

## “Am I Still a Virgin?”: What Counts as Sex in 20 years of *Seventeen*

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**Abstract** In this paper, I analyze what counts as sex using a qualitative content analysis of the sexuality and health advice columns in *Seventeen* from 1982 to 2001. These columns are a useful source for identifying adolescent sexual norms including what counts as sex. Previous sex research often assumed that sex meant penile–vaginal intercourse and was the cause of virginity loss. Thus, I use virginity-related key terms (e.g., virgin, sex) to identify the sexuality and health advice columns pertinent to this project. These columns illustrate how multiple sexual acts can cause virginity loss; however, *Seventeen* remains ambiguous in its discussion of what counts as sex. Letter writers are concerned with what sexual acts they can participate in and still remain virgins and what act defines virginity loss. My analysis reveals that the columns reinforce heteronormativity by telling readers virginity is lost only through penile–vaginal intercourse. Additionally, *Seventeen* supports the sexual double standard by placing the responsibility of sexual behavior solely on female adolescents rather than on them and their partners.

**Keywords** Technical virginity · Traditional virginity · Adolescents · Heterosexuality · Sexual behavior · Heteronormativity

### Introduction

Choosing to become sexually active and losing one’s virginity are important rites of passage; one’s virginity status is an important part of his or her identity (Carpenter 2001b; Cobb 1995). There is a general consensus in the literature and popular

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culture that penile–vaginal penetration (henceforth, referred to as intercourse) is the virginity-breaking event. Nevertheless, virginity is constructed differently based on situational circumstances. For example, the hymen has been used as an indicator of female virginity yet there is no such indicator of male virginity. If virginity is lost only through intercourse (i.e., the traditional virginity script) this allows for other forms of sexual activity (e.g., oral sex) all while remaining a virgin. For others, virginity is personally defined and the dominant definition of virginity loss is disregarded or modified for his or her own purposes.

Traditional scripts assume that sexual behavior should occur in a certain order (e.g., kissing tends to occur before intercourse) culminating in intercourse, which causes virginity loss (Gagnon 1990). The traditional virginity script renders all other sexual acts as somehow not as important because they do not cause virginity loss; or carry as high a risk of pregnancy (see Simon and Gagnon [1987] for a further discussion of sexual scripts). Importantly, the traditional virginity script does not allow for same-sex virginity loss because it privileges “straight” intercourse. Teen magazines present heterosexual sexual behaviors as normative (Carpenter 1998; Currie 1999; Jackson 1999).

It is important to explore which act or acts count as sex because this has implications for abstinence-only sex education. Abstinence-only sex education often fails to inform adolescents as to what they should abstain from sexually (Bailey et al. 2002; Hawkins et al. 2002). To fill in the blanks left by abstinence-only sex education, adolescents turn to other sources of sexual information, such as teen magazines. This project focuses on one such media source, the sexuality and health advice column (henceforth, sex advice column) in *Seventeen*. This column’s intent is to distribute sexual and health advice within the context of a magazine read for entertainment and as a resource of information.

Magazines both entertain and disseminate information, including sexual information. Readers actively use magazines by looking for relevance with their own lives (Milkie 1999) and to sort contradictory messages and gain sexual knowledge (Brown et al. 1993; Jackson 1999). Magazines are an important source of data because they are “one of the most accessible, inexpensive, and readily available media for information about sexuality” for teenagers (Garner et al. 1998, p. 60). Additionally, readers experience “peer interaction” through sharing their magazines and discussing its content (Milkie 1999). Readers of teen magazines use the problems and experiences of “peers” presented in teen magazines to help them feel normal (Milkie 1999) and to learn their available options regarding a host of issues (Baumgardner and Richards 2000). Adolescent girls cite magazines as significant sources of sexual information that are as meaningful a source as their parents (Treise and Gotthoffer 2002; Walsh-Childers et al. 2002). Thus, *Seventeen* is an important source of analysis to understanding what causes virginity loss.

