“You Can Make Them”: 
A content analysis of do-it-yourself articles in *Seventeen* magazine

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**Background:** Many previous studies have analyzed *Seventeen*’s content for reflections of or resistance to feminist messages (Peirce, 1990; Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman, 1998; Massoni, 2004). Since *Seventeen* began publishing in 1944, the role of women in society has changed in many ways, changes often credited to the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1946, the magazine identified their typical reader, a 16-year-old middle-class Caucasian girl it called “Teena” (Massoni, 2010). Since then, as women have entered the workforce in ever greater numbers (BLS, 2013), *Seventeen*’s target reader remains much the same: a 16-and-a-half year-old middle-class Caucasian girl (“Readers,” 2014). Another similarity over time is the magazine’s emphasis on appearance, a conclusion drawn by multiple studies (Peirce, 1990; Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman, 1998). To help readers achieve a fashionable appearance, *Seventeen* offered several solutions: the purchase of name brand garments as seen on celebrities or on fashion runways, the purchase of lower-cost alternatives to mimic high-fashion looks, and home production. Articles about creating fashion at home were the focus of this study. For decades, these do-it-yourself (DIY) fashion articles appeared in every issue.

**Purpose:** Though the demographic characteristics of the magazine’s readers have remained relatively constant over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the life those teenage girls can expect to live has not. Before the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, teenage girls in the magazine’s demographic were taught to prepare for lives of unpaid work in the home (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). This preparation included learning domestic skills like sewing and other means of fashion production. This study sought to determine whether changes to the number and content of *Seventeen*’s DIY fashion articles would echo the changing role of American women.

**Methodology:** This research analyzed the text in *Seventeen*’s DIY fashion articles using content analysis, an effective method to evaluate the manifest content of communication (Esterberg, 2002). *Seventeen* was chosen for analysis because it is not only the longest continuously publishing adolescent magazine, but also has the largest circulation record (Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman, 1998; “Readers,” 2014). The study evaluated all issues from 1945, the magazine’s first full year of publication, and all issues from 1955, 1965, 1975, 1985, 1995, 2005, and 2012, the most recent full year of publication at the time of this study. The use of multiple years of analysis and the span of time between them allow for comparison of data over time.

DIY fashion articles were evaluated for number, method of production, and the reasons for the completion of the recommended DIY fashion project. A coding sheet was developed, tested by
an independent researcher, and revised. Articles were located, counted, and analyzed, creating a frequency count for the necessary production methods and reasons given in the articles. Based on a priori knowledge of a convenience sample of six fashion professionals, techniques were classified by difficulty, as needing high levels of skill, low levels or no skill. Reasons to complete a project, as suggested in article texts, were determined, counted, and analyzed for themes that emerged, which included ease of production, financial savings, personal satisfaction, personal preference, currency, and fashionability.

Results: A total of 114 DIY fashion articles were identified. Until 1995, there was at least one article about the home production of fashion in every issue (1945 (n=15), 1955 (n=26), 1965 (n=19), 1975 (n=22), 1985 (n=17)), when numbers declined dramatically (1995 (n=6), 2005 (n=6), 2012 (n=3)). There is a similar decline in the occurrences of high-skill techniques. In 1945 and 1955, 100% of articles included mention of at least one high-skill techniques. In 1965 and 1975, 95% of articles mentioned high-skill techniques. In 1985, the number had decreased to 79%; in 1995, the number further decreased to 33%. In 2005 and 2012, no articles included methods of production that required skill. Of all the reasons for creating a DIY project, only currency, as defined by words like “current,” “now,” and “new,” and fashionability were found in every year’s issues. Ease of production, personal preferences, personal satisfaction, and financial savings fluctuated widely.

Conclusion: This study concludes that the changing role of women has influenced the amount and content in Seventeen’s DIY fashion articles, and that through these articles, Seventeen expresses the current reality that women work outside the home, and use their earnings to purchase, rather than make, their clothing – a reality made possible at least in part by the accomplishments of the feminist movement. However, this study adds to the body of knowledge evaluating American media content and concludes that Seventeen, at least in this respect, reflects feminism by recognizing, accepting, and promoting the changed role of women in society.

You can make them. (1945, February). Seventeen, p. 149.