

# KEY FACTS

Fall 2004

## Tweens, Teens, and Magazines

Ever since *Seventeen* magazine made its debut in the 1940s, teen magazines have been one of the most successful genres of magazines. But in the late 1990s, the teen magazine market exploded, with scores of new titles entering the playing field in response to the largest youth market since the Baby Boomers—an estimated 33 million 12- to 19-year-olds who spend upwards of \$175 billion annually.<sup>1</sup> The sheer size of this group of “Echo Boomers” and the competing media choices available to them have splintered the youth audience in more ways than ever before. Niche journals for boys interested in extreme sports, “little sister” magazines spun off from popular women’s titles, online companions to print editions, and alternative ‘zines—all these trends and more are reshaping the world of teens and magazines in new ways.

### Teen Magazines, Past and Present

- During the 1990s, teens constituted the fastest-growing segment of the population, which signaled to publishers that the market could support more teen titles: the number of new teen magazines more than tripled from 5 in 1990 to 19 in 2000.<sup>2</sup>
- Up until the late 1990s, *Seventeen*, *Teen*, and *YM* were the top three teen magazines, with a total of 6.3 million readers. Then the teen magazine market became more crowded and competitive with adult-to-teen crossovers that shifted the balance, starting with *Teen People* in 1998, followed by *CosmoGirl!*, *Elle Girl*, and *Teen Vogue*. These changes ultimately forced *Teen* to fold, *Seventeen*’s ad revenues to drop, and *YM*’s circulation to decline. The fallout eventually led *Seventeen* and *YM* to reposition themselves to target older teens 17 and up.<sup>3</sup>
- Each of these so-called “little sister” startups has its own distinct take: *CosmoGirl!* is targeted to the Cosmo reader’s younger sister but without the explicit sex talk, *Elle Girl* is for the off-beat, street-chic girl with a multicultural flair, and *Teen Vogue* is aimed at the fashion-conscious adolescent female.<sup>4</sup>
- By 2004, analysts warned that the teen market had peaked.<sup>5</sup> According to the group that tracks magazine circulations, the Audit Bureau of Circulation, in 2003 the teen market reported circulation losses from the previous year with one notable exception—*CosmoGirl!* whose circulation was up 18.5 percent.<sup>6</sup>
- Launched in 1944, *Seventeen* is the oldest and remains the most popular teen magazine in circulation today. Striving to maintain its dominance in the field, in 2003 *Seventeen* launched a return to Middle America values with a wholesome (as opposed to sophisticated) fashion statement.<sup>7</sup>
- Some teen magazines focus primarily on celebrities and the entertainment industry. *Twist*, *J-14*, and *M* all attract young tween and teen girls interested in music, entertainment, celebrity gossip, and pull-out posters.<sup>8</sup> The oldest teen fan magazine is *Tiger Beat*, launched in 1965. In 1972, *Right On!* started up to spotlight the latest news and information about Blacks in the entertainment business and was later joined by *Word Up!* and *Black Beat*, which focus on the urban music scene.<sup>9</sup>
- Alternatives to the traditional celebrity or beauty and fashion-driven magazines have also emerged for teens. *Girls’ Life*, or *GL*, winner of the Parents Choice Award, provides girls ages 10 to 15 a balance of information about beauty, fashion, and celebrities with advice about friends, family, boys, school, self-esteem, and profiles of real girls facing challenges.<sup>10</sup> Smaller alternative magazines that focus more on self-development and social issues have found a niche as well among teen girls. *Teen Voices*, a quarterly nonprofit magazine launched in 1990, has a national readership of 75,000 and a companion Web site, *Teen Voices Online*. Created to reach “high-risk” inner-city girls on issues such as nontraditional career choices, teen pregnancy, and sexual assault, almost all the magazine’s editors are minority girls and young women who live below the poverty line. *New Moon*, started in 1992 with a current circulation of 30,000, has a focus on self-development for girls 8 to 14 years old.<sup>11</sup>
- While there are more ethnic-oriented magazines than ever before, the majority are aimed at young adults rather than teens. Some teen launches have been short lived, such as *Latin Girl*, which at its startup in early 1999 was touted as the first and only national magazine created to address the needs of Hispanic female teens who want to maintain their bicultural identity.<sup>12</sup> Others are smaller publications with a mission such as *Blackgirl Magazine*, which started as a bimonthly publication in 2002 by a 13-year-old girl with the goal to empower African American teens by “promoting positive messages and imagery.”<sup>13</sup> *SuperOnda*, a magazine that partners with several universities, is targeted to the 18-year-old Hispanic high-achiever, with a focus on education and career, as well as entertainment, news, and politics.<sup>14</sup>
- The Scholastic Teen Magazine Network reaches the highest number of 12- to 17-year-olds, through its outlets *New York Times Upfront*, *Scholastic Action*, *Scholastic Scope*, *Scholastic Choices*, *Junior Scholastic*, *Science World*, and *Literary Cavalcade*. Taken together, the magazines have an estimated circulation of 11.2 million.<sup>15</sup>