### **The Social Construction of Virginity**

Historically, a woman’s sexuality was one of the few resources (often perceived as her most priceless) she had available to exchange for love and security (Schwartz

and Rutter 1998; Thompson 1984). Nevertheless, the high value placed on virginity might be weakening (Brumberg 1997). Carpenter (2002, 2005) adds that individuals perceive virginity as a gift, a stigma, or part of a process. Moreover, these interpretations influence the sexual double standard because understanding virginity as a gift harms women, understanding virginity as a stigma harms men, and understanding virginity “as a step in a process” is advantageous for both men and women because no one is stigmatized (Carpenter 2002, p. 359).

Because of the significance placed on virginity, it is important to know what causes virginity loss. Even sex researchers, however, do not consistently define “virgin,” “sex,” or “intercourse” (see Michaels and Giami 1999). Research indicates when respondents identify what counts as sex, nearly all respondents include intercourse (Bogart et al. 2000; Carpenter 2001a; McPhillips et al. 2001). Furthermore, a majority of respondents include anal sex and slightly less than half of respondents include oral sex (Bogart et al. 2000; Carpenter 2001a; Sanders and Reinish 1999) in their definition of virginity loss. Specifically, adolescents include many sexual behaviors in their definition of what counts as sexual activity in addition to sex and sexual intercourse (Hawkins et al. 2002). Adolescents also include activities such as kissing, hugging, oral sex, anal sex, and masturbation in their definition of what counts as sexual activity (Hawkins et al. 2002). Prior research indicates sexual activity and intercourse can include a variety of sexual experiences.

Virgins can be sexually active and sometimes consider themselves to be technical virgins. Technical virgins may only abstain from intercourse, so “technically,” they remain virgins (Laws and Schwartz 1977). Technical virgins still participate in other forms of sexual activity such as anal sex (Baldwin and Baldwin 2000; Janus and Janus 1993; Schlegel 2001; Thompson 1984), oral sex (Janus and Janus 1993; Remez 2000; Schlegel 2001; Thompson 1984), mutual masturbation (Janus and Janus 1993; Schlegel 2001), or sex with a same-sex partner (Thompson 1984). Research indicates adolescent virgins may still engage in other high-risk sexual behaviors while maintaining their technical virginity.

Virginity is a concept that has been, and in some cultures still is, applied only to women because the condition of a woman’s hymen is used to determine her virginity status (Berger and Wenger 1973). It is actually impossible to tell, however, if a girl is a virgin simply by examining the state of her hymen because hymens can be broken through exercise or by tampons (Brumberg 1997; Masters et al. 1988). Furthermore, the hymen might only stretch or not break at all during sex and some girls are born without or with only a partial hymen (Masters et al. 1988). Thus, the hymen is not a valid indicator of virginity status (Brumberg 1997; Holtzman and Kulish 1997). Holtzman and Kulish (1997) argue that if the status of the hymen is used as the marker for virginity status, then intercourse is the only sex that can count as virginity loss.

When virginity is considered lost only through intercourse, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered individuals are unable to lose their virginity with a same-sex partner, assuming same-sex virginity loss is desired (Denmark et al. 2000). The assumed virginity-losing act (i.e., intercourse) is also a form of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980); nevertheless, some lesbians define

virginity loss individually while others use more traditional definitions (Bouris 1994). Recently, Carpenter (2005) found gay, lesbian, and bisexuals contend virginity can be lost through oral sex, anal sex, or both, with some respondents arguing this standard should apply to everyone regardless of sexual identity. This suggests flexibility in the definition of virginity. Heteronormative virginity loss is placed on a pedestal compared to non-heteronormative virginity loss, even though individuals may have other sexual experiences they consider as important as intercourse. By maintaining virginity can only be lost through intercourse, nonheterosexual sexual experiences are rendered “irrelevant and illegitimate” (Ingraham 2002, p. 76).

The point at which virginity is lost has implications for the sexual double standard, which traditionally allows sexual freedom for men but denies sexual freedom for women (Schwartz and Rutter 1998). Even though the sexual double standard is not as strong as it once was (Cobb 1995; Schwartz and Rutter 1998), it still regulates behavior by labeling women negatively for the same actions that make men proud (Laws and Schwartz 1977). Furthermore, the sexual double standard pressures men to be sexually active (Carpenter 2005) and places the responsibility of controlling men’s sexual behavior on women (Durham 1998; McRobbie 2000). Interestingly, women may be at an advantage if the point when virginity is lost remains ambiguous because it could allow for their sexual gratification while still maintaining virginity (i.e., technical virginity) and abiding by the sexual double standard (Berger and Wenger 1973).

