's related to an immediate need in the home, like the price of coffee. Humor? Has to be gentle, they don't get satire. Travel? We have almost completely dropped it... You just can't write about ideas of broad issues of the day for women. That's

⁴³Mazey-Richardson, "From Private," 295.

⁴⁴*McCall's*, July 1956, 48-112, accessed October 20, 2023, https://archive.org/details/sim_rosie_1956-07_83_10/page/112/mode/2up.

⁴⁵Friedan, *The Feminine*, 50.

⁴⁶Friedan, *The Feminine*, 66.

⁴⁷Mazey-Richardson, "From Private," 297.

⁴⁸Mazey-Richardson, "From Private," 297.

⁴⁹"Your New Emotions," Box 17, File 13, Estelle Ellis Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁰Gemberling, "Feminine Agendas."

⁵¹Gemberling, "Feminine Agendas."

why we're publishing 90 percent services now and 10 percent general interest.⁵²

Other male editors agreed, saying that “[w]omen can’t take an idea, an issue, pure,” and must be given news in a way that “they can understand.” For example, a natural childbirth expert submitted an article titled “How to Have a Baby in an Atom Bomb Shelter,” which the editors would have bought if it was better written. Friedan explains that according to the feminine mystique, “women, in their mysterious femininity, might be interested in the concrete biological details of having a baby in a bomb shelter, but never in the abstract idea of the bomb’s power to destroy the human race.”⁵³ In 1952, the year of a presidential election, an edition of *Good Housekeeping* published a segment on voting. But it wasn’t a direct explanation of the political process – rather, it was explained through fashion. The pages advertised new fashion styles through a campaign format describing “a line-up of the candidates most likely to sweep the elections,” the candidates being fashion styles such as a “Roman-striped dress of Dan River Wrinkle-Shed cotton with softly pleated skirt, white embossed piqué collar and cuffs.”⁵⁴ These articles reveal that news and politics were only covered in the frame of women’s domestic expectations. Women were not seen as worldly enough to understand such issues.

However, as second wave feminism progressed and women’s perceived social roles were shifting, magazines increasingly included political content for young women. Indeed, in Mazey Richardson’s study, approximately 20 percent of the *Seventeen* articles discussed in her sample Letters to the Editor from 1955-1965 include political content. In the letters, she found that much of this political content polarized readers.⁵⁵ However, this polarization actually reveals the involvement of teen girls in politics at the time and their divergence from strict domesticity. In 1963, an article titled “Inside the Peace Corps” called for teen girls to join the Peace Corps and consequently their participation in world matters. The article received unanimously positive responses, with one reader even “writing of their plans to join the Peace Corps upon graduating.”⁵⁶ This overwhelmingly positive response demonstrates that young women wanted to exit the home and gain power in American society. Advertising, stories, and news coverage from the 1950s and 60s reveal the shift in content that occurred to promote young women’s deviance from domestic and submissive social roles to independence and autonomy.

9. MAGAZINE INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC OPINION

Sales data and input from readers of young women’s magazines provide evidence of the real power these magazines had over shaping young women’s choices, as well as how reader interests shaped magazine content. To encourage companies to buy ad space, *Seventeen* provided testimonials of successful advertisements. A calling card campaign emphasizes the 8.5 million “high school girls who use *Seventeen* as their shopping guide; high school girls who check the magazine’s editorial and advertising papers before they buy.”⁵⁷ It references “Harvey’s of Nashville,” whose “two column, \$625 insertion drew 36,000 inquiries,” and its “December cover” that “sold 2,500 teen-age evening gowns,” and would have sold more but for a fabric shortage.⁵⁸ The magazine “welcomed, even solicited, readers’ comments and reactions to the magazine,” listening to feedback from readers to maintain relevance.⁵⁹ Women’s magazines revealed similar findings of reader involvement. A May 1958 issue of *Ladies’ Home Journal* included an article under “Our Readers Write Us” titled “A Father’s Place... in the Home?” The reader-contributed article provided a positive account of a stay-at-home father and how it “worked out wonderfully for” his “family.”⁶⁰ This content reveals how integral readers were to magazines at the time and the economic and social relationship they had with such magazines. The dynamic and influence between the readers and the editors embody the Marketing Company Era, as magazines were directly taking into account reader input and as a result,

⁵²Friedan, *The Feminine*, 37.

⁵³Friedan, *The Feminine*, 51.

⁵⁴*Good Housekeeping*, August 1952, 68, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/good-housekeeping-vv-135-n-02-1952-08/page/72/mode/2up>.

⁵⁵Mazey-Richardson, “From Private,” 297.

⁵⁶“Inside the Peace Corps,” *Seventeen*, May 1963, 152-194, quoted in Mazey-Richardson, “From Private,” 299.

⁵⁷*Seventeen* Calling Card, Box 17, File 11, Estelle Ellis Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁸“Stuff from *Seventeen*,” 1945, Box 25, File 6, Estelle Ellis Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁹Mazey-Richardson, “From Private,” 293.

⁶⁰*Ladies’ Home*, 4.

were able to make meaningful impressions on readers.

10. CONCLUSION

In 1963, Betty Friedan critiqued women's magazines as subordinating women's roles to the home. However, around this time, the influences of second wave feminism, the emergence of the teen as a profitable and prominent audience, and market forces responding to reader input all contributed to a landscape in which teen and women's magazines promoted more feminist-leaning ideas, which in turn shifted mainstream opinions. These days, popular social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook are effectively an extension of the Marketing Company Era. These platforms' algorithms provide users with instant gratification from content tailored to them based on their interactions with other content. Such instant gratification can be negative, pushing toxic beauty images onto girls and negative self-perceptions. However, because content is driven by user demand, activists can employ this same algorithm to build positive images and feminist sentiment, echoing the tactics used by magazines and second wave feminists in the mid-20th century to ultimately shift public attitudes towards female empowerment.

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