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## Magazines and Teen Boys

- While most magazines for teen girls are about beauty, cosmetics, people, and relationships, those for teen boys are about electronic gaming, sports, music, cars, and other hobbies. The magazine market for teen males is dominated by smaller niche publications that appeal to specialized interests, such as *GamePro*, *Slam*, *Thrasher*, and *Under the Radar*. For the most part, teen boys who read mass-market magazines gravitate toward men's magazines such as *Sports Illustrated*, *ESPN*, *Spin*, and *Vibe*, which reportedly attract a high male teen readership.<sup>16</sup> For instance, 18- to 20-year-olds comprise 18 percent of the total readership for *Maxim* and 19 percent for *Stuff*.<sup>17</sup>
- Unlike adult-to-teen crossovers of women's magazines, spin-offs of men's magazines have not proven successful among teen boys. For example, *MH-18* was developed as a brand extension of *Men's Health* after focus group research indicated that teen boys ages 13 to 17 wanted lifestyle, relationship, and career information,<sup>18</sup> but it folded within a year.<sup>19</sup> One brand extension that has been highly successful is *Sports Illustrated for Kids* whose subscriber base is 8- to 15-year-olds, predominantly boys (82%) under age 12.<sup>20</sup>
- Recently, major advertisers have begun to pay attention to some of these niche publications. *The Source*, a hip-hop magazine whose readership is 88 percent teen males, became one of the fastest-growing publications during the late 1990s, attracting advertising from major apparel brands, athletic shoes, soft drinks, music, and even VISA and the milk industry. Other publishers followed this lead to tap the hard-to-reach 15- to 19-year-old teen male subculture, including *Vibe's* attempted spin-off *Blaze*, and others such as *TransWorld Snowboarding*, *Freeze*, and *BMX Snap*.<sup>21</sup>
- *Boys' Life*, the magazine of Boy Scouts of America first published in 1911, publishes two separate editions monthly, one for 6- to 11-year-olds and the other for teens ages 12 to 17,<sup>22</sup> with a total paid subscription of 1.2 million and advertising revenues of more than \$5 million.<sup>23</sup>

## Teen Magazines and Advertising

- Advertisers target teen consumers not only in teen magazines but also in a variety of magazines that attract a large teen readership, ranging from women's and men's magazines to music, sports, and entertainment.<sup>24</sup> A 2003 study conducted by the Simmons Market Research Bureau indicated that 12- to 17-year-olds comprise almost one-quarter (22.9%) of readers of women's magazines, and slightly less than one-fifth of sports (19%), fashion (18%), and automotive (17.6%) magazines.<sup>25</sup>

## Teen Magazine Readership

- According to a 1999 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 15- to 18-year-olds spend an average of 13 minutes a day reading magazines. In any given day, nearly 6 in 10 teens this age will read a magazine, with boys more likely to do so than girls (63% vs. 55%).<sup>26</sup>

- As part of the annual Teen Read Week, SmartGirl and Young Adult Library Services Association (a division of the American Library Association) have conducted online surveys about teen reading interests, habits, and attitudes since 1999. The *Teen Read Week 1999* survey found that two-thirds (66%) of youth ages 11 to 18 report regularly reading magazines. Adolescents consistently cite magazines as their favorite non-book reading material.<sup>27</sup> In 2001, almost one-third (31.3%) named teen magazines as their favorite non-book reading material.<sup>28</sup>

## Content of Teen Magazines

- A 1997 analysis of articles in leading teen magazines—*Seventeen*, *YM*, *Sassy*, and *Teen*—found themes relating to appearance (37%), dating (35%), and clothes and fashion (32%) were most prevalent. Few articles focused on topics such as self-confidence (16%), family (15%), career (12%), school (12%), becoming independent (5%), and even fewer related to health issues such as alcohol, drugs, and smoking (3%, respectively), or sexually-transmitted diseases (3%), pregnancy, and contraception (2%, respectively).<sup>29</sup>
- Teen readers may have more opportunity to see faces of cultural diversity on the magazine cover than inside the magazine. A 1997 study of the leading teen magazines found that the vast majority of women and men were White in the article photographs (73% and 80%, respectively) and ads (88% for both genders).<sup>30</sup> But according to a 2002 *New York Times* survey that analyzed the ethnicity of magazine cover models over a five-year period, 1 in 4 teen magazines featured a minority on the cover in 2002, more than any other magazine category.<sup>31</sup>