Past research on the topic of how people define having sex include using hypothetical situations (Bogart et al. 2000), case studies (Carpenter 2001a), questionnaires (Hawkins et al. 2002), interviews (McPhillips et al. 2001), surveys (Sanders and Reinisch 1999), and analysis of sex surveys (Michaels and Giami 1999). Teen magazines have also been used to explore the virginity script. Carpenter (1998, 2001b) analyzed *Seventeen* and *Bravo!* (a German teen magazine) providing evidence of the significance of virginity loss and again used *Seventeen* to identify what sexual scripts were presented to readers in sexuality and romance articles. My research differs from Carpenter’s (1998, 2001b) in that it focuses specifically on what counts as sex in the sex advice column of *Seventeen*. A limitation of using *Seventeen* is that there is no way to gauge readers’ interpretations of the magazine’s messages. Readers criticize, reject, and reinterpret media messages (Milkie 2002). Therefore, the messages I analyze may be different from the message *Seventeen*’s intended audience receives.

This research assesses the flexibility of virginity scripts addressed by *Seventeen*’s sex advice column. This column has the potential to illustrate how virginity is scripted for different types of adolescents (e.g., boys and girls) at different points in time, and could indicate that adolescents have important sexual experiences that are not considered virginity-losing experiences. For example, do the columns consider nonheteronormative virginity scripts (i.e., acts other than intercourse)?

In addition to reinforcing heteronormativity, the virginity script reinforces the sexual double standard. Traditionally, virginity scripts constrain women more than men and the responsibility of maintaining virginity of both men and women falls on women. A feminist perspective allows exploration of how *Seventeen* reinforces or

challenges the double standard. With the regulating control of the sexual double standard in mind, it is important to determine how the virginity script is being defined for adolescents. Furthermore, how virginity loss is defined has implications for public policy, including sex education. Moreover, this researcher raises the issue of consistency when using research terms such as sex, intercourse, or virginity while recognizing the fluidity of these terms.

This research is based upon a qualitative content analysis of *Seventeen's* sex advice column. This research aims to identify what counts as sex within the sex advice column in *Seventeen*. Second, it contributes to the growing literature using teen magazines to understand messages about sexual information. Finally, my research ultimately contributes to public policy related to sex education by examining an important source of sexual information for adolescents, including what counts as sex.

## Data and Methods

In my analysis, I focus on narratives regarding which sexual behaviors count as sex, and how the act of virginity loss is defined. *Seventeen* is an industry standard as the oldest teen magazine (since 1944) (*Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory* 1999, 1998) and has been the leader ever since (Currie 1999). *Seventeen's* intended audience is 13- to 19-year-olds (Currie 1999) yet reaches those aged 12- to 24-years every month (*Bowker's News Media Directory* 2003). Furthermore, in 2003, *Seventeen's* paid circulation included 1,950,000 subscribers (*Bowker's New Media Directory* 2003). *Seventeen* is regarded as a crucial resource for adolescent girls, making it an important resource for analyzing definitions of virginity loss (Wray and Steele 2002). *Seventeen* was chosen for the sample because it has been published much longer than any other teen magazine allowing the researcher to examine changes over time. Even though there are many teen magazines on the market today, during the sampling time frame very few existed and even fewer had a column devoted to sex advice as *Seventeen* had.

Typically readers writing to advice columns in *Seventeen* are asking indirectly about sexual scripts and which script(s) to choose (Carpenter 1998). Readers prefer the advice columns in addition to quizzes and “real life” stories compared to other types of columns (e.g., letter to the editor or fiction) in teen magazines looking to find a magazine’s “usefulness” (Currie 1999). Questions are presented as coming from a “typical” teenage girl” and the answers frame desirable behavior for adolescents (Currie 1999, p. 169). Readers compare what they read in magazines to their everyday life, looking for advice to solve actual problems (Currie 1999). The sex advice column usually takes the question-and-answer format, which is the most read column format (Currie 1999). Even if the column does not take this format the column’s author(s) make a point to tell readers the topic came from reader’s questions.

The sample for this research includes the sex advice column in every issue of *Seventeen* from August 1982 to December 2001. Issues were obtained from the Atlanta-Fulton County Library’s Central Library in downtown Atlanta, GA. Missing issues or pages were obtained through interlibrary loan.

In August 1982, *Seventeen* began the column, “Sex and Your Body.” This was the first time in *Seventeen* a monthly column had explicitly focused on the sexual issues of its readers (July 1982). The editors of *Seventeen* (July 1982) began this column because of the mixed messages adolescents receive regarding sex. Throughout the years, the column’s name has changed but the purpose remains the same. In 1993, the column changed its name to “Sex + Body.” In 2001, one column was called “Sex Smarts,” which was classified as “Sex + Body” because “Sex + Body” does not appear in this issue but does reappear in the following issues. The sample ends in December 2001, because inconsistencies in the column render consistent analysis difficult. For example, the column took different formats and titles from month to month, and did not appear at all in some issues. A limitation of using only one column is that *Seventeen* could contradict its messages in other parts of the magazine.

Reader’s questions were treated as if they were actually written by readers rather than fabricated by *Seventeen*’s editors. Even though *Seventeen* might write the letters, the magazine implies the letters are written by real teens. For example, at the end of many columns, readers are invited to write to *Seventeen* with their questions and *Seventeen* even provides a mailing address. Other times, within the text of the column, the author mentions how readers asked about the topic. Additionally, many of the columns were set up in a question-and-answer format suggesting that the question was from a reader while the answer was from the magazine. Ultimately, it is unknown what readers’ letters actually said or whether letters are fabricated. The extent to which letters are edited for publication (see Pattee 2004; Williams 2004), what unpublished letters inquire, and how *Seventeen* ultimately chose their topics are unknown. However, the researcher agrees with Jackson (2005a) who asserts the writers of the letters are “irrelevant for analysis since letters will be read and made sense of by readers independently of their source or status” (p. 258).

Qualitative content analysis is used to analyze 20 years of the sex advice column in *Seventeen* to understand how the virginity script is constructed. Virginity themes are gleaned from the magazine’s sex advice columns using Weber’s (1985) content analysis methods. After reading each column for virginity key terms, those columns using virginity key terms were then closely read repeatedly to determine how *Seventeen* constructed the virginity script. An example of a column classified as a virginity-related column asks the question: “Is it true that when a guy has sex with you, he can tell if you’re a virgin or not?” (April 1994, p. 112). Virginity key terms were developed from previous research as to what counts as sex (e.g., Sanders and Reinisch 1999). Virginity key terms include: abstinence, “cherry popped,” experience, fooling around, sexual slang, give in, hymen, intimacy, intercourse, nonvirgin, oral sex, sex, sexual activity, anal sex, vaginal sex, sexual, slept together, virgin, and went too far. These terms took a variety of forms. For example, experience included experiment sexually, physical experimentation, physically involved, sexual experience(s), and sexually experienced.

There were a total of 232 sex advice columns from 1982 to 2001; 58 (25%) use virginity key terms. Next, columns dealing with how virginity is maintained or how nonvirginity is attained were identified ( $N = 29$ ). These 29 (12.5%) columns are the focus of this paper because they include what counts as sex and ultimately how

virginity is lost. The researcher read these 29 columns to understand readers' questions about what causes virginity loss and *Seventeen's* responses. Though the sample size is quite small, the purpose of this project was to understand how *Seventeen* defined virginity loss and not to find out everything *Seventeen* discussed in the sex advice column.

## Findings

Overwhelmingly, according to *Seventeen*, penile–vaginal intercourse is the only sex that causes virginity loss. Oral sex is the sexual act that ranks nearly as important as intercourse but still does not cause virginity loss. Only once did *Seventeen* tell readers how virginity can be personally defined (September 1993). Below, is an illustration of the variety of ways that *Seventeen* is asked about virginity loss and how the editors define it. *Seventeen's* virginity-related columns can be categorized as answering the questions what counts as sex, what specific acts cause virginity loss (including oral sex and nonsexual virginity loss), what prompts a spontaneous virginity response (where the reader did not even ask about virginity; yet, *Seventeen* discussed virginity), what counts as safe sex, and what are the physical and emotional differences between virgins and nonvirgins. Finally, the section concludes with a summary of what counts as sex and causes virginity loss according to *Seventeen*.