## Role of Teen Magazines in Girls' Lives

- Studies of teen magazine readers indicate that they turn to these magazines as a valued source of advice about their personal lives. According to a focus group of 7th through 11th-grade girls, conducted by Teenage Research Unlimited for *YM*, teen readers want the content in their magazines to reflect their lives, and they rely on magazines as a sounding board, fashion and beauty consultant, and close confidant.<sup>32</sup> Another survey conducted by Taylor Research & Consulting Group indicated that 12- to 15-year-old girls look to magazines (42%) almost as much as their friends (45%) for the coolest trends.<sup>33</sup>
- In-depth interviews with girls ages 12 and 13 who were regular readers of teen magazines found that girls used the magazines to formulate their concepts of femininity and relied heavily on articles that featured boys' opinions about how to gain male approval and act in relationships with males.<sup>34</sup>
- For African American readers, the teen magazine tends not to be as important an influence as peers and cultural standards in defining femininity. In-depth interviews with African American girls 13 to 18 years old who were regular readers of the leading teen magazines indicated that they were less influenced by images of idealized beauty in the mainstream magazines than by their cultural standards which frequently were in direct opposition. The girls indicated that they wanted more diversity in the magazines, from the models and types of beauty products featured to the images of success and cultural experiences portrayed.<sup>35</sup>

## Teen Magazines and the Web

- Some industry analysts cite the Web as one of the largest threats to teen magazine readership,<sup>36</sup> while others suggest that going back and forth between the print and online worlds is becoming an integral part of life for teen magazine readers.<sup>37</sup>
- Teen magazines are transforming their editorial formulas to cultivate an online presence and sustain Net-savvy readers' interest between print issues. Editors of teen magazines report that most site visitors have already read the magazine and go online for more articles, compelling magazines to offer at least 50 percent original Web content.<sup>38</sup> According to *CosmoGirl!*, almost 6 in 10 teens visit a teen magazine's Web site with an open copy of the print version of the magazine.<sup>39</sup>
- Teen magazines use their companion Web sites to solicit reader feedback and build a loyal following. Polls, surveys, and message boards provide readers the opportunity to express their opinions and experiences, and contribute ideas to the print version. The Internet's multimedia capabilities are also being used for advertising that offers Internet-only promotions, sweepstakes, and special events and for streaming video movie previews. *Elle Girl* actually launched its Web site before the print edition.<sup>40</sup>
- Teen magazines use the Web to recruit "cool hunters" to stay informed about emerging trends in the youth culture. For example, *Teen People* accesses a network of 9,000 "trendspotters" across the nation that keep the editorial staff up-to-date about teen concerns and issues.<sup>41</sup>
- The Internet has also become a place where teen magazines provide support to their readers during a crisis. For example, after 9/11, all the magazines added a special section and reached out online to readers about the terrorist attacks. On September 12, 2001, the editor of *CosmoGirl!* sent an e-mail to 200,000 subscribers to check on them and used the American flag as a logo to launch a "Kiss America" Campaign. *YM* posted an online bulletin board with first-person responses to the tragedy, as well as information on how to deal with stress and where to volunteer.<sup>42</sup> *Teen People* developed a "Stars, Stripes and Strength" page asking readers to suggest ways to "fix" America.<sup>43</sup>

## Teen Magazine Trends

- Single-copy newsstand sales of teen magazines have declined substantially in recent years. Since 2001, *Teen People* dropped 20 percent in newsstand sales, and *Seventeen* declined by 35 percent.<sup>44</sup>
- TV crossovers with a potential built-in audience are generally considered safe new launches. For example, MTV recently experimented with two issues of an in-house publication tied to its programming and sold as a stand-alone newsstand title with a circulation of 300,000. Each issue was one of a kind with a different name and a different approach. The magazines covered new film releases, video games, and toys, and it came wrapped in a plastic bag that contained a smaller magazine about new music, along with a multimedia compact disc featuring movie and game trailers and samples of music, games, and movies.<sup>45</sup>

- Another teen magazine genre becoming more prevalent taps Christian teens who enjoy popular culture. Joining *Guideposts for Teens*<sup>46</sup> and *Brio*,<sup>47</sup> are *Breakaway* aimed at teen boys<sup>48</sup> and *Feed* targeted to the urban hip-hop culture.<sup>49</sup> The newest launch in this niche is *Beautiful Girl*, a beauty magazine started in 2003 as a quarterly publication with a companion Web site, both aligned with Christian beliefs designed to inspire teen girls to discover their inner beauty.<sup>50</sup> Like other teen publications, these magazines feature celebrity profiles, entertainment news, health and beauty tips, relationship advice, spiritual guidance, quizzes, and fiction.
- Teen Internet magazines, or Webzines, are emerging as a forum for teen voices, written by teens for teens. There are as many different types of Webzines as there are print magazines. Some are short-lived, while others outlive their print counterparts. *Blue Jean Online*, is a creative forum written and produced by teen girls and young women ages 14 to 22 who express their perspective through their writings, reviews, art, photography, and other creative work.<sup>51</sup> Still other Webzines offer a space for cultural diversity to flourish and empower minority youth. One example is the bilingual online magazine *Teen Latinitas* created for girls ages 15 to 20, started by students at University of Texas to provide culturally relevant content and build a sense of community where girls can communicate with others who have similar sensibilities, interests, and concerns.<sup>52</sup>

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