### What Counts as Sex

Two columns address the general question of what counts as sex. These columns are important because if first sex causes virginity loss, then it is necessary to know what counts as sex. For example, a reader asks if oral sex is sex, and because she is having oral sex with her boyfriend, she wonders “if he will expect ‘real’ sex now” (October 1997, p. 94). *Seventeen* responded that oral sex “is a sexual act, but it isn’t sexual intercourse. Doing it doesn’t mean you lose your virginity....” (p. 94). Thus, oral sex is presented as serious, but does not cause virginity loss.

Oral sex is not the only questionable act potentially causing virginity loss. Another reader asks if she and her boyfriend had sex because “his penis was partially inside me” (December 1995, p. 46). *Seventeen* acknowledged, “there’s no textbook definition of sex that proves one of you right and the other wrong. You are right that, technically speaking, penetration pretty much equals sex. For your boyfriend, though, it may not qualify unless he has an orgasm.” Here, sex is defined based on penetration but for boys it might only count if he orgasms.

### Specific Acts

Other columns discuss what specific acts cause virginity loss including sexual and nonsexual actions. Questions about sexual acts range from the general (e.g., what

acts cause virginity loss) to the specific (e.g., fingering, penis partially inside the vagina, and oral sex). Nonsexual acts include tampons and gynecological exams.

In May 1983, *Seventeen* stated the first time “a penis is inserted into a vagina” (p. 56) the girl and the boy become nonvirgins. Additionally, *Seventeen* said if a boy put his finger inside a girl’s vagina this did not make the girl a nonvirgin but is often used by boys to pressure girls into having sex with them. Defining virginity as a specific act (i.e., intercourse) means girls can use their goal of saving their virginity until marriage as a bargaining tool with their boyfriends. As long as there is value placed on virginity, girls can use the argument that they want to remain a virgin in order to avoid submitting to behaviors they may not want. Nevertheless, *Seventeen* frames readers’ questions in ways assuming girls want to maintain virginity—upholding the sexual double standard, which assumes boys want to become nonvirgins and girls want to remain virgins. Furthermore, *Seventeen* reinforced the perception that a penis has to enter the vagina to cause virginity loss. Some readers have had their vaginas partially penetrated by a penis raising questions about the traditional script, which assumes penetration—no matter how brief—is sex.

One reader stated she and her boyfriend started to have sex and stopped, but her hymen broke, and she now wondered if she was still a virgin because she feels physically different (September 1993). *Seventeen* replies,

Technically, if you’ve had sexual intercourse, you’re not a virgin. I’m not sure whether what you and your boyfriend did qualifies as sexual intercourse. If you sort of had sex, then I guess you sort of lost your virginity. If you think you didn’t really have sex, then you can probably think of yourself as someone who didn’t really lose her virginity. The point is, there’s no clear-cut answer to your question (p. 68).

*Seventeen* stressed the importance of self-determination of virginity status. This issue illustrates the movement from a specific definition of virginity loss in earlier issues to acknowledging the importance of deciding for one’s self if she or he is still a virgin. *Seventeen* also suggested the word virgin is outdated, because the concept is being applied to activities that were never considered virginal activities in the past, such as oral sex.

*Oral Sex. Seventeen* (April 2000, p. 100) argued oral sex maintains virginity, at least technically, because “the loss of virginity means having your vagina penetrated in a sexual way.” Oral sex is a way to be sexually intimate, and it is a kind of sexual activity, yet it is not a part of the medical definition of virginity according to *Seventeen*. Oral sex is not part of *Seventeen*’s virginity script which supports the magazine’s earlier contention in October 1997. But, *Seventeen* previously argued oral sex is “just as intimate as intercourse” (March 1993, p. 136). The type of oral sex (i.e., fellatio or cunnilingus) readers inquired about was never identified. However, *Seventeen* also says “a general definition of the loss of virginity means having your vagina penetrated in a sexual way” yet does not further elaborate (April 2000, p. 100). Does this mean receiving cunnilingus might cause virginity loss because it can include oral penetration of the vagina? *Seventeen* is unclear as to if oral sex definitely causes virginity loss or not.

*Nonsexual Virginity Loss.* In addition to sexual acts, readers ask about nonsexual causes of virginity loss including gynecological exams (December 1984, p. 32, 34) and tampon use, which do not cause virginity loss (according to the column's author), yet often elicit more discussion. There are two concerns with tampons' association with virginity loss: (1) only nonvirgins can use tampons and (2) tampons cause virginity loss. The first time a reader asked if virginity was lost through tampon use, *Seventeen* replied that only sexual intercourse causes virginity loss and tampon use has nothing to do with virginity loss (May 1993, p. 67). *Seventeen* identified the hymen as the source of the virgins-cannot-use-tampons myth. In another column, in which a reader asked nearly an identical question, *Seventeen* added oral sex does not cause virginity loss, even though the reader was not asking about oral sex (September 1993, p. 68). Why did *Seventeen* include oral sex in the answer? Did unpublished letters ask if oral sex causes virginity loss prompting *Seventeen* to address oral sex in a safer virginity script column?

Readers indicate other people told them they could not use tampons as virgins causing their concern over using tampons as virgins. Therefore, they wrote to *Seventeen* to clear up their confusion. Readers identify mothers (May 1990), cousins (May 1993), friends (September 1993), commercials (September 1993), a best friend (June 1994), everyone (November 1998), and once no one was specifically mentioned as being responsible for the question. *Seventeen* assumed authority on the topic of tampon use's relationship to virginity, an authority greater than readers' mothers or their best friends.

### Spontaneous Virginity Responses

Not all letters ask if a particular act counts as sex or causes virginity loss. Regardless, occasionally the magazine's responses spontaneously include answers to this unasked question. Most often the question had to do with tampon use (e.g., how to use a tampon). Not all spontaneous virginity responses are completely unprompted. For example, "She [mom] always says that 'all kinds of stuff' can happen to me [if I use tampons], but she never explains exactly what kind of stuff" (May 1990, p. 104). This reader asks for an explanation as to why her mother might not want her to use tampons. Therefore, *Seventeen*'s spontaneous virginity response was not completely unprompted by this reader's concerns. But why does *Seventeen* answer unasked questions?

In addition to tampon use, masturbation is another topic garnering a spontaneous virginity response. The column's focus in November 1988 was to answer common questions about masturbation (e.g., "how common is it" and "can it be harmful"). *Seventeen* told readers virginity could not be lost through masturbation even though that specific question was not asked (November 1988, p. 36).

*Seventeen* is not unique in the teen magazine genre for answering unasked questions. Jackson (2005a) finds this as well in her analysis of *Girlfriend* ("an Australasian teen magazine" [p. 282]). Jackson (2005a) asserts that a teen magazine "might consider it has a moral obligation to equip its readers for safer sex" (p. 290). As previously mentioned, *Seventeen* began this column to help

readers sort through all of the contradictory messages adolescents receive about sex. *Seventeen* might feel it needs to answer unasked questions based on the questions they have received due to their knowledge on the subject and the purpose of the column.

### Safe Sex

Some columns addressed the safety of various sexual acts (safe sex). Readers may evaluate the safety of an act to determine if it would maintain virginity. Virginity is perceived as a way to be sexually safe, even though some actions maintaining virginity (at least technical virginity) are far from safe.

Readers ask about the risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STD) from oral sex (December 1993, p. 68; November 1994, p. 59). In the November 1994 column *Seventeen* added, there is no pregnancy risk with oral sex and confirms there is STD risk. In the 1993 column, *Seventeen* told readers STDs could also be transmitted through vaginal and anal sex. Additionally, “dry sex” has the risks of STD transmission and pregnancy (April 1997, p. 78).

One reader asked if “dry sex” was safe sex (April 1997, p. 76). This reader considered “dry sex” to be going “through the motions of sex ... never fully undressed,” even though his penis was going inside her (April 1997, p. 76). *Seventeen* responded that the reader was not having dry sex but “technically you *are* going all the way” (April 1997, p. 78) because penetration was occurring. Here, penetration equaled sex.

*Seventeen* stressed abstinence was the “only way to be completely safe from STDs” yet fails to define abstinence in any way; additionally, “the next safest choice is to be in a relationship in which both partners begin as virgins and remain monogamous” (August 1989, p. 172). This same sentiment was expressed in October 1989, with *Seventeen* adding that if neither partner had used intravenous drugs or shared needles they are safe from STDs. In January 2000, *Seventeen* stated that even virgins were able to contract the human papilloma virus because it could be spread through skin-to-skin contact.

### Physical and Emotional Difference

One column (May 1983, p. 56) addressed the physical and emotional difference between a virgin and a nonvirgin. *Seventeen* stated that emotionally, becoming a nonvirgin, “enhances what already is good, intensifies what is unsatisfactory, and pretty much leaves alone all conditions in between” (May 1983, p. 56). Physical differences between a virgin and a nonvirgin included pregnancy risk (for yourself and your partner) and “you have expressed, for the first time, your sexuality with another human being” (May 1983, p. 56). The inclusion of pregnancy risk suggests only sexual activities potentially causing pregnancy (i.e., intercourse) can also cause virginity loss.

## So What Does Count as Sex?

*Seventeen* informed readers as to what counts as sex and by extension, what causes virginity loss. Penile penetration (of the vagina) causes virginity loss. But, if the penis only partially penetrates the vagina then there is some individual discretion regarding whether one continues to identify as a virgin. “Dry sex” involving penile–vaginal penetration also counts as sex. In the pages of *Seventeen*, neither oral sex nor anal sex are causes of virginity loss; if they were, this would allow for same-sex virginity loss. *Seventeen*, however, is vague as to whether oral sex causes virginity loss. Furthermore, being fingered, using tampons, having a gynecological exam, or masturbating do not cause virginity loss.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to determine how *Seventeen* constructed the virginity script for their adolescent readers by analyzing its sex advice column. Analyzing teen magazines is an unobtrusive way to discover how adolescents might construct the virginity script. Determining how magazines designed for adolescents and young adults are defining what counts as sex is a way to gauge what readers are being taught counts as sex and what causes virginity loss.

### Heteronormativity

Like previous research using teen magazines (see Carpenter 1998; Durham 1998; Jackson 2005a, b), this research found that heterosexuality, including heteronormative definitions of sex and virginity loss dominated the columns. Heteronormativity normalizes heterosexuality and constructs virginity as a heterosexual experience (Ingraham 2002). *Seventeen* discussed oral sex (only in a heterosexual context) as the closest sexual act to intercourse in level of importance, but does not say oral sex causes virginity loss. Additionally, a heteronormative definition of virginity loss challenges the definition of sexual experience for bisexual and transgendered individuals. Can virginity only be lost through heterosexual, sexual experiences? This would mean gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people could only lose their virginity through a heterosexual sexual experience and heterosexuals could not lose their virginity through same-sex sexual experiences. This research shows how virginity loss is constructed so that it can only be experienced through heterosexual sex. Furthermore, this research shows virginity can only be lost in one way (i.e., intercourse). If virginity can be lost in multiple ways and can be individually defined, then this means virginity can be lost through same-sex sex. The connection of tampons to virginity loss also suggests heteronormativity because it is the tampons’ association with breaking (i.e., penetrating) the hymen that supports the tampons-cause-virginity-loss myth. Additionally, the language associated with virginity loss, such as “popping the

cherry” (December 1997, p. 94), supports heteronormativity because it is referring to an object breaking the hymen causing virginity loss.

### The Virginity Double Standard

*Seventeen* always identified readers’ sexual partners as male and most readers of *Seventeen* are female adolescents. For women, their transition from virgin to nonvirgin is based on a man’s involvement (Laws and Schwartz 1977), an idea reinforced by *Seventeen* when the standard of virginity loss includes penile–penetration of the vagina. Not only does this make virginity loss an experience something that can only be experienced through heterosexual sex but it also reinforces inequality among men and women and the traditional sexual double standard (i.e., it is necessary for women, but not men, to maintain virginity until marriage). The virginity script for women is that virginity is lost when she has intercourse. For men there is some flexibility. For example, *Seventeen* tells its readers penetration equals sex, but boys might only consider it sex if he orgasms (December 1995). Here, *Seventeen* gave boys a different standard of virginity loss than girls. The boy could decide his virginity status based on his achievement of orgasm: he gets to decide. The girl’s pleasure is not relevant for her to become a nonvirgin. She becomes a nonvirgin when she is penetrated. This is a slightly more conservative standard than *Seventeen* proposed in an earlier issue (September 1993). In this issue the reader could decide for herself if she was still a virgin even though his penis had partially entered her vagina, but then sex was stopped. However, *Seventeen* also stated in this same column that even sort of having sex means “you sort of lost your virginity” (September 1993, p. 68). She can only determine her virginity status if her and her boyfriend start to have sex and stop (September 1993, p. 68). Yet, as *Seventeen* stated, most people would consider her a nonvirgin. Men and women are given different standards for when virginity is lost, reinforcing gender inequality.

### Implications

Most often, *Seventeen* does not question the traditional virginity script (i.e., penile–vaginal intercourse). *Seventeen* does, however, suggest there are other sexual activities (e.g., oral sex) their readers are participating in that were never part of the traditional virginity script but in some ways are as important and intimate as intercourse. How does acknowledging alternative virginity scripts challenge the virgin identity and gender dynamics? For example, leaving the construction of the virginity script ambiguous has the potential to empower girls by “obscure[s]ing an identity as a sexually active young women” (Jackson 2005a, p. 291). Ambiguity could be advantageous for girls because it gives them permission to participate in sexual acts and find sexual pleasure, yet maintain their technical virginity (Berger and Wenger 1973). Nevertheless, boys most often wield the power in sexual relationships. For example, there were questions from readers suggesting pressure

from boyfriends to participate in virginity-preserving sexual activities (e.g., oral sex). If the construction of virginity remains unclear, girls may perceive boys as an authority figure on what causes virginity loss. Teen magazines can counteract boys' authority by being an adult authority. Even girls who are waiting until marriage to lose their technical virginity might still be looking for sexual pleasure and may want to please their boyfriends. When *Seventeen* frames readers' questions in a way suggesting pressure from boyfriends, *Seventeen* fails to acknowledge that girls may be actively seeking sexual pleasure while attempting to maintain their virginal reputation. This points to a sexual double standard that acknowledges male sexual desire while ignoring female sexual desire.

This research challenges the relevance of the traditional virginity script by providing evidence that what is counted as sex is not constant. *Seventeen* does occasionally include more criteria than a penis inserted into a vagina for sex to occur (e.g., the boy may have to have an orgasm or the penis needs to completely penetrate the vagina). Moreover, my research findings illustrate how *Seventeen* maintains heteronormative, sexist virginity scripts for its readers.

### Future Research

Future research should analyze comparable columns from a variety of current teen magazines (e.g., *Cosmo Girl* or *Teen People*) to discover current virginity scripts. Many new teen magazines have been introduced in recent years and little to no published research has been conducted using them as a source of analysis. Moving away from using magazines and toward other media or away from media altogether are other possibilities. For example, interviewing adolescents could provide valuable information on virginity scripts. Additionally, interviews could explore what adolescents think of the sex advice columns in teen magazines and how they use those columns.

This study shows that virginity is vaguely constructed. Like sex, virginity means different things to different people and its definition may reinforce the sexual double standard. For example, *Seventeen* suggests an orgasm may be necessary for a boy to count sexual behavior as sex. These multiple meanings point to the further need of consistently defining sex-related terms in research and in the public sphere (e.g., sex education). As long as intercourse is privileged, other meaningful sexual experiences are denigrated as less important. This privilege excludes same-sex sexual experiences of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered individuals, and even heterosexuals from the experience of what is considered an important rite of passage in the transition to adulthood.

Previous research has used a variety of methods to help understand how people define sex. Teen magazines have been analyzed for a variety of virginity-related topics (e.g., the significance of virginity loss [Carpenter 2001b]) yet none have evaluated specifically what counts as sex within their pages. Regardless of changes in sexuality norms over the past several decades, virginity remains an important theme for female adolescents within the pages of *Seventeen*.

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